

AMAZONIA

An Impossible Choice



Sky Croft

Amazonia: An Impossible Choice

by

Sky Croft

Yellow Rose Books

by Regal Crest

Texas

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Dedication

For Mum, with much love.

Chapter One

A SUDDEN GUST of wind blew dirt into her eyes and Shale blinked repeatedly, trying to dislodge the grit. She was pleased she'd tied her long dark hair back for training practice, the leather cord keeping it bound and out of her way. Even with the wind's assault.

The two adolescent warriors who were practicing in front of her came to an abrupt halt, one cursing as she rubbed at her own eyes, the other spitting as if she'd gotten a mouthful.

"Hades." Calay spat again. "That's the third time that's happened."

Shale tipped her head back, looking up at the mottled gray sky. The weather had been off for days, especially given the time of year— summer was barely at an end.

"Let's hope the weather improves for the big day," Leda said as she rubbed her hands together excitedly.

Reminded of the upcoming event, Shale grinned, a happy glow lighting up her face.

Calay, who was more confident than her friend, quickly spoke up. "Actually, Shale, Leda and I want to ask you something."

"Oh?" Shale raised an expectant eyebrow. "What is it?"

"Zayla was telling us about marriage—that you should only marry if you're sure you want to spend the rest of your life with that person."

"She's right," Shale said. "Marriage is a serious commitment."

"Zayla told me I would know when I found the right person, because they would share the other half of my soul." Leda flushed red as she spoke, glancing around the training ground as if to make sure no one had heard her sentimental words.

Shale smiled at Leda, trying to alleviate her embarrassment. Warriors didn't usually talk about such things so openly, and Shale was pleased that they felt able to discuss the topic with her. "That is true also, at least I believe it to be. Some people don't."

Calay looked up in curiosity. "Does Kale?"

“Is that your question?” Amusement colored Shale’s tone.

Calay shook her mousy brown hair. “No, I was just wondering.”

“You’d have to ask Kale.”

“You don’t know?” Calay’s voice rose in disbelief.

“Of course she knows.” Leda gave her friend a shove. “But she’s not going to tell you.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s personal. Just ask Kale.”

Calay’s eyes widened. “I’m not asking her. You ask her.”

Shale chuckled, knowing that her twin’s stoic demeanor tended to have this affect on youngsters. They were both awed and frightened by Kale at the same time. Shale stepped in as Leda opened her mouth to argue.

“I will tell you to watch Kale when she’s with Amber. That will give you your answer.” That seemed to appease them both. “Now, what was your original question? Then we can get back to training.”

“Well, we thought Kale shared your soul?” “She does. Half belongs to Kale, the other half to Blake.” Shale wasn’t sure she liked where this was going. “In that case, if their lives were in danger and you could only save one, who would you save? Your blood or your love?” Calay asked.

Shale frowned. If an adult had been so insensitive, she would’ve wanted to strike her, or at least question her motives, but in this case, Shale put it down to the indiscretion of youth. They were merely being inquisitive, and didn’t intend any ill harm. “If negotiation were involved, I would save one, and trade my life for the other.”

“Ooh, good answer,” Leda said.

Calay didn’t relent. “No negotiation. What if you were on a battlefield?”

Shale had already considered the event that Calay spoke so casually about, but only briefly. It was too distressing for her. Kale would be the obvious choice—her identical twin was connected to her almost physically, and any lengthy time of separation was painful to them both. However, even the thought of losing Blake was excruciating to Shale. Her partner of more than a year was as much a part of her as Kale was.

“I truly cannot answer that. Whether you gave me a few moments or a lifetime, it would make no difference. It’s an impossible choice, and I could never choose.”

Shale swallowed around the lump in her throat. “And I pray to the gods that I’m never put into that position.”

BLAKE ARCHED HER back as she stepped out of the council lodge and into the brisk fresh air. The meeting had been long, but it’d been necessary, and she was pleased with the outcome.

The council was made up of honored elders, her mother Zayla, the former queen, being one of them. Along with the elders, each faction of Amazon society was represented by the leader of their group. Aris spoke for the warriors, Chrysanthe for the carpenters, Alke for the hunters, and so on. As queen, Blake spoke for them all, and it was her duty to be present at every meeting, no matter the subject. Today’s topic had been vital to all, as it concerned Appollonia, their chief healer. Actually, Appollonia was their *only* healer, and that was the problem. Appollonia herself had requested the meeting, expressing her worries about what might happen if she were to become ill or worse—the tribe would be left without a healer.

It was apparent that Appollonia was more than happy to pass on her skills and to train another, but that person had yet to be found. She’d helpfully provided Blake with a list of Amazons who she thought would suit such a role—women who were kind and caring, but wouldn’t fall apart in a stressful situation.

Blake had agreed with her choices, and seeing the importance of such an issue, she’d sent for the listed women. After filling them in on the details, Blake dismissed them so they could think about the proposition, not wanting to pressure anyone into doing something they didn’t want to.

Of the chosen twelve, four had seemed particularly keen. As Blake walked through the village, she spotted the quartet waiting for Appollonia outside the healer’s lodge—no doubt wanting to barrage her with questions.

Blake felt a smile emerge, and it only grew as she neared the warrior’s training ground. Her sweeping gaze easily found her betrothed. Tall, dark-haired, and toned to perfection, Shale’s beauty always took Blake’s breath away. And when those piercing ice blue eyes fixed on her, Blake swore her heart actually skipped a beat.

Blake simply watched for a few moments, noticing the improvements in both Calay and Leda’s technique. Under Shale’s tutelage, they had progressed well. As had many others, thanks in part to Aris, who’d seen Shale’s skill for teaching and encouraged it. Blake felt a surge of pride in her chest—Shale was a natural, and it was clear she enjoyed her new role.

The flat expanse of land that made up the training ground was open, cleared of trees and any other obstacle, so the warriors could spar unhindered. Unfortunately, that openness also meant they were unprotected from the elements, and the unusually strong wind was making training

difficult, throwing some of the smaller warriors off balance. The village itself was protectively nestled by the surrounding forest, which helped to shelter them from the worst weather.

Shale suddenly bolted into motion as Calay threw a punch, and the wind whipped Leda's hair around her face, obstructing her view. Calay's reflexes weren't honed enough to pull the strike, not at such a close distance, so Shale shoved Leda aside and caught Calay's fist in her palm.

Blake heard the solid impact and felt herself wince at what had almost happened. It would've been a nasty accident. She noticed Shale discreetly flexing her hand behind her back, out of Calay's view to spare her feelings, and that action in itself told her of the force behind the strike.

Blake began to walk toward them.

Calay blinked, then looked to Shale in shock. "I'm sorry. The wind..."

"Don't worry." Shale gave her shoulder a pat. "No harm done." She turned to Leda and offered her hand, hauling her up off the cold ground and back onto her feet. "Right, Leda?"

Leda nodded. "I'm fine. Thanks to you." Her expression was one of awe. "How did you move so fast?"

Shale shrugged modestly. "Practice. One day you'll both move like that. If you work at it."

"Really?" Leda sounded doubtful.

"Brilliant." Calay simply accepted Shale's words, clearly confident in her own abilities.

Shale nodded to Leda, giving her the extra encouragement she needed. "Absolutely."

Blake drew to a halt alongside them. She was wearing her usual rust bodice, skirt, and calf-length boots. Her long blonde hair was windswept.

"My Queen." Leda dipped her head respectfully, as did Calay.

When Blake had been a princess, she'd always requested that people call her by her name, not by her title. At least when it came to social situations. But now, as queen, the title remained as a sign of respect, and Blake had little choice but to put up with it. Though she, of course, understood the reason for the title, she still insisted that her closest friends address her by her birth name.

When they first met, Blake knew that Shale had struggled somewhat to call Blake by her birth name, for in Shale's old tribe, before they'd been slaughtered, royalty had always been addressed in a formal manner.

"My Queen." Shale winked playfully at her.

Blake couldn't stop her smile from emerging—though she was averse to the title, she'd actually grown rather fond of Shale's possessive take on it. The queen belonged to her, which of course, Blake did. They belonged to one another.

“Nice save, warrior.” Blake spoke to Shale, but indicated Leda, letting her know she'd seen what happened.

“Isn't she great?” Leda all but gushed. “She probably saved me from a broken jaw!”

Blake's smile turned into a grin. “She certainly is.”

Shale met Blake's warm gaze, and held it for a long moment. The smile she returned was reserved for Blake alone.

“Would you like to see what we've learned, my Queen?” Calay sounded eager to show off her new skills.

“Later, Calay, no more sparring today. Not with this wind.” Shale looked again to the heavens. “Just practice the moves by yourselves. I know it's repetitive, but your balance and speed will improve.”

“Practice makes perfect,” Leda said.

“Precisely.” Shale turned to her other student. “You have a lot of strength, Calay, but unleashing it isn't enough. You need to be able to control it. Try and work on that.”

Calay nodded. “I will.”

After dipping their heads to Blake, both Calay and Leda moved away, each getting into a space of their own to practice.

Now alone, Shale confided in Blake. “They'll both be good warriors. And Calay could be great, if she manages to get a handle on that strength.” Shale flexed her hand. “Sixteen summers old, and she already has more power than some adults I know. Her sturdy build is perfect for a warrior.”

“How can she not be great, with you as her teacher?”

Shale released a snort. “You're just trying to soften me up for our next lesson.”

“I am not. It's the simple truth.” Blake was also being taught by Shale, in an attempt to improve her own fighting skills. Her green eyes twinkled in mischief. “Besides, I can think of a better way to soften you up.”

“Oh?” Shale raised a slender eyebrow. “Do tell.”

“I would rather show you.” Blake stepped closer, raised herself up on her tiptoes, and soundly kissed Shale on the lips. Though Blake wasn’t small, she was compared to Shale, who was taller than most women.

When the kiss ended, Shale released a small sigh. “Do with me as you will.”

Blake laughed. “Don’t tempt me.” She lifted Shale’s hand, the one that had caught Calay’s fist, and kissed that also.

Shale answered her unspoken question. “It’s fine.” As if to prove her point, she ran her fingers through Blake’s blonde hair. “Are your meetings done for the day? Were you wanting a lesson?”

“No, I just missed you.”

“I missed you, too.” Shale smiled.

Aris’s voice suddenly rang across the training ground, loud and clear. “That’s enough for today.”

Blake linked her arm through Shale’s and led her forward, eager to get back to their cabin so they could continue that kiss. They headed for the large fire, which was in the center of the village. The village itself was in a clearing of forest, though trees still dotted themselves here and there, amidst the numerous wood cabins. The majority of the cabins were in two rows on either side of the fire, opposite one another. Both rows faced the village center. The warriors training ground and the jail were on the outskirts, as was the other expanse of cleared land, which the Amazons used to grow their crops. Their main water source came from a stream close by.

The healer’s lodge, the council lodge, and the dining lodge were all located side by side in the village center. Directly opposite sat the queen’s chambers. Those closest to her were housed in the surrounding cabins. Aris, the leader of the warriors, was also housed nearby, to defend the queen should she need it.

Blake and Shale passed many Amazons as they walked through the village. Most were bustling hurriedly about, their arms overflowing with various supplies, from food and drink, to hand-crafted decorations, all of which were for the upcoming event.

Blake glanced around. “There are certainly a lot of preparations being made.”

“It’s not every day their queen gets married.”

“I know, but I’m usually involved in organizing these things.”

“Blake, I realize it must be difficult for you to let go of the reins, to let others take charge.” Shale lightly touched her shoulder. “But Zayla is taking care of it. It is her gift to us both. Your mother doesn’t want you to worry about such matters.”

“I know. It’s extremely kind of her and everyone else. I need to take a step back.” Blake playfully bumped Shale with her hip. “I now understand how hard it must’ve been for you and Kale when you first arrived. To have to take orders from Aris when you were used to leading yourself.”

Shale chuckled at the comparison. “The gods help anyone who tries to order you around.”

Blake laughed, giving Shale a sheepish look. “I would’ve probably been flogged in that same situation.”

“Exiled more like.”

Blake made an indignant noise as she slapped Shale’s arm. Then, she said, “It’s a possibility.”

Shale led the way up their cabin steps and opened the door for Blake to precede her, but Blake stopped in the doorway, her green eyes sparkling in merriment. “Do you still want to marry me?”

Shale captured her lips, kissing Blake devotedly. “You’ll get your answer inside.”

KALE WAS PLEASED to get inside, out of the wind. She quickly closed the cabin door to contain the warmth. The cabin she shared with Amber was cozy, yet plenty big enough for their needs. A double bed sat in the center of the room, its carved headboard against the wall. At the foot of the bed were two wooden chests, each holding clothes and boots, both for the summer and winter seasons. The only other furniture in the room was a table and two chairs. A single glance at the far wall revealed that its occupants were warriors, for a variety of weapons were hung on display, pride of place, all gleaming and polished. A bearskin rug adorned the floor, and the large stag skin that Kale had once given to Amber as a thank you gift, now hung on the wall behind their bed.

Feeling Amber’s expectant eyes on her, Kale did not keep her waiting. She crossed to the table. Amber stood excitedly, and Kale revealed the item she’d been hiding behind her back. “What do you think?”

Amber took the weapon from Kale and studied it closely. “It’s beautiful. Shale will love it.”

“I’m quite tempted to keep it for myself,” Kale said, only half joking. The dagger was truly exquisite, its handle intricately engraved and inlaid with precious stones. “How is Blake’s gift coming along?”

“Nearly finished. It will be ready for the joining ceremony.”

Since Amber was Blake's best friend and knew her tastes well, both she and Kale had decided that it would make sense for her to be responsible for Blake's wedding gift, and in turn Kale would be responsible for Shale's, since she knew her twin sister so well.

"Not long to go now. Two days left of freedom." Kale grinned as she took a seat. "That's what I keep telling Shale."

Amber slipped the dagger back into its neatly stitched leather sheath, then placed it on the table. "You are so bad. If Shale doesn't show up on the day, I'm sending Blake straight to you."

Kale sniggered. "You would, too." At Amber's nod of confirmation, Kale waved a dismissive hand. "I'm not worried, they're both besotted with one another."

"You mean like you're besotted with me?" Amber placed two hands on her hips and raised an auburn eyebrow, as if daring Kale to defy her statement.

"You say besotted, I say enslaved." Kale almost choked on her laughter as Amber released a growl and leapt onto her knee, causing the chair she was sitting on to rock back with the momentum.

"You take that back!" Amber began to tickle Kale, clearly knowing that was a weakness of hers.

Kale tried to resist, but Amber was relentless. Before she could embarrass herself by begging for mercy, Kale stood, lifting Amber as she rose, and unceremoniously dumped her on the bed.

Kale grinned down at Amber, whose red curls were splayed around her like a fiery but beautiful halo. Her pale, milky skin was a stark contrast to her vivid hair, and the effect was striking. Her brown eyes were mischievous, playful, always in good cheer, much like Amber herself.

"But just think what you can do with a slave. I am yours to command."

"Hmm, that sounds promising." Amber pulled Kale down on top of her. "Kiss me."

Kale was more than happy to oblige, and brushed her lips softly against Amber's.

Amber shook her head, a seductive smile forming. "I didn't mean there."

Kale gave a throaty chuckle. "Well, I'd best keep on going till I get it right." She moved down Amber's body, leaving a trail of kisses.

Chapter Two

BEHIND HER, SHALE heard the cabin door open and close. An instant later, Kale sat down next to her.

It was like looking at her own reflection—sharp chiseled features, long dark hair, equally tall in height. She and Kale shared the same muscular, yet feminine form. But close up, she and her identical twin did have slight differences. Kale had a small scar above her right eye, while Shale had a larger, diagonal scar across the base of her throat. If you didn't know either woman well, the battle scars, of which there were several, were the easiest way to identify who was who. Only one scar was the exception, because it was the same on both women—a dagger wound to the stomach, which had been a parting gift from their brother.

Though the differences were there, most people found them hard to spot, and some didn't even try, simply treating them as the twins, one singular entity, not as the individuals they were. At least, that was how it had been for the majority of their lives. Upon joining this tribe, things had continued like that for a short while, and probably would still be, if not for Blake, who was the first person to see them each for who they were, and insisted the others in her tribe follow suit. It hadn't been easy, many challenges arose, but Blake hadn't backed down, determined that they both received the same courtesies that everyone else took for granted.

Now, more than a year later, every Amazon in the tribe followed Blake's example. Not one person treated them as a pair. Sometimes Shale and Kale were still mistaken for one another, but it was out of genuine confusion, and not malice of any kind. It probably didn't help that their clothes were so similar, they each wore a brown skirt made of soft leather, and a short top that revealed their midriff. A sword was strapped to each back, as they both favored that weapon above all else, and like many things, they were equally skilled in their fighting ability. They were the best warriors in the tribe, and together were a force to be reckoned with.

Shale smiled into eyes that were the exact same shade as her own, an unusual pale blue, that, according to Blake, were the envy of many a woman. "You're late, Kale."

"It's your fault, so you can't complain about it." She clasped Shale's forearm in greeting.

"How is it my fault you're late? I've been right here, sitting on your cabin steps." Though Shale could've easily knocked on the door, she'd been happy to wait outside, soaking up the sun. Her own cabin, which she shared with Blake, was right next door to Kale and Amber's, and not for the first time, Shale appreciated how fortunate they were to have such close living quarters.

"Because it was your present that I was busy with."

“And how is my dagger coming on?”

“Shh!” Kale hastily glanced behind, as if to make sure Amber hadn’t stepped outside. She raised a warning finger. “I swear, Shale, you’d better act surprised when I give it to you tomorrow or Amber will think I told you.”

Neither twin had ever been able to surprise the other when it came to giving gifts, for they had an uncanny ability of reading one another and knew almost always what the other was thinking or feeling. It was an ability that often amazed people, as it bordered on mind-reading at times. Kale hadn’t even hinted as to what her present might be, yet Shale knew instinctively what it was, spot on the mark, without even guessing.

“I haven’t seen it, so I will be surprised.”

“I don’t know why I even bothered to wrap it.” Kale sighed, though it was good-natured. “You could—”

“Use the cloth to polish the blade.” Shale finished for her. “I will.” She looked up at the sky. The harsh wind from yesterday had dropped, and she had to shield her eyes from the bright glow of the sun.

“So have you settled on what you want to do today?” Kale’s expression turned teasing. “Since this is your last day of freedom.”

Shale laughed. It was important to them both that they spend the day together, a day for just the two of them. Blake and Amber understood they needed time together. Their connection was unique and only something that the other could fulfill. It worked out well, as Amber and Blake tended to spend the time together, their friendship so strong that they were more like sisters. Their close relationship helped the twins immensely, as it meant they could spend time apart from their partners without feeling guilty.

“That’s easy. What’s our favorite thing to do?”

Kale’s mouth curled up at the edges. “Hunting it is.”

Shale lowered her voice in discretion. Many Amazons were already flitting about the village, despite the early time of day. “Plus, I overheard one of the hunters saying they hadn’t caught as much venison as they would’ve liked for tomorrow’s feast. And I know it’s Zayla’s favorite.”

Looking highly amused, Kale clasped Shale’s shoulder in praise. “I suppose now is the right time to impress your mother-to-be. Good thinking.”

Shale rolled her eyes. That wasn’t why she was doing it and Kale knew that. She shrugged, playing along. “Can’t hurt.”

Kale pulled her upward, off the steps and to her feet. “Come on, let’s show the hunters how it’s done.”

“WELL, WE HAVEN’T done too badly.”

Kale sniggered. “Imagine the hunters’ faces when we turn up with this lot.”

They’d had a very successful hunt—two deer, five rabbits, and two pheasants. They’d had to turn back as they couldn’t carry any more. Kale shouldered one of the deer, and also the pheasants, which were strung over an arm. Shale carried the remaining deer and rabbits.

Now mid-afternoon, the sun was blazing strongly in the sky, but the foliage of the trees kept the heat from becoming oppressive.

“You’ll have to teach the warriors *and* the hunters if you’re not careful.”

Shale smirked. “I’ll just send the hunters to you.”

“Ha, good one. Me, teaching? I would bash their heads together on my first day.”

Shale didn’t contradict her, knowing the statement to be quite apt, if a little exaggerated—Kale hadn’t inherited the same patience that Shale had. She had very little in fact.

Kale grew serious. “Are you nervous for tomorrow?”

“Truthfully,” Shale smiled. “I can’t wait to be joined to Blake. I thank the gods every day for bringing her into my life.”

Before Kale could offer a response, a menacing growl interrupted. They both whirled toward the noise, and spotted a disheveled-looking wolf loping through the trees, swiftly passing by. A few moments later, it emerged on the trail ahead and came to a complete standstill, blocking their path. The wolf’s predatory gaze fixed on them, and it growled again, as if to convey its intent.

Shale examined the wolf, its dark fur matted with dirt and clumps of blood. It’d clearly been in a recent fight, likely about food given its emaciated condition, and Shale assumed it had lost, since it was now challenging them for food. She couldn’t blame the creature, it looked half-starved, its wild eyes mad with hunger. The wolf smelled the air and licked its drooling mouth in anticipation—it could clearly smell the dead carcasses they were carrying, and the scent of food so close emboldened it further, overpowering its need for caution. To it, Shale imagined, the twins were a walking food tray.

Shale took hold of the string of rabbits she was carrying and threw them toward the wolf, though off to one side, so they could pass safely. But instead of snatching up the rabbits as Shale had hoped, the wolf snapped its teeth at her and took an aggressive step toward them.

“It wants a bigger meal,” Shale whispered. “It wants a deer.”

“No way.” Kale hissed back. “We earned these deer. The rabbits are more than enough.” She bent down and picked up a nearby rock. She threw it at the wolf, obviously intending to scare it away. The rock hit square on the animal’s shoulder. The wolf yelped in surprise, then its hackles rose, a deep savage growl erupting from its throat.

“Now you’ve done it,” Shale murmured. She kept perfectly still, waiting to see what the wolf would do. Beside her, Kale also remained fixed in place, like a statue.

“I need a new wolfskin,” Kale said beneath her breath.

As if understanding her words, the wolf surged forward, teeth bared, its aggression now fixed solely on Kale.

Both the deer and pheasants fell to the forest floor as Kale withdrew her sword, raising it quickly so the oncoming wolf would impale itself on her blade. Unfortunately, she couldn’t get the sword into position in time, the wolf was incredibly fast, its desperation to feed all consuming.

The wolf leapt straight at Kale, its weight and momentum knocking her down onto the ground. With the wolf on top of her, on her chest, Kale had little choice but to release her sword and grab its head, wrestling with it as it tried to take a bite out of her throat.

Shale grabbed the wolf by the scruff of its neck and by a handful of fur on its back. She hauled it off Kale, fighting to dodge its gnashing teeth as its head twisted around to try and bite her restraining hands.

Using all her strength, Shale threw the wolf aside, then freed her sword and leveled it as the wolf came back for another attack. The wolf sprang at her. Shale darted to the side at the last moment, then brought her sword swiftly down and chopped clean through the wolf’s neck, decapitating it.

Shale turned at the sound of applause, and grinned at Kale, who was clapping from her seat on the ground.

“Looks like I get my wolfskin after all.” Kale accepted Shale’s offered hand, and was hauled onto her feet.

Shale’s gaze assessed her for injury. Bar a few scratches from the wolf’s claws, Kale appeared unscathed. “You’re all right?”

Kale nodded. “Fine.” She took Shale’s sword from her hand and crossed to the fallen wolf. “Since yours is bloodied anyway...” Kale began to skin the creature.

“You’d better clean it afterward.” Shale bent down to help.

They couldn’t take the wolf with them, for they had enough to carry, but they could manage a roll of wolf skin.

When finished, and they were again shouldering what they’d caught, Kale started to laugh. “You do realize the hunters are going to hate us, showing them up like this.”

“IT SOUNDS LIKE they had a good time.” Blake smiled as she heard Shale’s approaching laughter. Kale, too, was laughing loudly, both were in hysterics about something.

Amber shook her head in amusement. “What have they been up to now?”

Blake and Amber had just recently returned themselves, having been on a long, pleasurable walk. Intending to dine together for the evening meal, they’d returned to Blake’s cabin, knowing their partners would’ve joined them by then, and they’d need the space to accommodate four around the table.

The outside steps creaked as weight was put on them, but the door remained unopened.

“Kale, don’t you dare!” Shale was heard saying. Then, after a beat, she said, “Smart planning.”

Blake and Amber shared a confused look at the cryptic words. Blake got up from her chair.

“We can hear you, you know,” Amber called out. From outside, Kale broke into laughter once more. “So you might as well come on in.”

“I’m afraid we can’t do that, Amber, not just yet anyway,” Shale said. “And you can’t come out, not until you’re prepared.”

“Prepared?” Blake didn’t like the sound of that. “Prepared for what?”

“You’re not to worry.”

“Why would I worry?” Blake was becoming exactly that. “Shale, what’s going on?”

“Let me explain what happened. We were out hunting—”

Kale, obviously sick of waiting, got directly to the point. “Shale and I are covered in blood.”

“Kale! Don’t say it like that, you’ll panic—”

“What?” Blake headed straight for the door. The chair behind her scraped loudly as Amber leapt out of it, close on her heels.

“See what you’ve done,” Shale chastised. Her voice lifted, as if to be certain those inside heard. “It isn’t our blood, we’re not hurt.”

Blake tugged on the door handle, surprised when it didn’t budge. Then clarity hit her. She now knew what Shale’s earlier words meant. Shale had apparently thought Kale was going to open the door, but instead Kale was making sure it stayed shut, as if she’d expected this reaction.

“Kale, damn it, you open this door.” Blake pounded her fist on its wooden surface.

“Not until you calm down.” Kale’s tone betrayed the fact she was enjoying herself, her humor obvious to all.

“Blake, we’re not hurt,” Shale said. “Not even a scratch.”

“Actually,” Kale sniggered. “I have—”

“You’re not helping.”

Amber gripped the handle, adding her strength to Blake’s. They yanked in unison, managing to wrestle the door open a fraction— though no more, Kale was incredibly strong. Even though they had the advantage as the door opened inward, they couldn’t manage any more. Before Shale could lend her weight to Kale’s, Blake stuck her foot in the doorway so it couldn’t be closed again.

“Let them out,” Shale said.

The door was thrown open, and scowls of frustration were replaced with looks of concern. Kale was indeed scratched, but none seemed serious, though her arms were caked with dry blood, solid red up to her elbows. Streaks of blood were also on her face, though they too had dried.

Shale’s arms were likewise covered, but Blake couldn’t tell whether she had any scratches, for the majority of her body was spattered with crimson, and one half of her face was colored so completely it looked like war paint.

Blake laid an anxious hand on Shale’s upper arm. “You’re unhurt?” She couldn’t help but ask, wanting to believe Shale, but finding it difficult given the sight before her.

“Yes.” Shale gave her eye contact to show she spoke the truth. “The blood belongs to a wolf. It attacked us, and I decapitated it.” She made a show of gesturing to her gore-laden form. “Hence the blood.”

“Then we skinned it.” Kale held up her hands. “Hence the blood.” She tossed the roll of wolf skin to Amber, who deftly caught it.

Blake and Amber stepped closer to examine Kale’s scratches. None seemed particularly deep, so Kale didn’t need to visit the healer’s. Blake could tell that the blood on Kale’s face had simply come from wiping a bloodied hand across it. “Why did the wolf attack you?”

Kale produced a smug smile. “We were carrying two deer, five rabbits, and two pheasants. It was hungry.”

Amber whistled, sounding impressed. “What did you do with it all?”

“Took it to the dining lodge. We are now greatly appreciated by the cooks.” Kale chuckled. “Though not so much by the hunters. Some turned the color of Shale’s face.”

Shale tapped the blood-stained side in indication.

“Is that why you were laughing?”

“Partly. It was the cooks’ reaction that had us in stitches.” Kale again burst into laughter, so Shale continued for her.

“A couple nearly passed out, and the others looked at us as if we’d arisen from Tartarus itself.” As if recalling the startled expressions, Shale joined in with Kale’s laughter.

Though she was amused herself, Blake defended the cooks. “I can’t blame them. You should see yourself, Shale.”

“From their reaction, I figured we must be a sight, and that’s why we wanted to warn you first.”

“And it went *really* well.” Kale scoffed. “You both overreacted anyway.”

Blake shook her head, “Well, *excuse* us for being concerned.”

Amber folded her arms. “The next time you come home covered with blood, Blake and I will just ignore you. See how you like that.”

“All right, all right.” Kale raised a hand in surrender. “I see your point.”

Blake switched her focus onto Shale. “Your intentions were good.” She knew it’d been Shale’s suggestion to prepare them first, not wanting them to be shocked. The gesture was too

thoughtful for Kale. Blake leaned forward and kissed Shale's cheek—the clean side. “I appreciate the consideration.”

Shale grinned, then gave Kale a taunting look.

Kale took a cocky step toward Amber. “Don't I get a kiss?”

In response, Amber thrust the wolf skin at her.

BY THE TIME Kale and Shale had washed and cleaned themselves up, and some ointment had been put onto Kale's scratches, it was time for the evening meal. Once they were all seated around the table, Kale pointed toward Blake's desk, which was tucked neatly into a corner. Or rather, she pointed above it, to the extra addition on the wall. Next to a picture of a field filled with flowers, was an impressive mountainscape.

“I like your new picture, Blake. I wish I could draw like that.”

“It's lovely, isn't it?” Shale dipped a piece of bread into her bowl of chicken broth. “She's certainly talented.”

Blake smiled at their praise.

“Always has been.” Amber took a drink from her mug. “Blake could draw better as a child, than I can now as an adult.”

Blake giggled and patted her arm. “You're not that bad.”

“I am. Mine bears no resemblance to what I'm drawing.”

Shale chortled. “Sounds like mine.”

“Do you have any others, Blake?” Kale asked.

“Some. But those on the wall are the best.”

“Would you consider a trade? You draw a picture for mine and Amber's cabin, and I'll give you whatever you want in return.”

“That's a great idea,” Amber said.

Blake mulled over it. “What would you want me to draw?”

Shale answered for her twin. “A waterfall.”

At Kale’s nod, Blake chuckled and shook her head, as if the insight they had into one another still amazed her. “No trade.”

At Kale’s crestfallen expression, Blake said, “I’ll draw you the picture, but you don’t need to trade me for it.”

“That’s generous of you, Blake, but are you sure you don’t want anything for it?”

“Yes, don’t forget Kale’s just got a fine new wolf skin. Oof.” The slap to Shale’s abdomen was well-delivered, knocking the breath right out of her. Shale coughed a few times, amidst laughter. “You got me there.”

Kale gave her a self-satisfied smirk, then they both looked to Blake for her deciding response.

“I don’t want anything. It’ll be a gift.”

Kale became even more smug. “Thanks, Blake.”

Shale sighed in exaggerated disappointment. “I merely wanted the skin for a blanket to keep me warm at night. Is that really too much to ask?”

Blake dissolved into laughter. “You tease. You’re always kicking the blankets off as you’re too warm.”

Amber looked up from her bowl with evident surprise. “Kale does that, too.”

Blake laughed harder, and Amber soon joined in.

Kale shared a droll look with her twin. “Apparently our sleeping habits are hilarious.”

“So it would seem.”

“Is Shale ticklish?” Amber suddenly asked out of nowhere.

Blake nodded. “Very.”

“Kale, too.” Amber tapped a finger on her lips, as if pondering something. “I wonder what else is similar. Bar the obvious. Ooo, I’ve got one. Does Shale fall asleep if you stroke her hair?”

Blake’s eyes grew round. “She does, yes.” She turned in her seat, toward Amber, now clearly intrigued.

“I guess we’ll just talk amongst ourselves,” Kale said loudly, as Amber and Blake seemed to have forgotten they were actually still present in the room. She was ignored, though she heard Shale snigger beside her.

“You know,” Amber said. “Kale likes it when I—”

“Oh, no!” Kale firmly shook her head. “We’re not going there.”

Shale, as always, knew Kale’s line of thought. “Our intimate desires are not up for discussion.”

Blake blushed, looking mortified. “I would never.”

“Nor I.” Amber shrugged one shoulder when Kale raised an eyebrow. “I wouldn’t ask such a question,” she smiled impishly, “if only because I know that Blake would never answer it.”

Shale chuckled. “At least you’re honest.”

“So what *were* you going to say?” Kale asked.

“It sounds boring now, sex talk would’ve been a lot more fun.” Amber playfully twirled a red curl around her finger. “I was going to say...” She focused on Blake, as she had done before. “Kale likes it when I sit back and let her cook. She actually enjoys preparing food.”

“Is that so?” At Kale’s nod, Blake said, “Well, in that case, Kale, you can prepare our evening meals from now on.”

As everyone laughed at her expense, Kale rolled her eyes. “Thanks for that, Amber.”

Chapter Three

“THERE. YOU’RE READY,” Amber said as she finished weaving the last of the flowers into Blake’s golden hair. As Blake stood, Amber released a low whistle. “You look incredible, Blake. The whole village is going to envy Shale.”

A flattered smile appeared, then Blake looked down at herself to make sure everything was in its place. She was wearing a lightly tanned skirt, which was longer than she usually wore, down to her knees. Her calf-length boots were new, like the rest of the outfit, and were made of the

same, pale tanned skin. Her top had an exquisite circular pattern stitched into it, and was accentuated with beads and feathers.

For jewelry, she wore her mother's necklace. It was a dark red circular stone that'd been polished to a high shine and hung on a cord. On her wrist was the delicate woven bracelet Shale had made for her more than a year ago, the green, yellow, and brown threads matching her coloring perfectly. The bracelet wasn't an extra addition, for Blake wore it daily and never took it off.

Zayla lifted her daughter's chin. "You look wonderful, Blakaea." She laid a kiss on her cheek. "You..." Her voice caught. "You make me so proud."

Blake's eyes misted. "Mother, please don't cry. I'll no doubt follow, and by the time I reach Shale I'll be a blubbering mess, and she'll turn me down flat."

Her humor had the desired effect. Zayla laughed, patting Blake's hand as Blake supportively squeezed her shoulder. To look at them, you could easily see that they were mother and daughter. They both shared the same blonde hair, though Zayla's was streaked through with gray. Their builds and stature were also similar, though Zayla's eyes were hazel, unlike Blake's green. Zayla's face was starting to show the signs of her age, though the wrinkles didn't detract from her distinguished bearing. A bearing that Blake herself had inherited.

"I'll see if everyone's assembled." Amber opened the cabin door, and in seeped a hum of conversation. Multitudes of women were all talking and laughing excitedly. Amber stuck her head through the doorway. After several moments she looked back into the cabin.

"Your soon-to-be-wife awaits."

Blake smiled, liking Amber's choice of words. She took a deep breath, embraced her mother and said, "Well then, let's not keep her waiting."

Zayla led the way, as she was to preside over the ceremony. Amber went next, then Blake, who was struck by two things as she left the cabin. The first, was that the gods had blessed them with fine weather, the bright sun lighting up the village with its cheery glow. The second, was the village itself. It had been transformed. Every cabin was decorated with wreaths, flowered vines, and crafted displays. Large urns were dotted around, each filled to the brim with multi-colored flora. As Blake passed the banquet tables, overflowing with delicious smelling food, her stomach rumbled in anticipation of the upcoming meal.

So much effort had been made on her and Shale's behalf that it warmed her heart to see it. Blake was genuinely moved by her tribe's generosity of spirit. She intended to thank every single Amazon, and she would, after the ceremony.

Up until now, she'd intentionally kept her gaze away from the ceremonial tree, as a mere glimpse of Shale wouldn't be enough. Blake wanted to see her in all her glory. As the last wave of Amazons parted, Shale was finally revealed to her.

Blake felt a tear fall, so struck by the beauty before her. Shale was a goddess, radiant in her ceremonial garments. Her dark, glossy hair cascaded over her shoulders, and was adorned with a red headband. Her paneled brown skirt was two-toned, and the contrasting light and dark materials were trimmed with a red braid. Her calf-length boots were also braided, and her top, a matching dark red, completed the ensemble.

Shale wore an awed expression that was no doubt reflected on Blake's own face. Never had Blake felt more like a queen, than she did in that moment.

Their eyes met. Green eyes held blue. The smile they shared was so filled with love, it was as intimate as a kiss.

Then, as if by magic, Blake was suddenly beside Shale, underneath the tree, though she had no memory of walking those remaining steps.

Shale linked their hands together. "You look beautiful, Blake."

"Shale." Blake had to force her brain to work. "You are absolutely stunning."

They faced one another, and Zayla gave them a moment before beginning the ceremony.

Zayla raised her voice to address the crowd. "Sisters." She paused, waiting for them to fall silent. "We have gathered here to witness the joining of Blakaea, our queen, to her beloved, Shale. They are not only joining their bodies on this day, but their hearts and souls as well. Their love will sustain them, as they must sustain one another."

Zayla spoke solely to the two women in front of her. "Blakaea. Shale. Do you pledge to love one another with all that you are, and all that you will be? Do you pledge to be steadfast, faithful to one another in all things? Do you pledge to support, nurture, and cherish one another always, in times of happiness and in times of grief?"

Zayla paused again, as if to allow her words to sink in. "By pledging yourselves to one another, your lives will be forever entwined, your fates as one."

Another pause. "Blakaea. Shale. In front of the gods, and in front of your sisters, do you pledge to uphold these solemn vows?"

"I so pledge. I give myself to Shale." Grinning, Shale slipped a gold ring onto Blake's finger.

"I so pledge. I give myself to Blake." Blake gave a happy laugh, then slid a ring onto Shale's finger, claiming her as her own.

Aris, a tall, powerfully built blonde, stepped forward, ceremonial knife in hand. As chief warrior, Aris was an expert with a blade, so she was often chosen to deliver the cuts for the blood-joining, as was the custom in their tribe.

“Where do you want them?” Aris asked. The placement of the three cuts was down to those receiving them, though the cuts had to be on the same place on each person, as a mark of unity.

Blake and Shale had decided on the position beforehand, so they didn’t need to discuss it now. Blake held out her left hand, palm up, and indicated the soft flesh of her wrist. She gripped Shale’s offered hand with her other, knowing the slices would hurt, as they had to be deep enough to scar. The scars were a permanent reminder of their joining, and of their vows to one another.

“The cuts represent how Shale and Blakaea are connected. The smallest cut represents the body,” Zayla said, waiting for Aris to make the mark on Blake’s skin.

Aris sliced horizontally, careful as to its depth given its position, and put the smallest cut nearest to Blake’s palm. Aris moved the blade up Blake’s arm, leaving a gap of half a finger, then cut again, this line being slightly longer in length.

“The middle cut represents the heart.”

Aris again left a gap, then drew the knife across once more. This last cut was the longest, nearly stretching the whole width of Blake’s wrist.

“And the longest represents the soul.”

Blake was quite pleased with herself. The cuts had hurt, but she hadn’t made a sound, though she’d been glad of Shale’s hand, which she’d clutched tightly. Blake now returned the favor, as Aris moved away from her and began to repeat the procedure on Shale’s wrist. Shale didn’t so much as twitch, or even wince, but that didn’t surprise Blake, who knew Shale’d had far worse in her time.

Once Aris finished, Zayla bound both of their bleeding wrists together, and entreated the goddess Artemis to bless their union.

Smiling delightedly, Zayla placed one hand on Blake’s shoulder, the other on Shale’s. “You are now joined.”

The surrounding Amazons erupted into cheers, and the noise only grew in intensity when Zayla said, “You may kiss.”

Blake stepped in and met Shale’s lips, the kiss soft and tender. She surprised everyone, including her new wife, when she pulled Shale closer with her free hand, deepening the kiss to an almost indecent level.

For Blake, who usually liked to retain what little privacy she had, it was a bold move indeed, and the crowd roared their approval, hooting and hollering like a band of banshees.

When they parted, Shale’s smile was somewhat dazed. “Whoa. I didn’t expect that.”

Blake felt like she was glowing with happiness. “We’re only getting joined once.”

The smile turned into a grin. “Best make the most of it then.” Shale leaned in for another kiss.

“THIS FOOD IS divine. I doubt ambrosia would taste better.” Shale offered some pork to Blake, holding it up to her mouth.

Blake took it without hesitation, releasing a moan as she ate. “That’s delicious.” Blake keenly eyed Shale’s plate for more.

Shale chuckled and placed a slice on Blake’s plate, more than willing to share.

“You’re a good wife.” Blake’s eyes sparkled at the words.

Shale smiled and squeezed Blake’s thigh beneath the table. They were seated at the head of the banquet tables, with Zayla, Kale, and Amber sat alongside them. The ceremonial dance had been performed before the meal, a sensible choice given the amount of food people were consuming. In between the dance and the meal, the entire tribe had lined up to offer their blessings and congratulations, giving Shale and Blake the chance to thank everyone for their effort and hard work.

It was not tradition to receive physical gifts, the offerings to the gods made on their behalf were gift enough. Only family, and those especially close to the couple, were expected to give a token of some kind, as a gesture to honor the union.

Shale and Blake’s wrists had now been unbound from one another, and each had been wrapped to protect the wounds.

“Shale, are you nearly finished?” Kale asked.

Shale looked up in surprise. “Why? It’s not like you to rush through a meal, Kale.” If anything, Kale usually ate more than she and Blake combined.

“I want to give you your gift.”

Shale chuckled. “Impatient as ever.”

“I’ve waited days already.” Kale playfully bumped Shale with her shoulder. “Don’t pretend you’re not dying to see it.”

Shale couldn’t deny the truth of that.

“And there’s plenty of food left, we can always come back and have some more.”

“You’d best go,” Blake said, smiling at Shale to show she didn’t mind. “Or Kale will never cease.”

Kale grinned, clearly not the least bit insulted. “Blake’s right.”

“Why don’t you bring the gift to me?” Shale tried for a middle ground.

“Actually, Shale.” Zayla stood up from her seat. “If we’re giving gifts, my gift to you and Blakaea is at your cabin. It’s rather heavy, so it would be easier if I took you both to it.”

Kale eagerly got to her feet. “Great. We’ll all go. Come on, Amber.”

Neither Blake or Shale had any objection, so they were willingly led to their cabin. They were both amazed when they stepped inside. Their cabin had been transformed. Against the right wall, in the center, was their bed, but it had been covered with flower petals. The long shelves that were on either side of the bed, which were used for storage and held a variety of items, were decorated with flowered vines. On the opposite side of the room, on the dining table, was a vase full of flowering blooms, and another was atop Blake’s desk in the corner. The cabin was beautiful.

Blake smiled in wonder. “Who did this?”

“Appollonia and Aris. It is their gift to you both.” Zayla seemed to anticipate the next question. “They slipped away during the dance.”

Shale was surprised she hadn’t noticed, she was usually very observant. Then, as realization dawned on her, she began to laugh. “So that’s why you kept pointing out those dancers, Kale. I thought you were teasing me about being unavailable.”

Kale scoffed in insult. “As if I would.” She sniggered when Shale, Blake, and Amber all directed disbelieving looks her way. “And anyway, I had to distract you somehow, Shale, you kept glancing in your cabin’s direction.”

Shale was still laughing. “Well, forgive me for being so difficult.”

“Only as it’s a special day.” Kale picked up one of the three packages on the dining table. She handed the gift to Shale. “This is from me and Amber.”

Shale crossed to the bed and sat down on it, unwrapping the outer cloth to reveal a bejeweled dagger. The craftsmanship was exceptional, and as Shale lifted it, it caught the light, highlighting both the intricate engraving and the glorious colors of the inlaid stones.

Shale was somewhat overwhelmed by the exquisite gift. “I don’t know what to say.”

Kale sat next to her. “If you don’t like it, I’ll have it,” she joked.

“I love it.” Shale laid the dagger on the bed and embraced Kale. “Probably more than I love you.”

Kale barked a laugh. “As if that’s possible.” She gave Shale a tight squeeze before she withdrew.

Shale eagerly showed the dagger to Blake and Zayla, then she enfolded Amber in a hug. “The dagger’s perfect, Amber. Thank you so much.”

Amber patted her on the back. “You’re welcome, Shale.” Blake’s gift came next. It was a matching brush and comb set that had finely sculpted bone handles. She thanked Amber and Kale as Shale had, with genuine appreciation and hugs for both.

Zayla’s gift was last, and she gestured them to the table, where the item was concealed underneath a draped cloth.

Blake carefully removed the cloth, revealing a magnificent statue beneath. The figure was of the goddess Artemis. Blake sucked in a sharp breath. “Mother, did you carve this?”

“I did, Blakaea.”

It was clear from the level of detail that a lot of time had been spent making the statue, and Shale was impressed by Zayla’s obvious skill. “Zayla, it’s beautiful. I now see where Blake gets her artistic talents.”

Zayla’s smile was humble. “It is for you both, for your home together.” She reached out and touched Artemis’s carved head. “May she watch over you always, my two precious daughters.”

Shale swallowed hard, touched by Zayla’s kind welcome into her family. Not only had she gained a wife on this day, but a mother as well—she was truly blessed.

THE CELEBRATIONS HAD finally died down, allowing Blake and Shale to return to their cabin. It was the first time all day they’d been alone together, and as Shale closed the door, shutting out the rest of the world, they took a moment to just look at one another.

“This is the happiest day of my life.”

Smiling, Blake wrapped her arms around Shale’s waist. “Mine, too.”

Shale lightly brushed her lips against Blake's. She moved down Blake's neck, laying kisses as she went. The material of Blake's top soon got in the way, so Blake helpfully raised her arms for Shale to remove it.

Shale cupped one of Blake's breasts in her hand, and took the other in her mouth. Blake ran her fingers through Shale's hair, and drew her closer still, letting out a moan as Shale fondled and sucked.

Blake groaned in disappointment, however, when Shale suddenly withdrew, and started to remove her own clothes.

Blake quickly took hold of her hands, stopping her. "What are you doing?"

Shale chuckled, her desire-filled eyes locking onto Blake. "If I have to explain it, I'm clearly not doing it very well."

Blake laughed, and gently caressed Shale's face. "I'm not sure I want to let you take off your clothes, you look so beautiful in them." Blake ran a finger across the material. "I think you should wear this every day."

"What about when they need washing?"

Blake didn't hesitate. "You can just walk around naked."

"Hmm. I see you've got it all figured out."

"I certainly do. Now hold still while I look at you." Blake's gaze raked across Shale's perfectly shaped figure, savoring the sight before her. Desire flooded Blake's senses, and it was she who couldn't hold still. She quickly pushed down her skirt, leaving herself completely nude, and then started to strip Shale of her clothes.

"I thought you wanted me to keep these on?" Shale teased.

Blake playfully narrowed her eyes at Shale. "I've changed my mind."

"Well, all right, whatever you wish." Shale kicked off her skirt as Blake pulled off her top, both items discarded on the floor.

Blake pressed her body against Shale's, bare flesh meeting bare flesh. Their mouths met hungrily, tongues darting out to caress, lick, and tease. Shale inserted her hard, muscled thigh between Blake's legs, and grabbing her rump, she moved Blake against it, swallowing Blake's moan of delight.

A slick wetness soon coated Shale's thigh, and Blake had to break off the kiss as she gasped for air, not wanting her release to be so soon, but unable to stop herself from rocking onto

Shale's thigh. As the wave of euphoria washed over her, Blake shuddered in Shale's hold, her moan long and unrestrained.

As Blake fought to regain her senses, Shale tenderly carried her to the bed and set her down on it. Shale then stretched out beside her and began to kiss Blake's face, so attentive in her ministrations that she didn't seem to notice Blake's wandering hand.

Shale gasped in surprise when Blake slipped two fingers inside her, and she released a startled cry.

Blake felt the tight, almost painful grip on her shoulder and stilled herself. "Shale? Sweetheart, did I hurt you?"

"No." Shale's breathing was uneven, and Blake detected the heady scent of their arousal in the air. "You just overwhelm me."

Blake chuckled, immensely pleased by that. Her eyes latched onto Shale's and they stayed that way as Blake began to move in her, sliding in and out with long, slow strokes.

"Oh, Blake," Shale whispered. "Don't stop."

Blake had no intention of stopping. As she watched Shale's expression, the passion rising ever higher, Blake felt her own wetness building again, and she whimpered when Shale kissed her, fervently locking their mouths together so their tongues could duel.

As if hearing Blake's need, Shale's hand snaked down her stomach. Blake opened her legs, eager to accept her. Shale's fingers delved up into Blake, the velvety folds slick with arousal.

"Shale!" Blake gasped and began to gyrate against her hand.

They stroked one another in sync, both panting heavily as their thrusts grew deeper, faster as their need increased.

Shale moaned. "Blake, I'm so close..."

Blake was barely managing to hold back her own climax. "I'm right with you, Shale."

They kissed again, and that pushed them both over the edge. They collapsed in one another's arms, completely spent.

Shale pulled a blanket over them, inadvertently showering them with flower petals. She smiled as she lifted a pale pink petal from Blake's cheek. "My wife."

Shale spoke the words with so much devotion, Blake felt herself tear up. She lovingly cupped Shale's face. "All yours. Now and forever."

Chapter Four

THREE DAYS LATER, the weather had again taken a turn for the worse. The wind whipped up such a frenzy that many Amazons feared for their cabins—worried that their roofs wouldn't hold—that they would simply be blown off by the strong, vicious gusts.

Early that morning, a deluge of rain had descended from the heavens, the outpouring so relentless that the ground was already slick with mud.

Many Amazons stayed huddled in their homes, and even the warriors' daily training session had been called off. But Blake had insisted on carrying out a few errands, her role as queen didn't stop for the weather. She was now rethinking her choice, cursing herself as she hurried across the village. She slipped, and barely managed to keep her footing. She consciously slowed her pace. Getting soaked was better than ending up face down in the mud.

She finally reached her destination and knocked on Appollonia's door. Blake's own cabin was actually straight across from the healer's lodge, but the usually short trip seemed a lot farther in the heavy rain.

Appollonia, an extremely skinny woman, opened the door and gestured for Blake to enter. It was quite spacious inside the lodge, being bigger in size than a cabin. The beds for the patients were all lined up against the same wall, all three of which were currently empty. A chair sat alongside each bed, for use by the patients or a visiting family member.

Two shelves stretched right across the back wall, each holding an assortment of medicinal supplies, from rags and bandages, through to bottles of herbs and remedies.

A table sat in front of the shelves, and was stacked high with scrolls and parchment.

"Is something wrong, Blake?"

Seeing Appollonia's concern, Blake shook her head. "No, I'm fine."

"I thought you must be ill to venture out in this weather."

Blake laughed. "You're the second person today to tell me I'm mad for doing it." Shale had been the first, not wanting Blake to catch a cold.

Appollonia smiled as she tucked her pale blonde hair behind an ear. “I think I put it a bit nicer than that.”

“You did.” Blake declined Appollonia’s offer of a seat. “No, thanks. I won’t stay long, and I don’t want to get everything wet.” She’d only crossed the village, and despite the cloak she was wearing, she was soaked through. “I just wanted to ask about the potential healers. Any headway?”

“Yes. I spoke to four women who were interested. I talked them through the sorts of things they’d need to learn, which I, of course, would teach, and what, as a healer, they’d be expected to do. I didn’t mollycoddle them. Being a healer is rewarding, but it’s not for the fainthearted. Some of the sights I’ve seen would turn a warlord’s stomach.”

Blake nodded as she could imagine. She also agreed with Appollonia’s direct approach. It was a waste of everyone’s time to train someone who wasn’t cut out for the role. “Did you scare them all off?”

Appollonia laughed, her voice high and musical. “Just one. The other three, Elpis, Hypatia, and Rhea are all still interested.”

Blake lifted a pleased eyebrow. “That’s better than I hoped.”

“Elpis in particular stands out, if you want my preference. I have high hopes for her.”

“That’s good to hear. I know we discussed a single healer, but how would you feel about teaching all three? Would it be too much work at once?”

Appollonia fell silent, clearly thinking it through. “It would be difficult, Blake, I won’t lie. That said, I can see the advantages—when their skills grow, the assistance will be of great help.”

“Take some time to think about it. You’re wiser than I on the subject, so I leave the decision to you. I’ll stand by it, whatever your choice.”

“I appreciate that, Blake. I’ll let you know the outcome.”

Blake acknowledged her words with a nod, then a smile appeared. “Speaking of appreciation, thank you so much for adorning the cabin, it was a lovely surprise to return to.”

“I’m glad you liked it. Aris and I had great fun getting it ready.” Appollonia’s unusual gray eyes twinkled at the memory, and Blake could tell that the relatively recent romance between Appollonia and the chief warrior was still going well. Blake considered both women to be friends, and was glad they’d found happiness with one another. She’d often heard the saying ‘opposites attract’, and it was certainly fitting in this case. A healer and a warrior couldn’t be more contrasted.

Though Appollonia's statement gave Blake an opening to ask about their relationship, she didn't take it. Blake wasn't one to pry. She merely smiled at Appollonia.

Her task now finished, Blake turned to leave. As she opened the door, the cold wind whistled in, nearly yanking the door from her grasp. Blake decided there and then to return straight to her cabin. None of her other errands were vital, and could wait until tomorrow.

BLAKE THREW BACK the cloak's hood, her hair beneath so sodden it appeared as if it was plastered to her head. She was dripping so much a pool formed around her mud-caked boots. "Gods, it's awful out there."

Shale immediately came close and removed Blake's saturated cloak, surprised when she found the clothes beneath to be in a similar state. "Doesn't look like the cloak did you much good. You're drenched, sweetheart."

"The wind kept blowing it open. My hood wouldn't stay up either." Blake hugged herself as she shivered. "You were right, I should've stayed inside." A small, sheepish smile appeared.

Shale rubbed Blake's shoulders in an effort to warm her. "Take your clothes off."

She left Blake to undress as she fetched a blanket from the bed. She also retrieved a large off-cut of cloth from the shelves, which she used to dry her hair after bathing.

When Shale returned, Blake was already naked, obviously keen to get out of her wet clothes. They were in a pile on the floor, next to her muddied boots. Shale drew Blake farther into the cabin then began to dry her with the cloth. She worked quickly, but was thorough, drying both Blake's body and her hair. Once dry, Shale draped a blanket over Blake's shoulders and led her to the bed.

Blake sat down on the bed's edge, but Shale shook her head. "Not there. Sit with your back to the wall. Stretch your legs out in front of you."

Blake didn't question and instantly did as Shale requested.

Shale covered Blake's outstretched legs with another blanket, so Blake was encased from neck to foot. She then reached beneath the blanket and lifted Blake's foot onto her lap. Her warm hands began to massage the cold skin.

Blake sighed in contentment. "What did I ever do to deserve you?"

Shale chuckled. When Blake's foot warmed, she switched to the other, eliciting an adorable moan from Blake. "I'm getting the impression you're enjoying this."

Blake gave a keen nod. "I may just go back outside and come back in again."

Shale laughed, though she shook her head. "Don't you dare."

She raised Blake's leg, kissed her ankle, then tucked it under the blanket. Leaving Blake in bed, Shale moved about the cabin, gathering up Blake's wet clothes and spreading them out on the dining table to dry. She then went through Blake's chest of clothes and selected a dry outfit for her to wear.

With Blake's new comb in hand, Shale returned to the bed. Blake scooted forward so Shale could fit behind her. Shale gently untangled Blake's hair, taking her time, as she knew Blake found it relaxing.

After a while, Shale set the comb aside and wrapped her arms around Blake, drawing her close so she could feel her body heat. Blake leaned back into her hold, turning her head to give Shale a grateful kiss.

Shale slipped a hand inside the blanket, smiling impishly as she cupped Blake's breast. "I'm just checking that you're warming up."

"Mm-hmm." Blake didn't sound convinced. "I am." Shale batted her eyelashes in pure innocence. She grew serious. "Are you still cold, love?"

"I'm a lot warmer since you put your hand on me."

The corner of Shale's mouth curled up, but the concern was still present in her voice. "Perhaps you should get under the bed covers? I don't want you to get sick."

Blake twisted in Shale's arms and placed a reassuring hand on Shale's cheek. "Sweetheart, I'm fine. Don't worry yourself."

Shale nodded, her mind put at ease. Moments later her mind was set on edge again, when thunder rumbled through the sky. The weather was already bad enough, and it seemed it was only going to get worse.

BLAKE SET DOWN the quill she'd been writing with. After waiting for the ink to dry, she rolled up the scroll. She looked at the two piles of parchment on her desk, one large and one small. Fortunately, the bigger pile was work she'd already done, and the other was work left to do. Pleased with her progress, Blake rubbed her neck, which was somewhat stiff from being in the same position.

The ring of steel against stone sank into her consciousness anew, the sound so repetitive that Blake easily tuned it out when she had to concentrate on her work. She followed the sound, and found Shale sat by the door, busy using a sharpening stone on her sword.

Shale paused in her task when a particularly loud clap of thunder erupted directly overhead. The storm had been raging all afternoon, the wind howling wildly outside their door. The rain was a constant addition, now torrential in its relentless descent.

“I spoke to mother.” Blake stepped out from behind her desk. “She’s willing to watch over the tribe for a while.”

Shale’s gaze darted to Blake in surprise. “Are we going somewhere?”

“I know you wanted to show me your old home. The scenery around there.”

Leaving her sword and the stone behind, Shale excitedly got to her feet. “Really? Zayla doesn’t mind?”

“I want to be alone with my new wife, mother understands that. She thinks the time away will be good for us.”

Shale happily embraced her. “Kale will be so jealous.”

“Why? She’s coming too. Her and Amber.”

“Really?” Shale asked again, sounding hopeful. She shook her head. “You don’t have to do that, Blake. I know we need time just for one another.”

“Yes, but we’ll be gone for more than a few days, and I know you don’t like to be apart that long.”

“True, but I don’t want you to think that our relationship comes second to mine and Kale’s, because it doesn’t.”

“Shale.” Blake stretched up and kissed her. “I know that.”

Shale smiled, her enthusiasm returning. “So when do we—”

Thunder boomed deafeningly overhead, though this time was different than all those before. A sharp crack split the air, and moments later the ground beneath them shook.

Blake clutched Shale’s arm in fright. “What in Hades name?”

Shale didn’t get the chance to speculate. Outside, a woman screamed.

They both bolted into motion. As Blake threw open the door, she was struck by how dark it was, the mass of angry storm clouds completely blocking out the light of the late afternoon sky. Fortunately, it wasn't as dark as night, so Blake could see relatively well.

The village was in pandemonium. Numerous Amazons were running frantically about, some shouting instructions, others yelling for help.

The smell of burning reached Blake's nostrils, and her head whipped to the right, instantly spotting the smoke and flames that were rising into the air. She grabbed Shale's hand, not wanting to lose her in the commotion, and broke into a run.

As they neared the blaze, Blake saw what was on fire—it was a cabin. The cabin was also half crushed by a large fir tree, and she summed up what had happened in an instant. Zeus's lightning bolt had struck the tree behind the cabin, setting it alight. The strike had also split the trunk in two, and part of the tree had fallen onto the cabin, collapsing a section of its roof and setting it ablaze.

“Amazons!” Blake yelled, somehow managing to make her voice heard above the din of the raging storm overhead. “We need water. Fetch pails, pans, anything we can use. I want you all to make a line to the stream, and pass the water along that line.”

Now with a purpose, everyone went into action, their fears tempered by the task at hand.

“I'll take care of it, my Queen,” Aris said, suddenly appearing beside Blake.

With the cabin being at the edge of the village, the wind was in danger of spreading the flames to the cabin next door, and to the surrounding forest. Blake pointed this out to Aris, who immediately seemed to understand the danger of the situation. If the fire were to spread to the cabins, their homes would be destroyed, but if the fire spread to the encircling forest, they could all become trapped and perish.

Blake hoped the heavy rain would help to douse the fire, or at the very least stop the timber from being so flammable. Though from what she could see, the rain didn't seem to be having much effect, the flames were still burning strongly.

“I need an axe!” Shale shouted suddenly. She was trying to force the cabin door, clearly intending to see if anyone was inside the burning structure.

Blake raced to help. The door was wedged tightly shut, and even Shale's powerful kicks failed to dislodge the obstruction behind.

“Step aside, Shale.” As if by magic, Kale was there, axe in hand. She swung it savagely at the door, taking a huge chunk out of the wood.

Through the hole Kale had just made, came a scared, whimpering voice. Someone was inside. “Please, help me.”

“We will,” Shale yelled. “We’re coming to get you.”

As Kale took another swing at the door, Blake racked her brain, trying to recall who lived in this cabin.

“Nephele, it’s Blake. Are you hurt?”

“Not seriously. But I’m pinned beneath some wood. I can’t get out.” Nephele could be heard coughing, and Shale and Kale picked up their pace. They each grabbed a hacked part of the door and pulled, tearing the wood from its hinge. They looked dismayed to find that the tree itself blocked the door, and it stood firm, unmoving except for the orange flames that crept along its length. Smoke began to billow out, making it difficult to see.

Kale dropped to her knees, indicating a gap beneath the trunk. She crawled into the burning cabin, Shale behind her.

“Nephele, is there anyone else in there with you?” Blake shouted.

“No, I’m alone.”

“We’ve found a way in, Nephele. Just hold tight. Where are you in the cabin?”

“Far wall. Away from the fire.” Nephele was coughing heavily now. The flames may not have yet reached her, but Blake knew smoke could be equally lethal. “I hear something...A strange hissing.”

“The water’s arrived.” Blake’s relief was clear in her voice. “We’re putting the fire out.”

SHALE FINALLY CRAWLED out from beneath the long trunk, able to stand at last. The thick smoke made her cough, and she was unable to make much out. She followed the sound of Nephele coughing, tripping over debris as she blindly stumbled through the cabin.

Shale banged her leg into something solid. “Ow.”

From ahead of her, Kale said, “Watch where you’re going.”

Despite the situation, Shale sniggered. “That’s kind of difficult at the moment, Kale.”

“Excuses, excuses.” Kale cursed as she loudly collided with something herself. She cursed Shale just as loudly when Shale laughed.

“You’re getting close,” Nephele said, amidst a coughing fit.

“We’ll get you out, Nephele,” Shale said.

Blake could be heard shouting outside, but Shale could no longer make out what she was saying. The roar of the fire had grown closer, its heat intensifying to an uncomfortable degree.

“Nephele, wave your arms so we can try and pick out your movement.” Shale spotted her as Nephele followed her advice, and she and Kale hurried to her side.

Nephele was pinned by a large wooden beam, no doubt structural given its size. Though Kale had brought the axe, Shale knew there was no way she could chop through the beam in time. Not with the flames so close.

Shale examined Nephele’s leg. Though it was pinned, the wood hadn’t actually fallen on her leg, which was fortunate, for the bone would’ve likely been crushed. “Nephele, when Kale and I lift, you’ll have to pull yourself free.”

“All right. I’m ready.”

“On three. One. Two. Three.”

As they both lifted, grunting with the extreme effort, the beam rose up off the floor.

Nephele twisted her leg, groaning in pain as she did so, but she managed to slide the limb free. “I’m out.”

The beam crashed to the floor. Nephele was lifted to her feet, each twin sliding a supportive arm around her waist. It clearly hurt Nephele to put weight on her leg, but she gamely limped forward, looking anxious to get out of the now scorching cabin. With Nephele between them, Shale and Kale headed back the way they’d come, though now with a haste that wasn’t there before.

They stopped in alarm when the tree began to groan, and an instant later it dropped, smashing into the cabin floor. As the tree was now lying flat, the hole they’d crawled in through was gone—the way out was blocked.

Kale growled in anger. “Hades.”

Nephele, who’d been admirably calm throughout, started to panic. “Now what do we do?”

They had no choice but to retrace their steps, the flames herding them back into the corner where they’d first found Nephele. Turning away from the approaching fire, they found themselves face to face with a wall.

Kale stepped forward and swung the axe into it, hacking deeply into the wood. Both she and Shale were coughing strongly, though Nephele had fallen silent.

“Nephele?” Shale received no response. “You need to stay awake.” She lightly slapped Nephele’s face in an attempt to rouse her. It didn’t work. “She’s out.”

Kale had managed to make a hole in the wood, but it was nowhere near big enough to fit through. She put her mouth to the hole and sucked air into her lungs. The outside air appeared to enliven Kale’s senses somewhat, for as Shale watched, Kale switched tactics. Instead of trying to make the hole bigger, Kale began to strategically place her strikes, making the rough shape of an arch. Seeing what Kale intended, Shale laid Nephele down on the floor. Shale wavered slightly as she stood, the smoke beginning to impede her actions. She was mightily tempted to take a breath from outside, as Kale was doing, but the axe would have to cease for a moment, and they simply didn’t have the time. She knew Kale needed the air more.

Shale thought she heard Blake’s voice coming from beyond the wall, but she couldn’t be certain—her smoke-addled brain could be playing tricks.

“Get back,” Kale yelled through the wall. She’d obviously heard a voice too.

When Kale dropped the axe and nodded at her, Shale was in position. In unison, they both lashed out with their most powerful kick, putting everything they had into the strike. On the second attempt, the wood exploded outward, sending pieces of timber flying in all directions.

The flames rolled toward them, as if wanting to prevent their escape. They hurriedly picked up Nephele and carried her unconscious form to the hole in the wall, which was far from big enough to walk through, but it wasn’t so small that you had to crawl.

Anxious faces peered in from outside, and several Amazons offered their hands in assistance. Nephele was quickly passed out to them and moved out of harm’s way.

Blake could be heard clearly now, she was shouting orders. “Get Nephele to the healer’s. We need some water here!”

Kale pushed Shale ahead of her, and Shale tumbled out through the hole, landing face down in the mud. She was coughing so much she couldn’t get to her feet, but she found herself upright as Blake and Amber hauled her up between them.

Shale suddenly hissed and clutched at her forearm, the sharp intake of breath causing the wracking coughs to increase.

“Shale? Let me see.” Blake tried to examine Shale’s arm, but the coughing fit caused Shale to bend double, stopping the attempt.

Shale was shaking her head, trying to draw breath enough to speak. As twins, they could sense when the other was in trouble, and Shale was feeling that sensation now. “K—Kale.” It was all she managed to get out, but it was enough.

As if understanding completely, Amber bolted toward the hole. Kale rolled out just as Amber reached it, and like Shale had done, she landed in the mud. Kale, however, sprang back to her feet, clutching a burnt-looking forearm in obvious pain.

“Water,” Kale rasped between coughs, though she wasn’t incapacitated by them as Shale was.

Since Blake had previously called for water, many Amazons close by held pails in their hands. Amber grabbed the closest pail she could, snatching it away before its contents could be tossed on the fire. She held it out to Kale, who thrust her arm straight into the water, covering the burn completely.

Kale clenched her teeth in agony. “Gods, that hurts.”

Shale knew the pain had to be bad for Kale to voice it. Amber obviously knew it too, for she gave Kale’s shoulder a sympathetic squeeze.

“Amber, we need to move,” Blake said. “Shale, drape your arm around me.” She inserted herself beneath Shale’s shoulder and drew her upright. “Let’s get you clear of the smoke.”

Shale couldn’t respond, for she was still coughing quite badly, and had to lean heavily against Blake for support. The exertion of movement only made Shale worse, so as soon as they were a safe distance from the cabin, Blake stopped and set her down on the rain-soaked ground.

“Do you need help?” Amber asked as they caught up.

“No, Shale just needs to catch her breath. I’ll take care of her,” Blake said the last part to Kale, giving her a reassuring nod. “Go and get that burn treated.”

As Kale and Amber left, Blake knelt beside Shale and began to rub her back in slow, comforting circles. “Easy. Easy, Shale. Just take your time.”

Several moments passed, then a low, tired cheer came from behind them. Blake glanced toward the noise, and a relieved smile appeared. “Fire’s out. It’s done.”

At Blake’s words, realization suddenly dawned on Shale. While waiting for her breathing to calm, she looked up to the sky—the storm had passed. In all the commotion she hadn’t noticed. Clouds still filled the sky, but at least the thunder clouds were no longer present. The wind had dropped significantly, now barely more than a breeze. Even the rain had ceased to fall.

“Typical.” Shale wheezed as she raised her arm, which was caked in both mud and soot. “Now that I need a bath, the rain stops.”

Paying no heed to the dirt covering Shale, Blake laughed and heartily embraced her.

SHALE ENTERED THE healer's lodge and crossed to the nearest bed, seeing the pile of blankets that were ready and waiting to be used. She retrieved one and returned to Blake, who was just closing the door. Shale shook the blanket out, then wrapped it around Blake, who was once again wet from the rain.

Blake's green eyes twinkled affectionately at her, and Shale couldn't help but tease. "I see you're after another foot rub."

Blake chuckled. "You won't hear me saying no."

Shale didn't need a blanket for herself, as the extreme heat inside the burning cabin had all but dried her off. She glanced around the room to see if anyone else needed a blanket. Only Amber did. Kale had been inside the cabin with Shale, Nephele had never been out in the rain, given she'd been trapped, and Appollonia had likely stayed in her lodge, readying to receive the injured. Shale knew it was important that the healer stay at her post in times of crisis, as she needed to be easily located. She would be no good to anyone if she couldn't be found.

Shale was surprised that Nephele and Kale were the only patients in the room, given what had just occurred. Under the circumstances, it could've been a lot worse.

Shale was pleased to see that Nephele was now conscious, and was being treated by Appollonia in the far bed. Kale was perched on the middle bed, her arm still in the pail. Amber sat beside Kale, a worried expression on her face. Though she managed a smile when Shale handed her a blanket.

Shale peered down at Kale's arm, and Kale raised it out of the water so she could see. Shale winced when she saw the harsh burn. She compassionately squeezed Kale's shoulder. "Looks nasty."

"Feels nasty," Kale said.

"What happened? You were right behind me."

"One of the tree's branches gave way. It fell onto me, so I shielded my head with my arm. The weight of it caused me to drop to one knee, and I had to brace it for a few moments before I could get out from under it. Unfortunately for me, the part I was bracing was on fire."

Blake grimaced. "Ouch."

Amber took hold of Kale's hand at the news.

“I’m so sorry you got hurt on my behalf,” Nephele said from the next bed. “I can’t thank you enough for what you did.” She smiled at Kale, then Shale. “Both of you.”

Shale, who was the humble twin, was somewhat embarrassed by the praise. “You’re welcome. I’m just glad things worked out. How’s your leg?”

Nephele looked to Appollonia, who answered for her. “It’s just bruised. You’re very lucky.”

Shale wasn’t sure she agreed with Appollonia’s statement. After all, Nephele’s cabin had just been practically flattened by a falling, burning tree. It seemed she was outvoted though, as Nephele eagerly agreed.

“Yes.” Nephele looked to Shale. “Kale’s been filling me in on how you got me out.”

Shale sheepishly tugged on an ear lobe as she remembered the hole they’d made. “Ah. Sorry about your wall.”

Kale sniggered in amusement. The pain clearly hadn’t dampened her sense of humor.

“I’m sure I can forgive you under the circumstances,” Nephele said, her tone droll. “Besides, that’s the least of the damage.”

Kale’s expression turned thoughtful. “You know, Shale, perhaps we should’ve entered through the wall in the first place.”

Shale fell silent for an instant, then she nodded. “You could be right.” She shrugged. “Well, we know for next time.”

“If there is a next time, can it be someone else’s cabin?” Nephele requested, making everyone laugh.

“Do you have someone you can stay with, Nephele?” Blake asked. “Until your home is rebuilt?”

“You can always stay here,” Appollonia said.

Nephele smiled at them both. “I have friends I can stay with.” As if to back up her words, three women entered the lodge. They went straight to Nephele’s side, each fussing with obvious concern.

Once Appollonia had finished her treatment, Nephele was released into their care. As the group left the lodge, they all hailed the twins as heroes. It was clear the accolades pleased Kale to no end, but they embarrassed Shale completely, so much so that Blake patted her back consolingly.

Kale, it seemed, found Shale's self-consciousness to be highly comical, for she laughed heartily. "Most people like praise, Shale."

"They were gushing."

"So? We deserved it." Kale frowned at Amber's not-so-subtle snort.

"Well if we weren't sure which twin got the modesty, we are now," Blake said.

Kale rolled her eyes. "Here I am, in pain no less, and you won't even let me boast." She pouted. "Shame on you."

In response, Blake scoffed, Amber giggled, and Shale rolled her own eyes, each seeing through Kale's blatant attempt to manipulate them.

Kale grew serious as Appollonia came to her, a variety of implements in her hands. The healer retrieved the chair from beside the bed, positioned it in front of Kale, then sat down on it. Kale lifted her arm out of the pail. Since the burn was on the top side of her forearm, it was relatively easy for Appollonia to examine.

"How quickly did you get to the water?"

"Not as quickly as I would've liked," Kale said, her voice wry. "Not that long. Amber was swift in getting the water to me."

Appollonia gave an approving nod. "Good. That should help to keep the blistering down." She directed a knowing look at Kale. "I bet the water hurt like Hades' fire."

"It did. Almost as bad as the burn itself."

"Did you manage to keep it immersed?" At Kale's confirmation, Appollonia lightly placed two fingers on the burn. She held still for a long moment, then moved her fingers to another position, again pausing in her work. She repeated the process along the entire length of the burn. "The water's drawn the heat from the burn. It's also helped to clean the wound, though I can see a few bits of small debris that need removing." Appollonia picked up a pair of tweezers from the bed and began to remove the embedded dirt. "Did I hear you say it was a tree branch?"

"You did." Kale's jaw clenched as Appollonia probed at the burn, and she gripped Amber's hand tightly.

"Were you hurt, Shale?" Appollonia asked, though her gaze remained focused on the task at hand. "I know how you like to keep me busy."

Shale grinned. It was a standing joke between them. When she and Kale had first arrived at the tribe, Shale had been involved in incident after incident, constantly requiring the healer's skill. "I'm fine."

A touch on her skin drew her attention.

“What about your arm?” Blake said. “I thought you’d fallen on it awkwardly.”

Shale’s brow knitted in confusion. “When?”

“When you fell out of the cabin. I saw pain on your face.”

Shale shook her head, understanding. “That was Kale’s pain, not mine.”

It was Blake’s turn to show confusion. “I thought you just sensed when Kale needed you?”

“I do. But sometimes I physically feel her pain.”

“Shale can go one step further than me when it comes to our senses of one another,” Kale said.

“Wait. Shale, you get actual pain?”

“Yes. Not to the same degree as Kale’s injury of course, but pain nonetheless.”

Blake looked worried. “Are you in pain now?”

“No.” Shale rested a calming hand on Blake’s waist. “I only get the pain when the injury occurs, I don’t feel the after-effects. It doesn’t happen often, only when Kale’s pain is extreme. So for example, if she took a few punches, I wouldn’t feel that.”

“Whereas, I,” Kale said, “only seem to sense trouble, or if Shale needs me. I’ll get a feeling, but I don’t get the actual pain. Not even when it’s bad.”

“That’s what I get for being more sensitive,” Shale joked.

“How come I haven’t noticed this before?” Blake sounded rather annoyed at herself for missing such a thing.

“You wouldn’t have,” Shale said. “The last time Kale was seriously hurt, I was in a worse state than she, so I simply wouldn’t have felt her pain more than mine.” Shale was referring to the incident where she’d nearly lost her life at the hands of her own brother.

Blake’s gaze went distant, as if she were recalling the events. “You were also unconscious for a lot of it.”

“Exactly. This is the first time you could’ve noticed it,” Shale said.

Blake looked a bit happier at that, clearly able to see Shale’s point.

Appollonia finished cleaning Kale's burn, then gently rubbed some salve over the whole area. As she started to bind the wound, she said, "I must confess I find the whole 'twin thing'," she smiled as she used the phrase, for it was how Shale and Kale described their connection, "to be quite fascinating. I'd love to study you both."

Kale immediately shook her head. "Oh, no. Our last healer said the same, and we were never away from her probing fingers." She smirked. "And not in a good way." Kale winked at Amber, who slapped her shoulder in reproach.

Appollonia didn't seem the least bit embarrassed. "I promise no probing fingers." She paused briefly. "Of any kind."

Kale raised her eyebrows, looking impressed by the healer's unflappable manner. "What do you think, Shale?"

"I think that after the amount of times she's patched us up," Kale pointedly cleared her throat, "me in particular, it's probably the least we can do."

Appollonia smiled brightly. "Great. Next time you're free, call in."

"I didn't say yes!" Kale said.

"No, but Shale did." Appollonia caught Shale's gaze. "I'm counting on you to convince her."

At Kale's sound of indignance, Shale chuckled. "I'll do my best."

Chapter Five

"KALE, SHOULD YOU be doing that?" Blake hurriedly walked to her and helped Kale to drag a large chunk of timber to the ever-expanding pile of debris.

Nephele's cabin was in the process of being dismantled, and the wreckage from that, plus the fallen tree, was all being piled up to be burned. The mound of debris was already substantial, and Blake smiled internally, pleased by how her tribe had rallied together, all pitching in to do their fair share.

Kale straightened, wiping a bead of sweat from her brow. "Why not?"

“You should be resting that arm.”

“My arm’s fine.”

Blake had to keep herself from rolling her eyes. “Warriors.” She shook her head. They always had to act so tough.

“I’m perfectly capable of helping, Blake. I’m not just going to sit around.”

“How about a compromise?” When Kale didn’t immediately object, Blake said, “I want a group to go and scout the surrounding area, see what damage the storm has done. If our water supply has been dammed, or a pathway blocked, we need to know about it.”

Kale nodded in understanding, seemingly mulling it over.

Blake spoke again, determined to convince her. “This way you’re carrying out an important task and you’re arm will still get the rest it needs.”

Kale rubbed her chin, looking thoughtful. “Only if I can be in charge.”

This time Blake did roll her eyes. “All right, you can lead the group.”

Kale became smug. “I accept. Now who am I going with?”

“I haven’t chosen anyone yet. I leave it to you.”

“I get to pick the group?”

Blake nodded. “Take anyone you wish. Though I’d suggest you take at least six, so you can conduct a thorough search.”

“And I get to be in charge, no matter who I pick?” Kale asked.

Blake didn’t like the mischievous twinkle that had appeared in Kale’s eyes. “Yes. Though may the gods help them. I see the little power I’ve given you has already gone to your head.”

Kale ignored her comment. “I pick Shale, Amber, Anikett, and Lathana.”

Blake frowned. “With yourself, that’s only five.”

“For the sixth member, I pick...” Kale paused in a dramatic fashion.

“You, my Queen.”

Blake narrowed her eyes as Kale erupted into laughter, looking far too pleased with herself. She scowled at Kale. “I walked right into that.”

“SHALE, I THINK we should delay our trip for a few weeks.” Blake glanced across to her as they ambled along the trail. The six Amazons that were checking the area for damage had been split into three groups of two, and she had paired off with Shale. “At least until the village is repaired and back to normal.”

“I’ve been thinking the same thing.”

“You have?” At Shale’s nod, Blake said, “You’re not too disappointed, are you?”

Shale shook her head. “I know that we’ll go, Blake, but I also know it needs to be at the right time.”

Blake ran an apologetic hand down Shale’s arm. “It must be hard to be married to the queen.”

Shale chuckled. “No harder than it is to be married to a twin.”

Blake smiled as she linked their hands together. “That’s not hard at all.”

“Precisely my point.” Shale raised their joint hands and kissed Blake’s fingers.

“You’re such a charmer.” Blake stopped as the path forked in two. One path carried on straight, going along the bottom of the mountain, the other went off to the left, and wound its way upward. “Which way did Kale and Amber go?”

Shale stilled for a moment, as if to concentrate on her senses. Then she pointed along the bottom trail. Since they wanted to cover as much ground as possible, they took the other path, up the mountain.

“There’s a plateau farther up,” Blake said. She knew this area like the back of her hand. She’d always found walking to be pleasurable, and had spent many a spare hour exploring the countryside. “We’ll get a good view from there, see if anything looks amiss.”

Shale nodded. “Good thinking, my Queen.”

“Don’t you start. I’ve already had that from Kale this morning.”

“Thanks for talking her out of the manual labor. Both Amber and I tried, but she wouldn’t listen.”

“Kale’s my family now, too.” Blake was suddenly struck by how far she and Kale had come. There’d been a time when they couldn’t be in one another’s presence without animosity. “It’s our

job to look out for Kale, especially when she won't look out for herself." Blake smirked. "And whether she likes it or not."

Shale's smile was broad, clearly thrilled to hear Blake's words. "Well said, my..." she broke off as Blake raised a warning finger. "Blake."

"My Blake?" She felt a teasing smile emerge. "I think I've finally found a title I like the sound of."

Shale chuckled. "Well, that's a pity, because I won't be using it. I do have some warrior pride, you know."

Blake clicked her fingers, feigning a discouraged expression.

Shale released a sigh. "Perhaps in private?"

With a triumphant smile, Blake leaned and kissed Shale's cheek. "Come on." She tugged on Shale's hand, urging her to move faster. "I'll race you to the plateau."

Shale grinned at her. "You're on."

They both broke into a jog. Blake knew that Shale would win, for Shale was far swifter on her feet, but Blake hoped she could at least keep up with her, given that she knew this terrain so well. As they reached the halfway point, Blake was astounded when she not only caught up to Shale, but she actually passed her, leaving her behind for a few moments. Then Blake heard her footfalls closing back in, and she yelped as Shale smacked her backside.

The speed at which Shale took off made Blake suspect that the whole thing had been a setup, and Shale's gleeful laugh only confirmed it.

When Blake reached the plateau, Shale was sat on a large boulder, waiting for her arrival. Panting a little, Blake joined her on the boulder.

"Looks like we're not the first ones here." Shale pointed toward the edge of the plateau, where Lathana and Anikett were studying the view. She glanced expectantly to Blake. "Since they took a completely different trail, I'm assuming it must link up with this one?"

"It does." Now that she'd caught her breath, Blake stood. "Let's see if they came across any damage."

She'd barely taken a step when a low rumbling was heard. Shale was immediately at her side, placing a halting hand on her shoulder. As the noise grew, the ground beneath their feet began to shake.

"It's not another tree, is it?" Blake yelled above the din. Her gaze swept the plateau, looking for exactly that, but she found no falling trees. The shaking grew in intensity, and an icy chill

crept up Blake's spine as she suddenly realized what was happening. Her head whipped toward Lathana and Anikett in alarm.

"Get away from the edge," Blake shouted. "It's a landslide!"

Neither Lathana or Anikett had time to react, as the edge of the plateau suddenly dropped away, taking both women with it.

A QUARTER OF the plateau was gone. The recent torrential downpour had weakened its base, and the weight of the sodden soil was too much for it to bear.

"We have to help them." Blake started forward, pausing when she realized Shale wasn't beside her. "Shale?"

Shale didn't respond, her gaze had turned inward. Then she blinked and anxious blue eyes lifted to Blake's face. "Kale needs me. Could she have been caught in the landslide?"

Blake thought quickly, tracing the route of the path Kale was on in her mind. A mortified look appeared. "The path rises up, goes underneath the plateau."

Shale made a dash for the edge. Anticipating her reaction, Blake blocked Shale's path and seized her shoulders. "Shale, stop. Going to the edge may set off another landslide, which won't help anyone below. And if we're caught in it ourselves, we can't help those who need it."

"I'm not running back down the mountain, Blake, it'll take too long. If Kale's buried under that, the air will run out before I reach her."

"I know a faster route, but we'll have to climb down."

Shale didn't question her. "Let's go."

Blake led the way, sprinting across the plateau and onto the trail on the far side—the trail that Anikett and Lathana had recently used. Blake wondered how badly they were injured, or even if they were still alive, and she shook her head to try and clear the negative thoughts. She forced herself to focus on the path ahead, eyes searching for the marker that would locate the climb. Blake found what she was looking for—a large moss-covered rock, leaning against a tree.

"Down here." She began to scale down a rock face, searching for foot and hand holds by feel, descending as fast as she was able. They were now far enough away from the plateau that they weren't at risk if another landslide should occur.

Shale hurriedly climbed down after her, using many of the same holds that Blake had.

Many moments passed as both women hastily scrambled down the rock. Never stopping her descent, Blake glanced below, checking the remaining distance to the ground. They'd made good progress—the ground was a lot nearer.

As if noticing this herself, Shale pushed away from the rock wall and leapt off into thin air. She landed deftly, bending her knees to absorb the impact. "Blake, jump. I'll catch you."

Blake didn't hesitate, trusting Shale completely. She jumped, sailing through midair. The landing wasn't as jarring as she'd feared, as Shale caught her and steadied her on her feet.

Breaking into a run once more, they headed along the lower trail, back toward the landslide.

When they neared, the destruction caused by the landslide became apparent. Rocks, shrubs, even whole trees had been caught up in it, the mass of shifting earth brushing everything in its way aside, or simply swallowing it whole.

Amazingly, on the far side of the landslide, and sat partway up it, was Lathana, perched on top of a fallen tree trunk. Even more astounding, was that Anikett was beside her, though she appeared to be injured. Blake spotted Kale easily, on the near fringe of the landslide. Kale was frantically clawing at the dirt, digging deep into the mud. Though Kale had apparently been able to outrun the slide, it seemed that Amber hadn't been as fortunate.

Shale surged into the sludge, her long legs carrying her through despite its cloying pull. Blake found it more difficult, the mire sucking her legs down to such an extent that she could barely wade through it.

Reaching Kale, Shale began to scoop out handfuls of mud.

"She's been down too long." Kale's tortured gaze met Shale's, though she kept on digging.

"We'll find her," Shale said. "We will. Are you sure Amber fell here?"

Kale nodded. "This is the last place I saw her."

Blake, who was still making her way to them, let out a startled yelp. "Something grabbed my ankle." Her eyes lit up in sudden understanding. "She's here! Amber, hold on, we're going to get you out." Blake furiously burrowed into the soil, and the hole quickly got bigger as Shale and Kale added their hands to the task. "She's by my left leg."

"We're coming, Amber," Kale shouted. "Just hang on."

Amber's hand was unearthed first, and from that they were able to tell the position of her body. Rather than digging any farther, Kale and Shale grabbed Amber's arm and hauled her up through the dirt. Though it was no doubt painful for Amber, Blake knew time was of the essence, and getting her to the surface was more important.

Spluttering and coughing, Amber emerged. She greedily sucked in air. “Gods, that was awful.”

“It’s all right, you’re out now,” Kale said, touching Amber’s back in comfort.

Amber’s lovely red hair was now brown. Like the rest of her, it was completely coated with mud. She was blinking profusely, as if tiny grains of it were in her eyes, and she spat to clear her mouth.

“I can’t see.” Amber tried to wipe the dirt away, but as her hands were filthy it had little effect.

Blake immediately went to help, but her own hands were covered in mud from digging. She cleaned her hands as best she could on her top, then attempted to brush the dirt off Amber’s face. It was no use. They needed a cloth of some kind.

“Keep your eyes closed, Amber.” Kale, not appearing the slightest bit bashful, abruptly stripped out of her top, revealing her round, full breasts. She turned the top inside out, where the material was still clean, and began to carefully rub off the dirt. She cleared Amber’s nose and mouth first, so she wasn’t breathing in any more mud, then Kale focused on her eyes, taking away the grime and dust that had settled there. “How’s that?”

Amber blinked a few times, clearly trying to dislodge the grains that were already in her eyes. She smiled. “Much better.” Her smile grew as she gestured to Kale’s half-naked form. “Did the landslide carry away your top?”

Kale chuckled. “I needed something to clean your face with.” She turned her top back the right way and slipped it on.

Amber seemed touched that she’d done such a thing. She rewarded Kale with a kiss, and wrapped her arms around her. Kale held her tightly, looking immensely relieved that Amber was safe.

“Are you harmed in any way?” Blake asked, unable to see for herself since mud covered Amber’s form.

“I don’t think so.” Amber laughed as Blake hugged her from behind, and a moment later Shale joined in, making it a four-way embrace.

“I’m so glad you’re all right,” Blake said in Amber’s ear, laying a kiss on her best friend’s neck.

“You know me,” Amber joked, “anything for attention.”

IT HAD TAKEN the four Amazons a while to skirt around the landslide, but they'd finally managed, and they were now searching for Lathana and Anikett. Since the two women had been sighted on the opposite shore of the mudslide, they had a rough idea of where to start looking. Fortunately, Lathana made it easy for them. As the group rounded some trees, she was spotted up ahead, standing as if waiting for them.

Lathana smiled as they neared, and spoke up when they drew to a standstill. "I'm glad to see you're safe, my Queen."

"And I you, Lathana." Blake clasped her muscular shoulder. Lathana was Aris's second in command, and was highly liked and respected. Most of the warriors considered Lathana to be a friend. "Though I see you are hurt."

Lathana glanced down at herself. Like Amber, she was covered in mud, but red patches were visible in a variety of places. "Simple cuts, my Queen. None that are serious enough to require stitches. It is Anikett who is hurt."

Blake stepped forward. "Take me to her."

"With respect, my Queen," Lathana pointed off into some foliage. "There's something I think you should see."

Blake's brow drew together in puzzlement. "What is it?"

"It would be best if I showed you," Lathana said. Clearly sensing that Blake was torn between the two choices, Lathana added, "Anikett is not seriously injured. I wouldn't have left her if she were. Her arm is broken, but I have already braced it."

"I'll go to Anikett," Shale said.

Blake tipped her head. She knew the young woman was a friend of Shale's. In fact, when Shale and Kale had originally arrived in the village, Anikett had been one of the first to befriend Shale. "Amber, go with Shale, make sure Anikett's all right to travel. It's a good walk back to the village."

Amber nodded in confirmation. "We'll see to it, Blake."

"How far is she?" Shale asked Lathana.

"A hundred paces or so. She'll be on your left. You can't miss her."

As Shale and Amber continued on, Lathana pushed some foliage aside, and led the way through large, overgrown bushes. “The mudslide is just through here. It’s where I ended up.” Lathana politely held back a branch for Blake, then she took them deeper into the thick shrub.

Up ahead, the plants had been abruptly cut off, the landslide washing everything away down the mountain. As Blake emerged, once again onto boggy mud—a substance she was quickly coming to hate— she instantly saw why Lathana had brought her.

Laid out in front of them, spread across the dirt, was a dead body. Or rather, a skeleton. The remains were clearly old, given the fact that only bones remained, but Blake was still able to tell, from the disintegrating rags that had once been clothes, that the body was that of an Amazon.

“She’s a sister Amazon.”

Around the skeleton’s neck, hung a worn leather pouch. Not squeamish, Kale knelt down and removed it. Lathana cupped her hands together, and Kale poured the contents of the pouch into them. A bejeweled bracelet tumbled out, along with a small piece of parchment, which had been folded many times.

Blake gingerly unfolded the parchment, careful not to damage it. It was in remarkably good condition—the leather pouch had protected it well. Though the ink had faded considerably, the words could still be distinguished, as could the sketch that took up the majority of the page.

Kale, who was peering down at the drawing in intrigue, said, “It looks like a map of some kind.”

“Yes, but a map to what?” Lathana delicately traced the bracelet with a finger. “Perhaps it has something to do with this?”

“Perhaps.” Blake folded up the map and returned it to the pouch. The bracelet followed. “My mother might know something about it.”

Lathana nodded. She gestured to the skeleton. “I’m unsure as to whether she was buried, and the landslide has simply unearthed her, or whether she’s been laid here all along, undiscovered.”

“I don’t think she was buried. Surely someone would’ve taken the map, or at least the bracelet? It looks valuable,” Kale said. “It seems to me she was on her way to delivering this map, likely to her queen, when something happened to her. She never made it to her destination.”

Blake nodded. “I agree. It’s possible her body lay here undiscovered. She’s off the trail, and the brush was thick to get through.”

“Could she have been caught in a landslide herself?” Lathana asked. “Like we almost were.”

“I’ve never known of a landslide here,” Blake said. “But it clearly can happen, today is proof of that.”

Kale leaned over the skeleton, and began to examine the bones and skull. “Look at this.” She indicated a substantial hole in the back of the skull. “A wound like that would kill.”

“You think she was murdered?” Lathana’s voice rose in pitch. “For the pouch?”

“Not necessarily. She could’ve fallen from the plateau and smashed her head on a rock.”

“If she was murdered for the pouch,” Blake said, “surely it would’ve been taken?”

“You would think so.” Kale pointed toward the mountain. “But not if she fell from up there. Let’s say she was killed, either by a weapon, or simply by being pushed off the plateau. Her body falls quickly out of sight, and the murderer can’t find her. You said yourself, Blake, that brush was thick. We only found her because of the landslide.”

“I don’t know, Kale. I’d think if someone was determined enough to kill for the pouch, they’d have stuck around to find it.”

Kale sighed. “You’re right.”

“Unless...” Blake thought it through. “What if the task was already complete? What if the killer just wanted to stop what was in the pouch from being delivered?”

Kale’s eyes widened. “The map?”

Blake nodded. Then she shrugged. “We’re just speculating. It could’ve just as easily been an accident.”

“But if we’re right,” Kale said, “whatever this map leads to, someone thought it was worth killing for.”

Blake laid a compassionate hand on the dead Amazon’s skull. “And worth dying for.”

Chapter Six

“THE BOTTOM MOUNTAIN trail is completely covered by the landslide, but the higher trail is still passable. It’s a longer trek, but at least we still have passage through.”

“Well, that’s something, Blakaea.” Zayla shook her head. “You certainly had an eventful outing. Thank Artemis none of you were seriously hurt.”

“Amber had a close call. She nearly...” Blake pulled in a shaky breath, and she sat down on the closest chair she could find. Both her mother and Shale were instantly beside her, each warm touch immensely comforting.

“Amber’s fine,” Shale said. “Appollonia’s checking her as we speak. She’s safe.”

Blake nodded, knowing that Lathana, Anikett, and Kale were also at the healer’s lodge, though only Kale didn’t need treatment.

Fortunately, on the way back to the village, they’d passed close by to a stream, so they’d all been able to remove the mud from their skin. Their clothes were still dirty, but they’d managed to get themselves relatively clean.

Blake gripped Shale’s hand, which was on her thigh. She took a moment to collect herself. “What with the fire, and now the landslide...three out of the four most important people in my life have been in imminent danger recently.” She blew out a breath. “It’s a lot to take.”

“Sweetheart, you don’t have to explain yourself,” Shale said. “I understand.”

Blake entwined her fingers through Shale’s, then she smiled at Zayla. “It seems Mother is the only one I can trust to stay out of trouble.”

Zayla returned her smile. “I’m too old for trouble.”

Blake scoffed. “Hardly.”

“Speaking of old,” Shale patted the leather pouch on Blake’s hip. “Show Zayla what we found.”

Blake untied the pouch, placed it on her lap, and fumbled inside for a moment before withdrawing and unfolding the map.

Zayla studied the parchment interestedly, but when Blake withdrew the bracelet, her gaze snapped to it in sudden attention. “This was on the body you found?”

“Yes.”

“What did you do with the remains?”

“We buried her, Mother. She was a sister Amazon.”

“She didn’t have anything else with her? A satchel, perhaps?”

Blake indicated the pouch in her lap. “This was all she had.” A frown furrowed her brow. “Why do you ask?”

Zayla crossed her cabin with a haste that revealed a sense of urgency and when she reached the writing table, she began to forage through a sizeable sheaf of parchment, sending scrolls skittering to the floor with careless abandon. “If this is what I think it is...”

Shale gave Blake a questioning look, but Blake just shrugged, equally in the dark as to her mother’s meaning. Blake didn’t impede the search by asking the obvious question. Though she badly wanted to, she knew her mother hated interruptions, and would tell them when ready.

Blake placed the pouch, map, and bracelet onto the nearby tabletop. She then encircled Shale’s waist and tugged her down onto her lap, enjoying the familiar feel of Shale in her arms. “Rest your legs,” Blake said, stroking a well-muscled thigh. “It’s been a long day.”

Shale offered no protest, and leaned back into her hold, casually resting her head against Blake’s. As Zayla kept at her search, Shale turned her neck and laid a soft kiss on Blake’s cheek. “I’m sorry I scared you before, with the fire.”

Blake shook her blonde hair. “Don’t be. You did the right thing, Shale. You saved Nephele’s life.” Her fingertips lightly traced Shale’s face. “I’m so proud of you. I just don’t like to think of you in harm’s way.”

“The feeling’s mutual.” Shale twisted around and embraced Blake, holding her close. “I’ll try my best to stay out of trouble from now on. I’ll get some tips from your mother.”

Blake chuckled against her. “I’d appreciate it.”

“Here!” Zayla raised a disheveled piece of parchment as if it were a prize to behold. “Blakaea, bring the items you found.”

Shale stood, and pulled Blake up out of the chair. Blake gathered the objects and carried them to the writing table, spreading them out beside the parchment that Zayla was intently studying.

With Zayla in between them, Blake and Shale peered over her shoulder. Zayla tapped a discolored part of the sheet, where it had turned brown with age. She indicated the drawing there: it was a detailed drawing of a bracelet. The same exact bracelet that sat on the table.

“This is Queen Sappheire’s bracelet.”

“Mother?” Blake looked to her in shock. “Can it be?”

“See for yourself. The drawing is identical.”

While Blake compared the drawing to the object, Shale glanced to Zayla. “Who was this Queen Sappheire?”

“Forgive me, Shale,” Zayla laid an apologetic hand on her arm. “I’d forgotten you were not raised in this tribe. To explain it to you, I must go back to the very foundations of Amazon culture, to the beginnings of our great nation. You know of Queen Zephyra?”

Shale nodded. “Of course. The original Amazon. She started our nation, and rose to be its first queen.”

“Every single Amazon, no matter their tribe, owes their existence to Queen Zephyra. She is mother to us all,” Zayla said. “She had four daughters, to carry on her line, and when Queen Zephyra died, after her funeral pyre, her ashes were placed in a gold, bejeweled urn.”

Zayla pointed to the second drawing on the parchment. “That urn there.” She paused for a moment as Shale examined the picture. “As you would expect, the urn became a sacred relic to all Amazons, and was passed down Zephyra’s bloodline, to her direct descendants. Her eldest child, Airlia, inherited Zephyra’s rule, while the other three split away to form their own tribes, as Zephyra had wished. One went north, the other south, and the last west. Though we now have many more tribes, these three formed the basis of what you now know to be called the Northern Amazons, the Southern Amazons, and the Western. Zephyra’s tribe, which passed down to Airlia, lay in the east. Zephyra’s foresight allowed us to build a nation, rather than just a single, stand-alone tribe.

“Zephyra’s children each had children, so the bloodline grew in number.” Zayla’s tone turned droll. “No matter the tribe, there never seems to be a shortage of men who are willing to lay with an Amazon.”

She waved a dismissive hand, as if to get herself back on track. “The urn of Queen Zephyra was only passed to the most worthy of kin, blood relatives who had proved themselves to be of note. Eventually, it fell to Queen Sappheire, whose honored name reflected that of the first queen, and proudly displayed her ancestral heritage. Unfortunately, her tribe was ransacked by a group of marauders, and along with pillaging various valuable trinkets, including Queen Sappheire’s own personal bracelet and royal crest, the sacred urn containing Zephyra’s ashes was also taken.”

“Stolen?” Shale sounded skeptical. “I know the story of Zephyra’s urn. I heard it’d simply been lost over time.”

“It is lost,” Blake said. “No one knows where to find the urn.”

“But surely the theft of such an item would’ve been mentioned? The outcry alone,” Shale trailed off. “Poor Sappheire, was she stripped of her royal title? Cast out into exile?”

“Neither,” Zayla said. “Fearing the reprisal of such a failure, she swore herself and her tribe to secrecy. Don’t ask me how Sappheire managed to keep up such a pretense, for I don’t know. I

know only that she succeeded. You, Shale, in your innocence to the full story, have just verified how successful she was.” Zayla paused, as if to let that sink in. “Having a direct lineage to Zephyra, Sappheire felt she had personally dishonored her ancestors, and devoted the rest of her life to recovering the urn. She never found it, but she did—in a last attempt to one day restore Zephyra to the Amazon nation, to her home—draw a detailed representation of the urn, her royal crest, and bracelet, so that her descendants would know what to look for.”

Shale nodded approvingly. “That was smart thinking.”

Zayla smiled ever-so-slightly. “She was a smart woman. And a good queen. It was simply misfortune that fell upon her, certainly no fault of her own. Yet Sappheire’s entire life after that was tainted. She felt the gods had both abandoned and cursed her in equal measure. Her sense of dishonor so great her entire being was swallowed up in it, until she was nothing more than a pale shadow of her former self.”

Zayla flipped the parchment to reveal a neatly written letter on the back. “Sappheire wrote this, basically expressing all I just told you.”

Shale read the letter anyway, as if wanting to make sure she hadn’t missed anything. “It’s terribly sad.”

Blake nodded, though she was lost in thought. “That’s why she gave her life.” Her mind suddenly connected the pieces together. “The Amazon we found, she died trying to restore her queen’s honor, trying to bring Zephyra home. She’d found the stolen bounty—the bracelet she carried proves it.”

“And she was killed to prevent the location being divulged,” Shale said. “The location she drew on the map.”

“Blakaea, are you sure she wasn’t carrying a satchel? Since she managed to retrieve the bracelet, she may well have retrieved the urn as well.”

“We didn’t see anything like that, though it is possible the landslide carried it away.” Blake’s heart sank at the notion, the urn would be impossible to recover from under all that mud.

“I don’t think she had the urn,” Shale said. “Or she wouldn’t have made the map. If she already had the prize her queen coveted, there would be no need to draw such a map.”

“A valid point.”

Hearing her mother’s impressed tone, Blake winked at Shale. “Beauty and brains.”

Shale returned her warm smile. “I also can’t imagine the marauders knew what the urn contained, or they would’ve likely ransomed it back to Sappheire. She would have paid a goodly sum. I think the thieves just saw the gems lining the urn. And if you look at the drawing,” Shale gestured to the picture, “it shows that the urn’s lid clips into place, which means it would have to

be specifically removed, it couldn't just fall off. So with some luck, and the gods willing, Zephyra's ashes could still be safely inside."

Zayla became tearful at the news, and Blake wrapped a compassionate arm around her. "We have a duty to our mother," Zayla said. "We must restore Zephyra to her rightful place, return her to her home nation. And in so doing, we will restore Sappheire's honor."

Blake nodded her agreement. "We'll do all we can. Let's see where the map leads."

Shale glanced to Zayla. "Was Sappheire an ancestor of yours?"

Zayla tucked a strand of hair behind an ear. "Yes, though I never met her. She used to rule this tribe, before my great grandmother's time." Shale's voice rose in amazement. "So you and Blake are descendants from Queen Zephyra herself?"

Zayla tipped her head. "We have that honor, yes."

Shale looked somewhat awestruck. "By the gods, Blake, you are a queen of queens."

Blake raised a warning finger. "Don't even think of using that as a title."

"I wasn't." A slow grin spread from ear to ear. "At least, not until you mentioned it."

Blake covered her face with a hand. "What have I done?"

"THERE IS SOMETHING familiar about the map, but I just can't place..." Shale broke off with a frustrated sigh. The clarity she sought, which was niggling at the depths of her consciousness, just wouldn't rise to the surface, wouldn't reveal itself to her.

She, Blake and Zayla were still gathered around the small writing table, though they'd given up standing long ago, and now sat closely clustered together so everyone could see. Two maps lay unfurled and open on the table. One was the map they'd found, the other was five times its size, covering a vast area and showing an impressive level of detail. The larger map had been in the council lodge, but Zayla had removed it and brought it back to her cabin to study. They were searching for similar landmarks, trying to see where the smaller map fit with the larger. All they had to go on was the direction in which they'd found the body, and that wasn't entirely helpful, as the Amazon could've taken many routes to get past, around or over the mountain.

Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, the map didn't lead straight back to their doorstep. The parchment simply wasn't big enough to show an expansive area of land. Their only option was to match the landmarks, so they could place the location that the map depicted.

Shale tapped her forefinger against her temple in annoyance, as if that would somehow release the memory she was seeking. She leaned back in her chair, purposefully glancing around to distract herself.

Zayla's cabin was beautiful. It had the look and feel of a shrine. The many ornate carvings that were on prominent display looked like objects of worship--the devoted level of craftsmanship making them almost lifelike in their appearance. Though a lot of the carvings paid homage to the gods and goddesses, some portrayed woodland animals, and they were incredibly realistic. Each work of art had its own miniature shelf to sit on, and these small shelves were dotted all around the room, adorning each wall. No matter where your eyes fell in Zayla's cabin, there was something wondrous to behold.

All of the furniture, the single bed, the writing table, and the dining table, were all tucked out of the way, each in its own corner. Even Zayla's private chests sat neatly along one wall. This left a lot of free, empty space in the middle of the cabin, making it look deceptively bigger than it actually was.

Except for a small patch by the door, the entire floor was covered with a variety of animal skins and rugs. Blake had once explained the reason for this—Zayla hated the feel of cold, hard floorboards against the soles of her feet, so she'd simply overlaid her rugs to make a patchwork carpet.

Shale had to admit she rather favored the idea for their own cabin, but she knew that bare floorboards were a lot easier to keep clean than rugs. Zayla got around it by requesting that people remove their boots before entering, which was fine, but Shale presumed it would get somewhat tedious if she had to do it on a regular basis, as she would at her own cabin.

Shale recalled the first time she'd been inside Zayla's cabin. She'd found it so enchanting that she'd begun to wonder if some shaman had cast a mystical spell. It still retained that quality even now, after many visits.

Her eyes suddenly darted to the map, focusing in with a sharp intensity that wasn't there before. "I'm not certain, but when we first came here from our old tribe, I think Kale and I may have passed some of these landmarks. Odd stone pillars that I've never seen elsewhere."

Shale found where her tribe had once settled, the home where she'd been raised, and with a finger, she traced the route she and Kale had taken. "Mind, I could be wrong, I wasn't exactly in the best frame of mind to notice such things." At the time, Shale's entire tribe had just been butchered, so naturally she hadn't paid much heed to the scenery around her.

Blake reached out as if to give Shale's wrist a sympathetic squeeze. Instead, she grabbed her wrist to stop its motion across the map. "There. That's it."

Zayla brought the smaller map closer, and visibly compared the markings. "Blakaea's right. The terrain features are the same. This is the place."

Approvingly, she patted both Shale and Blake on the back. “The land the map depicts is not Amazon land, though at least it’s not restricted by another. We are free to pass.”

“Look how far she’d traveled,” Blake said, sounding sad for the woman whose body they’d found. “She was so close to making it home.”

“Her sacrifice may yet allow us to recover Zephyra’s urn. If we manage such a feat, our sister will not have died in vain.”

Shale smiled. Zayla was a wise woman, and always knew just what to say. Blake straightened at the rallying words, and gave a determined nod.

“I’ll send out our best scouts.”

Zayla regarded Blake with a confused expression. “Why send out scouts to an area you’re already passing? It’s on the way to Shale’s old home.”

“We’ve decided to postpone our trip, Mother.”

“Whatever for?”

“Just until things settle down. What with the storm and the fire, things are somewhat up in the air. Nephele’s cabin needs to be rebuilt. I need to oversee the clear up...” Blake broke off as Zayla waved a dismissive hand.

“Don’t worry about that. It will all be taken care of for when you return.”

“I’m not sure that’s very fair.”

“Well, I am,” Zayla said. “And you should always listen to your mother.”

At Blake’s hesitation, Zayla’s hands rose to her hips. “Honestly, Blakaea, you seem to forget that I was queen myself for many, many summers. I can manage perfectly fine.”

“That was never in question. I know the tribe would be in good hands.”

“Look at the location of the map, whoever goes will already be halfway to Shale’s old tribe,” Zayla said. “You have to admit, it makes sense to do two things at once.”

“It does.”

“And if that map leads to Zephyra’s urn,” Zayla’s eyes sparkled, “surely someone should supervise a mission of such high importance?”

Shale chuckled at Zayla’s persuasive methods. Blake laughed and nodded in consent.

Zayla smiled triumphantly. “Then it’s settled. You’ll go on your trip as planned.”

SHALE WAS BUSY packing for the trip ahead. Her broad grin could barely contain her excitement. Though her old home had been burnt to the ground, the village reduced to rubble and ash, the area around still held many memories. Some bad, most good, and she wanted to share them all with Blake. She couldn’t wait to show Blake where she’d grown up, to show her where she and Kale had played as children. And, as adolescents, where they’d had their first success on a hunt—they’d only caught a rabbit, but at the time it was a great prize. Shale still remembered the elation she’d felt. And finally, as adults, the hidden places and secret lairs that she and Kale had discovered while out roaming the countryside. Their old haunts and favorite spots—she wanted Blake to see it all.

Though Shale was happy in her new home, the happiest she’d ever been in fact, she sometimes missed her old village, the tribe she’d been born into, and the people she’d known since childhood. Whenever that happened, Shale simply reminded herself of the life she had now, how much better it was. Though there were many reasons for this, the main and most important was Blake, her beautiful wife. As long as Blake and Kale were at her side, she was complete. Wherever they were, that was Shale’s true home.

Shale felt arms encircle her waist from behind, and an instant later a kiss was placed at the nape of her neck.

“You do realize,” Blake whispered in her ear. “I’m going to insist on a separate campsite for us.”

Shale chuckled as she turned in her hold. “I’m sure I can go along with that.” She soundly kissed Blake’s lips. “Kale and Amber will want the same privacy we do, so it won’t be an issue.”

“Good, because the thought of not being able to touch you drives me to despair.”

Shale’s chuckle became laughter. “You flatter me.”

“It’s the simple truth.” Blake cupped Shale’s face in her hands and kissed her again. “I love you.”

Shale smiled, and it was laced with affection. “I love you.” She drew Blake’s head to her chest and hugged her warmly. They stayed in the embrace for some time, then Blake withdrew.

“Appollonia’s given Amber the go ahead to travel. Says she’s as fit as a horse.”

“I’m pleased to hear it. She must’ve been touched by the gods to escape that landslide unscathed.”

Blake nodded emphatically. “I agree. We’re going to leave the day after next, so we have a chance to prepare.” She plucked at her own muddied top, then Shale’s. “Our clothes need cleaning for a start.”

“Why don’t you strip out of them?”

“All right. You go and wash our clothes, and I’ll begin to pack.”

Shale pointed to the two travel bags on the dining table, one was half full with supplies. “I already have.”

Blake smiled. “Someone’s eager. Well, you wash, and I’ll continue to pack.”

“Who said anything about washing?”

“Shale, you just said to strip out of my clothes.”

“I know.” Shale raised a suggestive eyebrow. “But I just wanted you naked.”

“Oh.” Blake giggled as she scratched at her mud-coated clothes. “They are starting to itch.”

“That’s another good reason to remove them.” Shale smiled seductively. “Here, let me help.”

Blake playfully swatted her probing hands away. “I can manage, thank you.” She dodged another attack, laughing as she darted out of Shale’s reach. “I thought you were packing?”

“I was. But you distracted me.” Shale lunged for her, and again Blake evaded capture.

“I merely entered the cabin!” A shrug. “That’s all you have to do.” Shale was unrepentant. “I can’t resist your charms.”

“Now, *you* flatter me.”

Shale grinned. “It’s the simple truth.”

Blake laughed again, holding out a hand as if to forestall Shale’s approach. “We do have tomorrow to pack.”

Shale tried to give a serious nod, but wasn’t quite sure she pulled it off. “And we might as well enjoy the bed while we have it.”

The teasing banter stopped as they came together, their bodies meeting in a passionate embrace.

Chapter Seven

THE WEATHER WAS gloriously sunny, perfect for traveling. It was hot, too, though you wouldn't know it to look at Amber, who, as always during the day, was wearing trousers and a long-sleeved top. Blake knew it was actually because of the fine weather that Amber wore such clothes. Her pale, delicate skin burned easily, and needed constant protection from the sun.

Blake felt somewhat sorry for Amber as they ambled along the well-worn, uneven trail. She knew Amber had to be sweltering inside such garments. Blake herself was sweating, and her clothes, her usual skirt and bodice, allowed her skin to breathe. She glanced toward Shale, who didn't seem to be the least bit perturbed by the heat. If anything, she seemed to be enjoying it, soaking up the sun like a lizard. Blake had to admire her stamina, and she would've made a note to praise Aris for training her warriors to such a high fitness level, if she hadn't already known that Shale and Kale were superior athletes to everyone in the tribe. No one else could come close. Blake envied their natural ability, but she realized it was only through sheer determination and training on their part that had allowed them to excel.

The extra weight of the travel bag Blake was carrying didn't help, but as they each carried one, she could hardly complain. It was best that they be well-prepared, it wouldn't do to run out of supplies in the middle of nowhere. Especially in unfamiliar territory.

Despite the heat, and the weight of her bag, Blake was enjoying herself. She felt somewhat liberated, being free of the responsibility of taking care of an entire tribe. Though she loved being queen, and wouldn't change it by choice, it was nice to have a break now and then, to be able to focus purely on her relationship with Shale, and indulge in the love they shared.

"Shall we stop for a break?" Shale slowed her pace, and looked at Blake. "We've been walking all morning."

Blake smiled at her consideration. Though Blake was far from being unfit, in fact, she'd shown up a few warriors in her time, she wasn't as fit as Shale and Kale, who seemed to have a never-ending supply of endurance.

Shale glanced up at the sky, clearly checking the position of the sun, which was high and bright overhead. "It's around noon, so we could stop and have something to eat."

"Sounds good to me."

Amber called out to Kale, who was slightly ahead. “Kale, we’re stopping for food.”

Retracing her steps, Kale came back to join them. “I’m starved.” Blake regarded her humorously. “You always are.”

“I know. It’s a constant torture.”

Shale scoffed. “You’re just greedy.”

“If you were as toned as I am,” Kale teased. “You would know why I need the energy.”

“Ha! We all know you and Shale are equal in that regard. It’s been proven enough times.”

“Blake’s right,” Amber said. “And actually if you think about it, since Shale doesn’t eat as much, so has less energy to burn, the fact that she manages to keep pace with you--”

Blake started to laugh, easily seeing where this was going.

“Surely means that Shale is fitter than you,” Amber finished.

Kale frowned, looking annoyed that her statement had backfired on her. “What? That makes absolutely no sense, Amber. None at all.”

Blake was still laughing. “I disagree.”

“You would,” Kale muttered.

Blake rubbed it in further. “It makes perfect sense.”

“I think Amber may be onto something there.” Shale ducked under Kale’s swipe, and she came up grinning. “See? Without food, you’re slowing already.”

Kale’s blue eyes narrowed, and she leapt at Shale with an indignant growl. Shale couldn’t dodge her this time, and was tackled to the ground. As they wrestled with one another, Kale, who had Shale pinned beneath her, received a kick to her behind.

“Stop roughhousing,” Blake said. “If someone gets hurt, we’ll have to return to the village.”

Kale stayed where she was for an instant longer. “Think yourself lucky that your wife saved you.”

Chuckling, Shale accepted Kale’s hand and was hauled to her feet. Kale leaned close as if to whisper a secret, but she spoke loud enough for the others to hear. “Your new wife is certainly bossy. However do you cope being joined to her?”

Blake pointedly cleared her throat, then scoffed when neither twin paid her any attention.

“I wouldn’t have her any other way,” Shale said.

Kale rolled her eyes. “You would say that. She’s practically standing right next to you.” She nudged Shale conspiratorially. “I’ll ask you in private later.”

“The answer will still be the same.”

“We’ll see.”

“It will,” Shale said. “Now stop trying to stir the pot. Blake and I are perfectly happy, right Blake?”

“I couldn’t be happier.” Blake smiled, and Shale instantly returned it.

“Eros certainly shot his arrows into you two, didn’t he?” Kale placed a hand on her stomach, as if feeling queasy. “But please stop with the sweet talk, or you’re going to put me off my food.”

“As if anything could.” Shale tossed Kale a juicy red apple, looking surprised when Kale passed it on to Amber. “Don’t you want one?”

“Of course I do. But Amber prefers the red apples, so I’ll take the green.”

“Aw, Kale, how sweet of you.”

Kale’s nose scrunched up in response to Blake’s accusation. “No, it isn’t. I just don’t want any to go to waste, that’s all.”

Blake wasn’t convinced in the least. “Uh-huh.”

“She can be quite sweet when she wants to be,” Amber said, patting Kale’s knee when she glared in outrage. “Well you can.”

Shale smiled knowingly and threw Kale another apple, this one green in color.

“Not a word, Shale,” Kale said in a warning tone. “Not one word.”

KALE SAT ON a tree stump, impatiently waiting as Amber finished applying salve to her burnt forearm. Appollonia insisted it be used twice daily to keep infection from taking hold.

They had traveled a good distance that day, and were now settling down for the evening. Though she and Amber would later retire to their own campsite, for now they stayed put, the intention being to eat as a group.

“Ow!”

Amber grimaced in response. “I’m sorry. I’m being as gentle as I can.”

“Kale, that’s not nice,” Shale said from beside the campfire, where she was adding more wood to the flames.

Kale couldn’t hide her amusement, and Amber smacked her shoulder in punishment.

“That’s not funny, Kale. I thought I’d hurt you.”

Kale rubbed her shoulder. “You just did.”

“Well, that you deserved.”

The corner of Kale’s mouth curled upward. “Fair enough. Are you almost done?”

“Do you want it to become infected? Then sit still and let me spread the salve on.”

Blake came and peered down at the wound. “Seems to be healing all right. Is it causing you much pain?”

“Only when people touch it,” Kale said, with a pointed look to Amber.

“Oh, hush, it’s for your own good.” Amber carefully ensured that the entirety of the burn was covered by the salve, then she wound a fresh bandage around Kale’s forearm. “There, finished.”

Despite her grumblings, Kale rose from the tree stump and kissed Amber, full on the lips. “You know, Shale,” Kale said as she joined her by the warm, glowing fire. “I’ve been thinking about that fine new dagger of yours, and it seems rather unfair that you have to carry around the extra weight. Why don’t I take it for a while?”

Shale sniggered. “Nice try.” She tapped her hip, where the ornate dagger was safely tucked in its sheath. “But it doesn’t weigh a thing. Though since you like it so much, I’ll make a deal with you.”

As Kale eagerly leaned toward her, Shale’s smile turned smug. “When you get yourself joined, I’ll give you a dagger exactly like this one.”

“I may get joined, for a dagger like that.”

Amber shook her red hair despairingly. “How romantic of you.”

“A girl has to have her priorities in order.” Kale winked at Amber to show she was joking.

“And that girl will be sleeping alone tonight if she’s not careful,” Amber said.

Kale held up a surrendering hand. “Let’s not be drastic. I apologize.” She noticed Shale’s taunting smirk. “What? She had me on my back.”

Shale nodded emphatically. “On your back, with legs splayed wide, I would say.”

Kale blinked at the image. “That sounds interesting.”

Shale appeared to ponder on it for a moment. “It sounds damned uncomfortable.”

They both burst into a fit of giggles, and were soon laughing so hard tears streamed from their eyes. They leaned against one another for support, a happy tableau of sisterly affection.

“DID YOU SEE that?” Flat on her back, Blake pointed up at the night sky, where specks of light shone out from the darkness. One of those specks had just streaked across the sky, leaving a white trail in its wake.

Shale nodded from her bedroll. She was stretched out beside Blake, an arm folded beneath her head to raise it slightly. “I did. A god is coming down to visit a mortal. Probably Zeus, searching for another beautiful maiden to bed.”

Blake chuckled. “He does have quite the reputation for it.” She paused briefly. “I don’t know how Hera puts up with it.”

“Me neither.” Shale turned on her side and draped an arm across Blake’s abdomen. “It would drive me crazy to know you were going off to be intimate with someone else.”

“You never have to worry about that.” With a hand on Shale’s neck, Blake drew her in for a soft, gentle kiss. “You’re all I want.” She tenderly caressed Shale’s cheek. “All I ever wanted.”

Shale’s smile showed she was genuinely moved by Blake’s words.

“Likewise, love.”

They spent several long, pleasurable moments exchanging kisses, then Shale rested her head against Blake’s chest, sighing contentedly when Blake began to run her fingers through her dark hair. Blake kept up the motion, knowing that it put Shale to sleep.

Shale pulled the blanket over them both. “I love sleeping under the night sky. Kale and I used to sleep outside often.”

“You still can,” Blake said. “I wouldn’t mind.”

“Would you join us?” Shale slowly tickled Blake’s ribs. “If I asked you very nicely?”

Chuckling, Blake squirmed a little beneath the teasing fingers. “Well, I can’t say I’ve had much cause to sleep outside, but from what I’ve experienced so far,” she gave Shale a squeeze, “I must say I’m enjoying it immensely.”

Clearly pleased, Shale pressed her lips to Blake’s breast. “It’s best when the weather is nice, it’s not much fun in the rain.”

“Sounds like you’re speaking from experience.”

“Mm. Unfortunately.” Shale lifted her head and propped it up on an elbow, so they could look at one another. “One time, when Kale and I were young and stupid...”

Blake interrupted in her defense. “I can’t imagine you were ever stupid, Shale.”

“You might want to wait until *after* you hear this story to make up your mind.”

When Blake didn’t add anything further, Shale said, “Kale and I had planned a hunting trip. We’d been looking forward to it, so when we were advised to stay in the village as the weather was due to worsen, we ignored the advice and went anyway. We were only to be gone overnight, so didn’t see the harm. Besides, we were big, tough warriors. A bit of bad weather couldn’t hurt us.” Shale shook her head. “We noticed the dark, heavy clouds, swollen with the intent of rain, but still we kept going, not wanting to give up and turn around.

“We’d barely made camp when the skies opened, soaking us to the skin. We managed to find a cave and went inside, though we were unable to start a fire as any wood or kindling we gathered was sodden, so wouldn’t catch alight. We should’ve returned home, but didn’t want to accept defeat, didn’t want to be proven wrong, so we spent the night in the cave, trembling like a pair of frightened babes.” Shale raised an expectant eyebrow. “Go on, you can say it.”

“Warriors.” Blake didn’t accompany the word with the usual roll of her eyes. She was only concerned. “What happened?”

Shale chuckled. “We returned home early the next morning with a nasty chill, and spent the next two days in bed.”

“You poor thing.”

“It wasn’t all for nothing,” Shale said. “Our warrior pride took a good knock, but I learned that some things are more important.” Her gaze became reflective. “It’s probably one of the reasons I’m not as driven by my pride as other warriors are.”

Blake picked up on her singular noun. “And Kale?”

“It made her more driven to prove herself.”

“So, she missed the point completely,” Blake said, though not unkindly. “How you two can be so different, yet so alike is beyond me. And I still don’t think you were stupid, even after hearing that story. Misguided, maybe.”

“You give me too much credit, Blake.”

“No, you give yourself too little—another difference between you and Kale.” Blake lightly took hold of Shale’s chin. “But don’t worry. I’m here to keep you right.”

Shale grinned. “Is that so? Well I’d better not argue, you are my queen after all. A queen of queens, in fact.”

Blake pursed her lips at the name. “I’m going to order you to never say that again, that’ll stop you.”

Shale clamped a hand over Blake’s mouth, laughing when Blake playfully nibbled at her skin. “Please don’t. I like teasing you.”

Blake pried her fingers away so she could speak. “Uh-huh. I know that all too well.”

“Please?” Shale’s blue eyes locked onto green. “My Blake.”

Blake felt herself crumple under the phrase. “Ooh, I can see you getting whatever you want when you use that.” Her brow furrowed. “I shouldn’t have told you that, should I?”

“Nope. I’m going to take full advantage. It’s only fair, since you can simply order me to do what you wish.”

“When have I ever done that?” Blake admonished. “I was joking just now. I would never hold my power as queen over you in that way.”

“I know, Blake, of course I know that. But the fact remains you could. And I would have little option but to follow your wishes, no matter what they were.”

“I have a strong feeling you’d try and talk me round—try and convince me otherwise if you didn’t like the order.”

Shale smiled, a touch sheepishly. “Perhaps,” she said. “But not if you were serious. Not if your mind was made up.”

“Shale, I put my role of wife higher than that of being your queen. I’d like to think that I would never put you into a situation where those roles were reversed. I certainly wouldn’t wish such a thing.”

Looking satisfied by Blake’s response, Shale nodded. “That’s good enough for me.” She didn’t resist as Blake urged her head back down onto her chest, and began, once again, to stroke her hair.

“Get some rest, sweetheart. We have a long day of traveling tomorrow.”

“Night, my Blake,” Shale mumbled, sounding as if she were already half asleep.

Blake smiled softly, and laid an answering kiss on Shale’s temple.

She briefly wondered what the next few days would bring, and whether they would find Zephyra’s long lost urn. Soon her thoughts drifted, and she joined her wife in peaceful slumber.

SHALE SCRAMBLED FOR her footing, for anything that would stop her fall. A branch, a stone, anything she could get purchase on to halt her sideways motion. There was nothing close enough for her to grab, so she tumbled headlong into the water, cursing Kale loudly for her intentional shove.

The lake was deep even at its edge, overflowing with the excess rain from the recent storm.

Shale found herself completely submerged, yet still she could hear Kale’s riotous laughter. Her feet found the lake bed easily, and she straightened, rising to her full height. She broke the surface, and found that the water only came mid-torso, so she had no need to tread water.

“I can’t believe you did...I’m not even going to bother finishing that sentence.” Shale shook her mane of wet hair. “I can believe it. In fact, I should’ve seen it coming.”

Kale was too busy laughing to answer. She was bent double, holding her side as if she had a stitch.

“You’d better run, Kale,” Shale said as she waded toward her. “Because you’re going in next.”

“Ah, ah.” Kale held out her arm, tapping the bandage there. “Appollonia said to keep the burn as dry as I could, remember?” A smug smile formed. “You can’t do a thing about it.”

Shale narrowed her eyes, then squinted up at the dazzling, hot sun. "It's lovely and cool in here." She made a show of splashing water on her face, enjoying its refreshing feel against her overheated skin. "It's a shame you can't come in, Kale."

"Your satchel will be going in if you're not careful." Kale had taken it from Shale mere moments before pushing her into the lake, on the pretense of wanting an apple.

Shale ignored her, knowing the threat was an empty one. It wouldn't do for the supplies to get soaked.

"Why don't we all go in?" Blake said. "There's a rock over there where you could at least dangle your feet in, Kale."

Kale nodded. "All right. Let's leave our things here."

Four travel bags and three sets of boots were set down in a clustered heap. But only Blake dove into the lake.

"Aren't you coming in, Amber?" Shale said.

"No, I'll stay with Kale."

Kale shook her head. "There's no need. Go and have fun."

As Amber was about to protest, Kale simply scooped her up in her arms. "I insist." Without further preamble, she dumped Amber into the lake. Amber came up spluttering. She was also laughing. "You know, Kale, you're not the subtlest of people."

Kale winked at her. "Make sure you dunk Shale for me."

KALE OFFERED HER hand to Blake, hauling her out of the water and onto the large rock beside her.

Blake lay back against the boulder, sunning herself in an obvious attempt to dry out her clothes. After several moments, she said, "Do you know what it would mean if we found Zephyra's urn?"

Kale smirked. "You would become one of the most renowned queens of our time?"

Blake scoffed. "That's hardly my focus. I meant for the nation as a whole."

Kale gave Amber, who was wrestling in the lake with Shale, a thumb's up as she managed to submerge Shale beneath the water. Amber whooped in success, though an instant later she let out a startled yelp as Shale tugged her under. Her red curls disappeared from view, the water rippling from the ongoing tussle below.

Kale returned her attention to Blake. "I guess we'll find out soon enough. We should reach the map's destination tomorrow."

"SHALE, CAN I talk to you about something? While we're alone?"

Shale ceased her splashing and began to tread water in place. "Sure, Amber. What is it?"

"I don't want to put you in an awkward position, but I'd appreciate an honest response. It's regarding Kale."

"All right."

"Do you think she'll ever want to get married?"

"That's a difficult question." Shale paused to consider her answer. "When Kale and Aeron began to discuss their joining, that's when things started to fall apart, so I imagine Kale will shy away from the idea."

"That's what I thought," Amber said. "And though I'm certain that I don't want to push her into anything, I also know that..." She broke off with a sigh. "At your ceremony, you and Blake, it made me realize how much I wanted that for Kale and I."

"Please don't think that Kale isn't committed to you, for I know she is. She loves you deeply, Amber. Kale was never half as happy with Aeron as she is with you."

Amber produced a delighted smile. "Thank you for telling me that."

"It's true. And if Aeron hadn't figured into her life, I suspect Kale would've already offered you her hand."

"But surely Kale knows I would never do what Aeron did, demanding she choose between me or you. Haven't I proven that by now?"

"Kale wouldn't be involved with you otherwise. But fear is a strong motivator, and Kale was scarred deeply by what happened. I will say that before Aeron, Kale did indeed wish to get married, so given time, those feelings may yet re-emerge. It wasn't that long ago Kale believed she'd remain single forever—look how that turned out."

Amber chuckled. “I see your point.”

“Be patient. They say time heals all wounds. I think Kale will come around to the idea.”

Amber looked pleased by her words. “I’m not saying I need to get joined straight away. There’s no rush. I’m just saying as long as it happens at some point.”

“I believe it will.” Shale gave Amber’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “Truly.”

With a smile, Amber reached up and patted Shale’s hand. “Thank you.”

Chapter Eight

“THIS HAS GOT to be the place. Look at those rock formations. I’ve never seen anything like it elsewhere.”

Blake pointed, though there was no need. They could hardly miss the strange gigantic stones that jutted up out of the earth—tall pillars stretching upward, some leaning against one another as if for support. The ground at the base of each column looked ruptured, so it appeared that the stones had clawed their way out of the earth, striving to reach the light of day. The pillars were crammed tightly together, like an ancient stone forest. Some were jagged, others smooth, all were of varying height and shape.

Blake imagined that in the dark, or even on a cold, overcast day, the place would seem eerie, and the mass of gray stone all around would only add to the gloom. But today, in the glow of the shining sun, the place was oddly beautiful, and had a somewhat sacred feel, like it was a secret sanctuary to one of the gods on Olympus.

Blake wondered whether she was projecting her feelings for Zephyra, mother to all Amazons, onto the place where she supposedly rested, where her urn was supposed to be hidden. A single glance at the others told her she was mistaken, for Shale, Amber, and even Kale looked awed, as if they too were struck by the sanctity of the place.

Blake took another look at the map, raising it slightly when Shale peered over her shoulder to study the drawing also.

“I think we should be a bit more to the right,” Shale said, her low tone conveying a respect for her surroundings.

Blake nodded, folded the map, and took Shale's hand as she led the way forward, deeper into the vast cluster of stones. The problem they were encountering was the sheer number of pillars. The map hadn't specifically identified any, no particular shape or structure had been drawn to indicate where they should now head.

The only thing the map showed was an odd circle, which had been shaded in. They had speculated on it being an entrance to a cave, but as they neared the exact located position, that theory vanished completely. There was plenty of stone surrounding them, but none of the numerous rocks even hinted at the shape of a cave, only more towering pillars, for as far as they could currently see.

Kale began to climb one of the slanted towers, obviously hoping to get a clearer view from the perch aloft.

Blake kept on walking, determined to search in every nook and cranny, even if it took her all day. "It has to be here, Shale. What have we missed?"

"We'll keep looking. If there's something here, we will find it."

Blake stepped onto what she thought was solid ground, though suddenly found herself falling forward, plummeting down through the dirt and toward an inky black void below. Terrified, she called out Shale's name, but had barely done so when a sharp pain erupted in her shoulder, and she was jerked to an abrupt halt.

"Kale! Amber! Get over here!" Shale yelled. "I've got you, Blake. I won't let go."

Blake realized that Shale had stopped her fall. The fact they'd been holding hands had likely saved her life. As she looked up, she saw that Shale's grip on her hand was tenacious at best, the harsh pull of the fall had almost wrenched her from Shale's grasp.

"Blake, you need to reach up with your other hand, grab my wrist."

Blake stretched upward and gripped Shale's wrist, gaining a firm hold.

Visibly relieved, Shale released a shaky breath. "I know you were keen to find the entrance, Blake, but this seems a bit extreme."

Blake gave a short, tense laugh. "Gods, that was close."

Amber suddenly slid to a halt beside Shale, flat on her stomach. She took hold of Blake's arm, and between the two of them, they hauled Blake upward. Kale joined them a mere moment later, though Blake had last seen her halfway up one of the pillars, and they soon had Blake out of the hole.

Once away from the edge, Shale sat Blake down and embraced her. Blake felt herself trembling, the shock of what had almost happened beginning to sink in. Shale tightened her hold,

and whispered soothing words of comfort in her ear. Amber rubbed Blake's back in a silent offering of support.

When Blake regained her composure, she said, "I guess we've found the entrance."

"Talk about stumbling across it." Kale smirked at Blake. "Nice work."

"Next time, Kale, you can lead."

Kale grinned and offered Blake a hand up. "You might want to watch where you place your feet in the future."

Blake frowned in annoyance as she stood. "It was covered over with growth! The plants and foliage had hidden the hole completely. Even the mighty Kale herself would've fallen."

Kale glanced amusedly to her twin. "Hear that, Shale? She thinks I'm mighty."

Shale responded by shaking her head. "You do have a tendency to miss the point, Kale."

Kale shrugged. "Only when I choose too. But it's you who's missing the point this time. All of you are."

Shale raised a doubtful eyebrow. "How so?"

"It must've taken many years for the foliage to cover the hole, so it hadn't been disturbed." Kale snorted. "At least until Blake fell through it." "Well excuse me for..."

Kale interrupted her. "I'm not having a dig at you, just think it through. You were the first to disturb the entrance in some time..." She trailed off, and it was, unsurprisingly, Shale who finished her sentence.

"Which means the bounty may still lie below, untouched."

Blake felt hope ignite in her chest. "You know, Kale, I could kill you sometimes..."

"But?"

"But on occasion, and it's rare, mind you, I think you're a genius."

"A mighty genius?" Kale appeared to consider the words, looking impressed. "Yep, sounds about right to me."

Shale scoffed. "You forgot egotistical."

"No one asked you!"

SHALE AND KALE used long, sturdy branches to clear the hole, stabbing through the foliage to find the outer perimeter, where it was safe to stand. Once the last of the scrub was removed, Amber and Blake joined them, and all four women peered down into the dark abyss below.

The hole, Shale assumed, would lead down to a cave system of some sort, though she couldn't see down far enough to be sure. The hole itself was quite large. If she were to lay flat, arms and legs spread outward, the area she'd cover would be similar to the size of the circular hole. The shaft below, the same width as the entrance, was lined on all sides by rock, though it was natural, not man-made, which was why she presumed it might lead to caves.

Shale dropped a pebble into the shaft. Many moments passed, but she at least heard it land—a quiet crack that sounded like stone striking stone. The shaft was deep.

“Do we only have the one rope?” Shale asked.

“No.” Kale dug into her satchel and removed a tightly coiled length of rope. “We have two.”

“I don't know that either will be long enough, but I'll try it and see.”

“I? We'll both go to scout it out. Then Amber and Blake can follow.”

“It'll be a hard climb back up, Kale, your arm will feel the strain.” Shale held up a hand to stop the expected protest. “At least let me go down and check it's not simply a dead end? Then you can come down if there's a reason to.”

Kale's nod was reluctant. “All right.”

“I'll tie the rope around a pillar.” Amber started toward a cluster of rocks. “It'll be sturdy enough to hold your weight.”

“She's saying you're fat,” Kale teased.

“I noticed that.” Shale feigned indignance but her lips twitched in humor. “I'll need a torch.” She suspected it'd be pitch black down the shaft. She patted the pouch on her hip. “I have a flint to start it with.”

“I'll find something suitable to burn,” Blake said, heading away to search.

“I'll whistle once when I'm down.” Shale tucked her hair back, making sure it was out of the way. “The sound should carry. We heard that pebble after all. I'll whistle twice if I want you to join me, Kale.”

“Fine. But don’t light the torch till you’re down. You don’t want to burn through the rope.”

“What do you take me for?” Shale said, a touch impatiently. “But more importantly, how would you expect me to strike the flint, light the torch, and hold onto the rope all at the same time?”

Kale paused for an instant, then she chuckled. “You’ve got me there.”

Shale produced a self-satisfied smile. “So if I outsmart a genius, what does that make me?”

“More than egotistical.”

Shale barked a laugh. “Nicely played.”

Amber came back, kneeling beside them at the edge of the hole. “Rope’s nice and tight. It won’t come loose.”

Shale gave the rope a harsh tug to test it. “Good.” She dug out the second rope, and draped it diagonally across her body, the coils crossing one shoulder and down to her waist. When Blake returned, Shale wedged the torch, which essentially was a short, stubby section of branch with a cloth wrapped around the top part, between the coils of rope.

“Right, I’m all set.” Shale gave Blake a brief kiss, then locked her forearm with Kale’s to assist her over the lip of the hole. Climbing down the rope, Shale began a controlled descent into the thick, smothering darkness below.

“WOW.” KALE RAISED her torch overhead, adding the light to Shale’s. “This place is remarkable.”

The shaft opened up into a vast cave, and the flames of their torches danced on the stone walls, giving the cave an odd yellow glow. As Kale explored, stepping around strange rock formations, she found a tunnel of sorts, sprouting off from the main cavern.

They followed it for a short while, though Kale slowed when a deep rumbling reached her ears.

Shale drew to a halt. “What’s that noise?”

“I think it’s water. We must be near an underground river.”

The rumbling only grew louder as they continued on, heading lower into the bowels of the cave. Rounding a bend in the winding tunnel, they came across a dead body, skeletal, like the

Amazon they'd found. Protruding from the side of his lower rib cage, Kale assumed it was a handle from his ragged clothes, was an axe. Beside him lay a bag of gold, which had split and spilled out on the ground.

"This isn't a very good sign."

"Don't get jumpy, Shale. And I would say otherwise. We're on the right track at least." Kale pawed through the tattered bag, seeing what else was inside. "Just money. We'll have to return with our satchels and load them up, this bag is next to useless now."

"Our priority is the urn."

"You're right. Let's keep moving."

At Shale's hesitation, Kale asked, "What is it?"

"The last time I was in a cave..." Shale grimaced. "It didn't work out so well."

Kale knew that was an understatement. Shale had nearly been tortured to death. Her smile was sympathetic. "I tell you what. I'll go first, and you just follow my lead. All right?"

Shale sounded grateful. "I can do that."

"Come on then." Kale touched her arm as she passed by, the contact meant to reassure.

The tunnel, which had always had a downward gradient, grew steeper still, and soon the slope was at such an angle they had to position their feet carefully, or risk a nasty tumble. They emerged from the tunnel and found themselves on a high ledge, suspended above yet another passageway.

Shale removed the rope she was carrying and secured it around an outcrop of rock.

"Kale, look at this." Shale indicated another rope, which was already fastened around the same outcrop. It was frayed quite badly in a few different places, its state of disrepair revealing its old age.

"That man we found, he must have used it. I wonder why he didn't take the rope with him."

"The gold he carried was probably weight enough. And besides, the money made him rich, so he probably figured he could buy another." Shale paused. "What I'm wondering is where was the rope he came in by? It had to be tied at the top to drop down the shaft."

Realization struck Kale. "When I landed, it was on something soft, spongy. It was obscured by moss, but I'm betting that was the rope. It likely wore through and dropped down the shaft."

Shale nodded at the explanation. "Makes sense."

Kale swung herself off the ledge using their rope, not wanting to chance using the older one. The rumbling of the water grew to a thunderous roar as she reached the bottom, and she stepped clear so Shale could throw down the torches. Kale picked them off the ground before either could snub themselves out, and waved one back and forth to let Shale know it was all right to descend.

Shale landed deftly, and reclaimed her torch.

Kale had to yell to make herself heard. "The river must be close."

The passageway grew tight up ahead, and Kale had to turn sideways to squeeze through. It continued like that for a short distance, then when it opened back up she was able to see the rushing flow of water. It was indeed an underground river, but unfortunately for them it cut right across their path.

Kale cursed. "I don't see the next tunnel, or even a route elsewhere. Do you?" Her view was restricted where she was, she needed a clearer picture. All Kale could see was the froth of the gushing water, and beyond that was a solid rock wall.

"The river has to be going somewhere," Shale said. "If we can just get to those rocks, we can peer round and see the course of the water, maybe spot another tunnel."

"It's worth a shot." Leaving her torch on the ground, Kale waded into the water that had pooled into the tunnel. The pool wasn't particularly deep, not quite waist high, so she was able to keep her bandaged arm dry. The pool didn't have the driving force of the main flow, but even still, as they neared the end of the tunnel, they had to brace one another against the powerful current.

With Shale steadying her, Kale leaned out into the much deeper river, gripping the rock to hold herself in place as the river tried to forcefully wash her downstream. "Shale, shine your light this way." From the glow of the torch, Kale managed to track the course of the river, though she had to be quick about it. She was exceptionally strong, but after only a few moments she had to duck back into the tunnel, out of the path of the tumultuous water.

"Well?"

"There's another tunnel farther up. But it's on the opposite side, and there's no way we can swim upstream, not with that current."

"Could we utilize a rope somehow?"

"Not that I could see." Kale knew they'd used all the rope they had, but if need demanded they could fetch some from the nearest town. Nearly every blacksmith stocked rope. An idea suddenly struck her.

Kale leaned back out into the flow of the river. She felt along the wall, taking note of the different textures under her hand. Despite Shale's support, it was difficult to keep herself in position, the cold, icy water pounding her relentlessly.

With effort, Kale pulled herself back into the tunnel. She smiled at Shale. "I don't think the water's usually this high. I think the excess rain recently has flowed down through the mountains, and lifted the water level."

"What makes you think that?"

"The river wall is smooth lower down, yet rough near the top. The water's worn it smooth only up to a certain point, because it's not usually this high. The rush of water is just the excess trying to escape. I bet we'd be able to wade through it normally. They'd still be a current of course, but if we could keep our feet on the ground, we'd probably be able to make it upstream and on to the next tunnel."

Shale proudly clapped her on the shoulder. "Sounds logical to me."

"If we go on with our trip, by the time we get back from our old village, the water level may have dropped enough for us to pass." Kale took another look at the surging flow. "Let's hope I'm right, because we can't go any farther as is."

Shale waded out of the water. "Let's get back to the others. They'll be starting to worry."

THE EXERTION OF the hard climb was wearing on her. Shale hadn't allowed herself to rest, eager to get out of the caves. Kale had insisted that Shale go first, no doubt seeing her keenness to leave.

The smell of fresh air from above urged her on, and she smiled up at Blake when her face appeared at the top of the shaft. The sight renewed her energy, and ignoring her burning arm muscles, she pushed herself on.

Blake and Amber's offered hands were gratefully received, and they helped to haul Shale up off the rope and onto solid ground.

As Shale shook her arms out and rolled her shoulders to loosen them, she felt Blake's touch to the small of her back.

"Are you all right, Shale? You look a bit pasty."

Shale felt a smile emerge. Blake could read her like an open scroll. "I just need to walk it off. I'm glad to be out of the caves." She strode away from the hole, toward a crowd of stone pillars.

A moment later Shale heard footsteps behind her—Blake’s footsteps. It didn’t take her long to catch up, and she wound a hand around Shale’s waist, smiling when Shale’s arm settled around her shoulders.

They walked in silence for a few moments, then Blake asked, “What happened down there? Why are you so pale?”

Shale summed it up for her. “The cave reminded me of when I was kidnapped by Theron, that’s all.”

“That’s all?” Blake looked mortified, yet annoyed with herself at the same time. “Shale, sweetheart, I’m so sorry. It didn’t even occur to me that it would raise such awful memories.”

“Don’t feel bad, it didn’t occur to me either. Only when I was down there did my thoughts take such a turn. But I managed. It worked out all right.”

“I don’t want you to go back down. Not if it’s going to cause you distress.”

“Blake, I’m fine, it just caught me unawares.” She gave Blake’s shoulders a reassuring squeeze. “I’ll be all right to return. Trust me.”

“If you’re sure?”

“Quite sure. Besides, we’ll all be needed to lug along the extra ropes. Not to mention any treasure.”

“Did you find anything?”

“A bag of gold. We’re definitely at the right place.”

Blake seemed thrilled at the news. “Nice work, warrior.”

Shale dipped her head, though her smile faded when she recalled the river blocking their path. “Don’t get too excited, we can’t do anything just yet.”

Blake’s brow creased. “Why not?”

Shale gestured to an enormous toppled pillar, lying flat on its side like some sort of fallen titan. “Let’s sit down. Kale and Amber are on their way, so we’ll fill you both in together.”

She could sense her twin’s approach, and sure enough, Kale soon appeared, with Amber close in tow. Blake no longer looked surprised by such a feat, but she did shake her head in amusement, as if still amazed by the connection they shared.

Kale and Amber sat down opposite, forming a small square.

“At the bottom of the shaft lies a cave, like we expected,” Kale said. “It only has one way out, excluding the shaft, so we followed that tunnel a ways.”

Shale seamlessly picked up the conversation. “Which was where we found the remains of a dead body, and with it, a bag of gold coins. We wondered whether he’d been caught stealing, since he had an axe buried in his side, but that doesn’t explain why the gold was still there. Surely whoever caught him would’ve taken away the loot.”

Kale waved a dismissive hand, clearly she didn’t think it was important. “Anyway, we had to use our other rope to descend into the next tunnel. Unfortunately, at the end of it was a raging underground river.”

“So that’s why you’re all wet,” Amber said.

Kale nodded. “The river blocks our route completely. We were able to spot the next tunnel, but it’s upstream, so we simply can’t reach it.”

Shale continued once more, “The water level has risen because of the recent storm, so if we give it time, it should disperse somewhat. We thought if we came back this way after visiting our old tribe, we might be able to go farther.”

Blake gave a nod of agreement. “Then that’s what we’ll do.”

“We have to pick up some more rope on route. We’d used ours before we even reached the water. I’m not sure how many we’ll need, though they have to be long.” Kale dug into the pouch on her hip and pulled out a stash of gold coins. She’d obviously grabbed a handful on the way back through the tunnel. “This should buy what we need, and more besides.”

Amber took a coin and placed it between her teeth, as if testing it. “It’s real. You said he had a bag load of these?”

Kale grinned. “Sure did. We’re rich.”

“You can haul it up the rope, Kale,” Shale said. “It’ll be awfully heavy.” “I’m not worried. Between us we’ll make short work of it.”

Shale released a snort. “Rope me into the task, why don’t you?”

“Actually,” Kale tapped a finger against her chin. “It could be a good thing that we have to come back, or we’d end up lugging whatever we find around with us. Gold does weigh a lot.”

“You have a point,” Blake said. “And if we do find Zephyra’s urn, it’s probably best that we take her straight back to the sanctuary of Amazon land. Imagine if we found her, only to be robbed by bandits.”

Kale frowned, as if her warrior pride took offense. “We could handle a few bandits, Blake.”

“I’m sure you could, but why risk it?”

“You both speak sense,” Shale said, before Kale could object further. “There is a town not too far from our old village. We can buy some rope from there, and whatever else we need. Lanterns would probably be a good idea, so we can set them down without having to worry about the flame.”

“What about some extra candles, too? For the lanterns.” Kale paused a moment. “Oh, and some twine to mark our way in case the tunnels divide up. We don’t want to get lost down there.”

“We may have use for tools,” Amber said. “In case we need to cut into the rock.”

Shale snapped her fingers. “We’ll definitely want a,” she and Kale spoke in unison, “chisel.”

“I’d better start a list,” Blake said.

Chapter Nine

BLAKE GLANCED UP from the scroll in her hands as Kale, retracing her steps, came back to join her.

Shale was crouched over a plant, studying it with an intense expression.

Kale hovered for a moment, then loudly cleared her throat. “Shale, are you coming or what? Blake doesn’t need any more flowers. You must’ve chosen three already.”

“They’re not for me.” Blake waved the scroll at Kale. “Appollonia gave Shale a list of rare herbs to look out for, plants which simply don’t grow near our territory.”

“Did she now? That was presumptuous.”

“I offered,” Shale said.

“Of course you did.” Kale shook her head. “The things you get yourself into.”

Shale ignored her. “You and Amber go on ahead. We’ll catch up.”

“Don’t take too long.” Kale strode away. “It’s nearly time for lunch.”

“You could always get it prepared,” Blake said.

“Sorry?” Kale yelled, tapping her ear and shrugging. “I didn’t quite catch that.”

Blake shook her head in exasperation, hearing Kale’s laughter fade as she left. She refocused on the unfurled scroll in her hands, reading the detailed description Appollonia had helpfully provided for each plant. Even more useful, was the drawing alongside each, giving them a better idea of what to look out for.

“Here.” Blake knelt next to Shale’s crouched form. She tapped the picture that befitted the plant before them, turning it around for Shale to examine.

“That makes four. We’re really doing quite well.” Using her hands, Shale began to dig the plant out of the soil, being cautious around the roots.

Blake put down the scroll and spread a cloth across her hands. Each plant was to be wrapped separately, so they wouldn’t contaminate one another. The plants would be left to dry out of their own accord, then Appollonia would presumably grind up the leaves or flower petals, depending on what type of plant it was, so the powder could be used for medicinal remedies.

When the plant was free of the soil, Shale placed it inside the cloth, and Blake carefully tucked it away inside her satchel.

“Appollonia will be pleased,” Blake said. “As am I. These herbs will help many in our tribe, and they’ll all have you to thank for it, Shale. Your foresight could prove quite invaluable.”

Shale’s smile was shy, making her all the more endearing to Blake. “I just want to do my part. Anyone else would’ve done the same.”

Blake, on her knees, leaned forward and captured Shale’s lips. “I’m so proud to call you my wife.”

Shale beamed. “That makes two of us.”

“And as for anyone else doing the same, did you not hear Kale just now? Most people wouldn’t even think to do such a thing.”

Shale shrugged modestly. “I must have too much time on my hands.”

“You must be kind, thoughtful, and generous. Which of course,” Blake tweaked her nose. “I know you are.”

“Blake,” Shale began to brush the soil from her hands. “You’ll make me blush.”

“You look lovely when you blush.” Blake kissed a reddening cheek. She then whispered playfully in Shale’s ear. “You’re selfless, too.”

“By the gods,” Shale’s tone dripped sarcasm. “You must be married to the perfect woman.”

Blake held her gaze, deadly serious. “That I am.”

Shale shook her dark mane, though she grinned, clearly delighted that Blake believed such a notion. “If I get a big head, it’s on you.”

Blake scoffed. “You have more chance of growing a third eye.”

“Now, there’s an image.” Shale stood, offering her hand to Blake.

Blake smiled as she was helped to her feet. “Courteous, t--” She was cut off as Shale pressed her mouth to hers. The kiss was deep, and Blake blinked dazedly when Shale withdrew.

“I’m going to keep on kissing you until you desist.”

Blake raised a defiant eyebrow. “If you want me to desist, you shouldn’t have given me an incentive.”

Shale grinned cheekily. “Damn, you found me out. I just wanted to keep kissing you.”

Blake snaked an arm around Shale and tugged her closer, making a show of looking around as she did so. “Well, you’re in luck, because we seem to be all alone in the woods.”

Clearly recognizing Blake’s underlying question, Shale’s gaze turned inward, as if checking her twin’s sense to detect Kale’s whereabouts. “We are. They’re nowhere near us.”

“Good.” Blake ran a teasing hand down Shale’s torso. “I’d hate for us to be interrupted.”

“SHALE, I’VE FOUND it,” Kale called out triumphantly.

Shale’s voice came back almost instantly. “Be right there.”

Kale couldn’t hear her coming through the trees, after all, Shale was trained in stealth, but she could sense her approach. Kale began to climb up the large tree, its old age apparent by its wide trunk and its many thick, sturdy branches.

“Kale, wait for me.” Shale chuckled excitedly as she all but bounded up the tree, taking Kale’s outstretched hand to be yanked up onto the wide branch beside her. “I’m so pleased it’s still here, and hasn’t been cut down for timber.”

They were nearing where their old village used to lie, and the tree they were currently in held many fond memories. They’d spent a lot of time gallivanting through the surrounding area, and this spot had become a favorite of theirs.

Kale held a finger to her lips as Amber and Blake finally came into view, hurrying through the woods in a clear effort to catch up.

“Now where did they go?” Blake asked, sounding a bit winded. “Don’t tell me we’ve lost them?”

“Kale?” Amber shouted. “Call out, will you?”

In the following quiet, Kale leaned against Shale and chuckled silently, these sorts of tricks amused her no end.

“Shale?” Blake tried now, yelling loudly.

Shale kept quiet as Kale had done.

Kale’s broad grin widened as Blake came to a stop directly under the tree they were hiding in.

Amber threw her hands up in the air. “Well, that’s just great! We’ll have to search for their tracks and find them that way.”

She began to pace around, and soon pointed out the twins’ trail. Following it, Amber put her hands on her hips when the trail suddenly ended near the foot of the tree. She shook her head at Blake. “No good. The trail stops here.”

Amber’s red curls bounced as her head abruptly whipped up toward the branches overhead.

Kale and Shale erupted into raucous laughter, and it only increased in volume as Blake and Amber scowled up at them.

“Why you…” Amber shook her fist at them.

“That wasn’t funny.” Blake clearly tried to be stern, but her face cracked into a smile. “We thought we’d lost you.”

“That was the point,” Kale said, completely unrepentant. “We had you completely fooled.”

“That you did,” Blake said.

Shale slapped Kale's outstretched hand in success, then she patted the tree's trunk affectionately. "This is the tree. You can see our names etched into the bark there." Shale pointed downward, near the base, and Blake and Amber obligingly moved to take a look.

"I bet you two were a handful as adolescents," Amber said.

Kale laughed. "Were we ever." She looked eagerly to Shale. "Shall we show them?"

"Why else are we up here?" Shale scrambled up the trunk. "I'm going first."

"I don't think so." Kale raced around the other side, shinning up the trunk as fast as Shale was. They both climbed past the next branch, and up onto the next, Kale pushing past Shale so she could emerge on the branch ahead. They were now so high that if either were to fall, it would likely be fatal. Despite that, they both balanced on the branch with such assuredness it was as if they stood on flat, secure ground.

"Shale, be careful," Blake called out.

"Don't worry, Blake," Shale said. "We've done this plenty of times."

Kale took off at a jog, running toward the end of the ever-narrowing branch. A moment later Shale followed, and as they neared the branches tip, their weight caused it to shake, and it began to sag.

Just before the branch reached its limit, unable to flex any more, Kale leapt off into the air, her arms rising to grab an overhead branch from a neighboring tree. Using her momentum, and the drive of the now swaying branch, she swung her legs forward and released her hold, falling through the air and landing nimbly on yet another branch, this belonging to the tree planted opposite to the one they'd started in.

Kale didn't stop there. With Shale not far behind, she began to jump down the tree, leaping from one branch to the next, sometimes dropping quite a distance between each level. When Kale landed on solid ground, she felt herself grinning from ear to ear. Shale landed an instant later, the same grin reflected on her face. Four identical blue eyes looked expectantly to their gaping spectators.

Blake's hand covered her chest, as if in fright. "Shale, don't you ever do that to me again."

Shale's grin faltered slightly. "You didn't like it?"

"It was one of the most incredible things I've ever seen, but you scared me half to death."

Shale crossed to Blake and gave her an apologetic, one armed hug. "It wasn't my intention to scare you. And I'm sorry that I did."

Kale waved off her reaction. “We know what we’re doing, Blake. Amber, what did you think?”

Amber, being a warrior herself, seemingly appreciated the talent needed for such a feat. “It was phenomenal.” She clapped her hands. “And I want to amend my earlier comment—as adolescents, you must have been a bloody nightmare!”

“WHAT A VIEW,” Blake said admiringly. “It’s so beautiful around here.”

Shale wrapped her arms around Blake from behind, and Blake leaned back into her, resting her head against Shale’s collarbone. From their vantage point on the crest of a hill, they were able to see the valley as it unfolded before them. Kale and Amber had gone on ahead, leaving them to catch up when they so desired.

Shale pointed to the floor of the valley, which was quite expansive in width. Her finger tracked across the grass plains and wild flowering meadows. “That’s where the livestock were kept. Where the horses grazed.” She felt Blake’s nod against her chest. “The forest we just left, it continues right down the length of the valley, though only on this side, as you can see. The hills opposite helped to shelter us from the wind, and as the incline is a lot steeper on the other side, they helped to keep out invad...” Shale broke off with a grimace. Swallowing hard, she forced herself to continue, immensely grateful for Blake’s comforting squeeze to her arm. “Can you see that river in the distance? Along the valley?”

Blake craned her neck, squinting a little against the sun. “Where? Oh, yes, I’ve got it.”

“That was the border of our land. The river is actually a good bit wider than it appears from here, and the streams that flow off it provided our village with drinking water.”

“It’s beautiful,” Blake said. “I can see why a village would be built here. Where exactly did it lie?”

Shale frowned at her oversight. “Just west of the meadows.” She focused her gaze on the spot. From this distance, it didn’t appear any different from the meadows themselves. Since the village had been burnt to the ground, and more than a year had passed since then, nature had reclaimed the land as her own, leaving not a trace, at least none that Shale could see from here, of a village ever being in existence.

A single tear rolled slowly down her cheek. “It’s like we were never there.”

THE JOVIAL ATMOSPHERE from earlier had disappeared completely, and was replaced by a mournful, respectful silence.

Walking through the remnants of the Amazon village, where Shale and Kale used to call home, a profound sadness fell over the group. Amber and Blake hung back. They were there, should either twin need them, but allowed them the space to be alone with their thoughts, and one another.

Most of the fire-charred earth had healed itself, new growth or plants shooting through the once damaged soil. In some places, however, where the flames had burned particularly hot, a black scorch remained, a reminder of the heinous attack that had once taken place here.

Debris from the odd structure lay scattered about, the timber darkened from the blaze, warped beyond use.

When Shale and Kale had first discovered the massacre, their sisters' weapons—swords, axes, staves, bows and arrows, all had lain beside their fallen masters, and were left as such, even after the mass funeral pyre. Now, those weapons were nowhere to be seen, and it was clear from their absence that the village had been picked clean. Scavengers, and not of the animal variety, had taken whatever had survived the fire, whatever had been of worth.

Shale felt sick at the realization—the idea of strangers callously picking over what was left of their murdered tribe, making a profit from their untimely deaths. It was simply too much for her to take.

“Bastards.” Kale seethed from beside her, having obviously drawn the same conclusion.

They suddenly found themselves in front of a large black void in the grass, and they shared a pained look. They both remembered this spot well. It was where they'd piled their dead sisters, where the funeral pyre had been lit. The intense heat of the pyre, now burnt down to nothing, had left a permanent scar on the landscape, similar to what the twins felt in their hearts.

Shale withdrew her sword from the sheath on her back and embedded it, tip first, into the ground. She dropped to one knee, hand still on the hilt, and dipped her head to pray.

Kale followed suit an instant later. They were twin profiles against a backdrop of black.

Many moments passed, then clearly sensing her distress, Kale embraced Shale, who shook in her arms as she cried. It wasn't long before they were crying together, both overcome with grief. The only comfort they had was the satisfaction of knowing they'd brought the man responsible to justice, and by avenging their tribe, their sisters' spirits could now rest in peace.

A short way back, Blake and Amber stood quietly, their faces showing nothing but sympathy. They didn't intrude, seeming to recognize that in that moment, all the twin's needed were one another.

KALE ROSE FLUIDLY to her feet, sheathing her sword back in place. Shale began to rise also, but she dropped back onto her knee, causing Kale's hand to dart out to her in alarm. Kale motioned for Blake and Amber to join them, but she needn't have bothered, for Blake was already hurrying toward them—in fact, she'd already covered half the distance, an anxious look etched onto her face.

“Shale, are you all right?” Kale asked quickly, her grip to Shale's shoulder tightening reflexively.

Shale glanced to her in visible surprise. “Of course.” She twisted her sword in the dirt, seemingly searching for something. “When I pulled up my sword, I felt it grate against something. I think it was metal.”

Blake suddenly dropped down beside them. “What's wrong, Shale?”

Shale frowned. “Nothing.” She touched her face self-consciously. “Do I not look well or something? Kale just asked me the same thing.”

“You collapsed,” Blake said.

“I did no such thing.”

“I saw you just now, Shale.” Blake gently brushed her thumb over the drying tears on Shale's cheeks. “You're grieving, I understand.”

Shale stilled Blake's hands on her face, looking touched by her concern. “I'm fine. I just found something in the ground.”

“Oh.” Blake chuckled. “My mistake.”

Kale began to dig around with Shale's sword. She heard a clink as the blade made contact with something other than soil.

Amber leaned over Kale. “Sounds metallic.”

Shale smiled at her. “That was my guess too.”

Kale removed the sword, passing it back to Shale, then started to shovel the mud out. She came up holding a silver leg greave, the shine dulled somewhat from being in the ground. Surprisingly, the styled pattern on the front, which protected the shin, could still be made out.

Kale shared an incredulous look with Shale.

“What?” Blake said. “Do you recognize it?”

Kale held out her hand. “Amber, pass me your water skin.”

Shale took the greave from Kale, so that Kale had both hands free to squeeze the water skin. As the water squirted out, Kale increased the pressure to get more force into the flow. The soil and dirt came off quite easily, though Shale had to rub at a few spots where it had become more ingrained. On the inside, the plain undecorated side, they took more care, cleaning every part, focusing particularly in the corners.

“Here it is.” Shale tapped her finger close to one corner.

“Let me see.” Kale eagerly peered over, then clapped her hand delightedly against Shale’s back. “It is hers. She always did like to mark her things.”

“Who?” Amber and Blake exclaimed together, clearly impatient to be informed.

Shale and Kale blinked in shock. Shale was the first to laugh. “You sound like us.”

“We don’t sound like that,” Kale said.

“You do!” Blake and Amber again spoke in unison, this time breaking into giggles as they did so.

Kale blinked once more. “It’s quite jarring.”

“Now you know what we have to deal with,” Amber teased.

Kale frowned in affront, but Shale was still laughing. “You’re both spending too much time in the company of twins.”

Blake smiled warmly. “I’m sure we can cope.” She pointed down to the greave. “So who does it belong to?”

“It was Senna’s,” Shale said. “You remember, who...”

Blake nodded. “You considered her to be a blood sister, I remember.”

“The woman who got skewered by that wild boar?” Amber asked, obviously recalling a story they’d once told.

“That’s right. Senna used to be quite possessive with her things, always marking them with her first initial.” Shale gestured to the engraved marking on the greave.

Blake shook her head in wonder. “What are the chances of you finding this?”

“Pretty remote.” Kale took the greave and caressed the mark fondly with her forefinger. Her eyes filled with happy tears.

Amber draped an arm across Kale’s shoulders. “Perhaps Senna wanted you to have it?”

Kale gave her a dotting look, and it was reflected on Amber’s face. “That’s a nice thought.”

“ARE YOU TIRED, sweetheart?” Blake asked, as Shale stifled another yawn.

Shale turned her head slightly, giving Blake an amused look over her shoulder. “You’re playing with my hair. You know it puts me to sleep.”

“I’m plaiting your hair,” Blake said, busily weaving three sections together, intertwining them into a single long braid down Shale’s back. “You have beautiful hair, Shale.” Her locks had a reflective shine, sleek and glossy, dark as a starless night.

Shale chuckled. “I don’t know who enjoys this more, me or you.”

A guilty smile. “Hmm, that’s a tough one.”

Once the plait was finished, Blake seated herself on Shale’s lap, folding her arms around her neck. Shale was sitting on a low tree stump—she’d thoughtfully done so to make it easier for Blake to reach her hair.

“Are you enjoying the trip?”

Blake nodded emphatically. “Very much. It’s nice to be able to see where you grew up—the area at least.” Blake appreciatively took in her surroundings, the rolling countryside lush and green. “It’s wonderful around here, very picturesque.”

“It is.” Shale smiled, but it was tinged with sadness. “Though I wish you could have seen it before.”

Blake rested her forehead against Shale’s in silent support. She knew there was nothing she could say that would fix the situation, so she remained quiet, using simple touch to provide the comfort needed.

After a while, Blake drew back, noting that Shale looked somewhat drained. Shale’s earlier outpouring of grief had clearly taken a lot out of her. Blake watched Shale closely for her reaction as she spoke. “It’s been an emotional day. Why don’t we make camp here? We can relax for the rest of the afternoon, and start out fresh tomorrow.”

Shale's lips curled up at the corner. "You read me so well, Blake. As well as Kale. You always have."

Blake smiled, pleased by her words. "I have a vested interest." She kissed Shale's cheek. "And it's not difficult to see that today was hard on you."

"It was harder than I thought," Shale said, her voice dropping to a whisper. "The village especially." She paused, visibly gathering herself. "But the other places evoked good memories, and I'm pleased I got to share them with you."

"Me, too."

Shale brushed her knuckles softly down Blake's face, her blue eyes full of adoration.

"You make me feel so special when you look at me like that, Shale."

"That's because you are special."

Blake playfully rubbed their noses together. Their lips were so close that neither could help the inevitable kiss that followed. That kiss led to another, then another. Their kisses were slow, unhurried, each enjoying the simple pleasure. Every kiss was a declaration of their love, and of what they meant to one another.

Chapter Ten

"BLAKE. BLAKE, WAKE up," Shale whispered, her tone urgent but hushed. As Blake stirred, she said, "Don't move, Blake. Keep very still."

Blake blinked awake, staying perfectly still as instructed. "What is it?"

"I need you to remember not to panic. Your first instinct will be to move, but you absolutely cannot do that, Blake."

"Shale, you're panicking me right now."

Shale ever so fractionally squeezed the hand resting on Blake's shoulder. They were both laying on their sides, and it was fortunate they were facing one another, so Shale could help to keep Blake calm.

“A snake is coiled up behind your legs.” Shale’s grip tightened as Blake stiffened in reflex. “Stay still. I know you’re terrified of snakes, but moving will scare it and that’s when they bite.” It had been cold through the night, and Shale knew the snake had likely sidled up to Blake for her body warmth. It meant no harm, but it could indeed cause harm if it felt threatened.

“I can feel it,” Blake’s breathing increased in fear. “Against the back of my legs.”

“Blake, no, focus on me. I’m right here with you. I’m not going anywhere. It won’t hurt you if you just keep still.”

Blake grimaced. “Is it poisonous?”

“I can’t see a lot of it from here.”

“I want it away from me,” Blake said, her rising panic clear. “I can’t…”

“Blake, look at me.” Shale slowly slid her hand up to Blake’s face, partly covering her ear to help block out any sound that the snake might make. “Look at me, Blake.” Frightened green eyes locked onto hers, and Shale gave her best reassuring smile. “Shh. I’m right here.” She soothingly caressed Blake’s cheek with her thumb. “Shh. Kale’s already on her way. She won’t be long. I can get it away from you myself, if that’s what you want, but I’d have to move to do it, and I’m worried you’ll bolt once I move.”

Blake gave her a look that confirmed her suspicions. “Don’t leave,” she all but pleaded.

“Never. I won’t leave your side.”

Kale appeared at the edge of the camp, slowing her hurried pace when Shale shook her head. Shale looked to the snake, then back to Kale, alerting her twin to the problem.

Kale immediately began to search around the campsite. She picked up a long stick and continued closer.

“All right, Blake. Kale’s going to try and get the snake to move away, so don’t be alarmed when it moves,” Shale said, since Blake was faced away from Kale, and could hardly turn around to see what was happening. She felt Blake’s jaw tense under her hand. “You’re doing great, love. Not much longer now.”

Shale had wrangled a few snakes in her time. As had Kale. Shale watched as Kale tapped the stick along the ground as she advanced, creating vibrations so the snake could feel them. In most cases, Shale knew, this simple technique worked, many snakes slithering away from the reverberations to get away from the perceived threat.

The brown-green snake slowly uncoiled itself, revealing it to be quite large in length, and eyed the stick with open hostility. It seemed annoyed that its sleep had been disturbed, and somewhat reluctant to leave its cozy position.

“Shale, get yourself clear,” Kale said. “Damn snake’s not cooperating.” At Shale’s head shake, she added, “It’s poisonous.”

“I’m staying put.” Shale looked back to Blake, who had clamped her eyes shut at that new bit of information. “It’s all right, Blake. Everything’s going to be fine.”

Kale didn’t argue, and got down to business. She hooked the stick under part of the tail, lifting the snake and dragging it sideways toward herself, but away from Blake’s legs. The snake’s beady black eyes locked onto its tormentor, and it coiled back on itself, hissing as it tried to strike.

The snake’s attack was fast, but Kale was faster. Before its fangs got too close, Kale tossed the snake aside. Drawing her sword before it had a chance to react, she whipped her blade down and cleanly took off the snake’s head.

“It’s finished now,” Shale said, cradling Blake to her chest. She felt Blake clinging to her tightly, as if her life depended on it.

“You can get up now, it’s dead.” When neither woman moved from their bedroll, Kale strode swiftly to them. “Were you bit?”

Shale shook her head. “No, we’re fine. Blake’s afraid of snakes.”

“Really?” Kale asked in surprise. Her taunting smirk was wiped off her face by Shale’s stern look. Telling her now wasn’t the time to tease. “Well, don’t worry, Blake, I killed it. It’s dead.”

Blake’s voice was muffled by Shale’s shoulder. “Thank you.”

“No problem.” Using her sword, Kale pushed the snake’s head out of the camp and into the bushes, as if realizing Blake wouldn’t want to see it again. She then picked up the snake’s lifeless body, holding it up like a prize. “Actually, it’s worked out rather well. Saves me from having to hunt for breakfast.”

Blake made a disgusted sound.

“It’s really quite nice,” Kale said. “You should try it, Blake.”

“I think we’ll pass, Kale.” Shale injected a hint of warning into her tone.

Kale shrugged. “More for me and Amber. Speaking of, I’d best get back and wake her. We’ve got a full day ahead.”

Shale nodded, and gave Kale a smile of thanks for her help.

Kale dipped her head, then hefted her soon-to-be breakfast. “Can’t leave you alone for a moment.” With a smirk, she sauntered away, soon disappearing from sight.

Shale drew back slightly, so she could look at Blake. “Sweetheart? Are you all right?”

“That’s put me off sleeping outside.”

Shale released a small chuckle. “Kale nor I have ever had that happen to us. Not once in all the times we’ve done it.”

“Lucky me,” Blake said dryly.

“I mean that it’s a rare occurrence. It’s not likely to happen again.”

“It definitely won’t if I sleep inside.”

Shale chuckled again. “I can see I’ll have my work cut out convincing you otherwise.”

“I think it would be easier to build another cabin, and we’ll leave the roof off.” Blake smiled as Shale began to laugh. “We’ll use that on nice nights.”

“What about if I built you a bed? Then you could sleep off the ground.”

Blake giggled. “I can just see me lugging that around.”

Shale laughed with her, pleased to see Blake back in good spirits. “Ah, I’ve got it.” She pulled Blake on top of her. “There. You can lie on me. Then if any more snakes come slithering along, they will cozy up to me instead of you.”

Blake made a face. “I’m not sure if that’s better or worse. I don’t like the idea of snakes cozying up to my wife.” Blake brushed their lips together. “Though I appreciate the suggestion.”

“I’ll keep thinking on it. I’m not giving up that easily.”

“You have until the end of this trip to convince me. But I’m telling you now, it’ll have to be something amazing to make me forget that snake.”

“Amazing, huh?” Shale bit her lip in concentration as she thought, running different scenarios in her head. “Leave it with me.”

“NOW WHERE HAVE they got to?” Blake stopped and placed her hands on her hips, scanning the area around her. She glanced up into trees, not about to be fooled twice by the same trick.

They'd drawn to a standstill next to a good-sized lake, which was nestled on the far side, at the foot of two cliffs—one of which had a waterfall cascading down it. Blake admired the scene for a moment, though her attention was caught by movement in the lake itself.

A smirk crossed her face, and she tapped Amber's arm to attract her gaze. With raised eyebrows, Blake tipped her head toward the placid water.

"Oh, for the love of--" Amber raised her voice. "Kale, you'd better not be in there."

Two heads rose up out of the depths, revealing only their mischievous eyes.

"Kale, get out of there at once," Amber said, her frustration clear. "You're supposed to be keeping your arm dry."

Shale emerged to her shoulders, giving Kale an I-told-you-so look. "I said she'd be angry."

"My arm's feeling a lot better, Amber," Kale said. "Besides, Shale and I want to show you something."

"Shale can show us. Come on out and dry off your arm."

"No way. I'm not letting Shale have all the fun. It's wet now anyways, so where's the harm?" Kale didn't wait for a response. She dove under the water, swimming away like a fish.

Shale smiled meekly at Amber and shrugged. "I tried to talk her out of it."

Amber let out an aggrieved breath. "It's not your fault. I know how forward she can be."

Shale snickered. "That's putting it nicely. I'll see what I can do to hurry things along, get her out of the water quicker."

She took a deep breath and submerged.

SHALE SWAM UNDERWATER, in a route she knew well—she and Kale had swum here often in their youth.

She felt the thundering of water above as she swam beneath the waterfall, though off to one side so as not to get caught in the swirling current. She came up for air behind the tumult of falling water, into a small recess in the rock. The space had been hollowed out from the constant erosion of the falls. She looked up and saw that Kale was already three-quarter's of the way up the cliff, the familiar hand and footholds, though slippery, were ingrained into both of their memories.

Kale waited for her near the top, and they walked along the narrow trail that they themselves had made, emerging from behind the falls and out into the open. From below, Shale knew it looked like they were walking along the cliff face itself, a miraculous feat given its vertical angle and the sheer drop.

When the path ended, they turned and waved to Blake and Amber, standing at the lake's edge.

"I'll let you go first this time," Kale said. "I went first with the tree."

"I'm going to climb back down, I don't want to scare Blake again."

"Oh, come on, Shale, how often are we here?" Kale gave her back an encouraging pat. "For old times' sake?"

"That's not fair. It's not that I don't want to, but...Kale!" The encouraging hand now became a shove, and Shale was suddenly off the ledge, her arms freewheeling as she fell. She fell feet first, her body straight, and she tucked her arms by her sides as she neared the fast approaching water, making herself as streamlined as possible. She held her breath as she collided with the water, shooting down into the depths with impressive speed. She felt Kale enter an instant later, and they both swam up in sync, side by side.

Shale glared at Kale when they broke the surface.

"Don't pretend like you didn't enjoy it," Kale said knowingly.

Shale couldn't refrain from grinning. "I did." She splashed Kale in the face. "But don't do that again."

"I'm afraid I can promise no such thing," Kale said, as bold as brass.

Shale tossed her an amused look. "I wouldn't believe you even if you did."

Chapter Eleven

"HERE WE GO again," Shale muttered under her breath to Kale. They were already getting curious looks, their likeness to one another causing many of the townsfolk to stare.

It was a little after noon, and they'd just arrived at the town of Pyrrhos, hoping to buy the extra items they needed while also topping off their own supplies.

The town was heaving with people, but Shale soon saw why—there was a market on. Traders were set up behind their stalls, selling their wares to whoever would purchase them. There was a good range of items to buy, from clothes, boots, and jewelry, right through to trinkets, and food and drink.

“It’s busy,” Amber said, placing a guarding hand over her satchel. “Watch for thieves.”

Blake drew her bag closer to herself. “Shale, can you see the blacksmiths?”

Shale, a head taller than everyone around them, was able to see beyond the swarming crowd.

Kale, who was equally tall, answered for her, “It’s at the far end of the market.”

Blake sighed. “How typical, now we’ll have to trudge through the marketplace and all the bustle of people. It would be easier if we split up to collect what we need.”

“I agree,” Shale said. “I suggest I go with Blake, and Kale with Amber. If Kale and I go together we’ll never get anywhere, people will be too busy gawking at us.”

Kale nodded. “We’ll meet up with you at the tavern.” She pointed to a disheveled looking building off to their left. “We can get something to eat there. I’m famished.”

Blake’s eyebrow rose in disbelief. “We’ve just had lunch.”

Shale chuckled. “You’re underestimating how much Kale can eat.”

“Actually, you’re underestimating how long it’ll take you to get through that lot.”

Shale followed Kale’s gaze toward the throng of people, many of whom were wandering around stalls, while some simply stood gossiping. Shale frowned at several who were pointing indiscreetly at her and Kale. Some people milled around the customers and not the stalls, either begging or outright stealing what they could.

Shale suddenly realized the intent behind Kale’s words. “I take it Blake and I are going to the blacksmith then?”

Kale slapped her shoulder. “Thanks for volunteering.”

Shale released a heavy breath. “You and Amber have to get everything else.”

“Fair enough. See you at the tavern.”

As Kale and Amber headed off in one direction, Blake and Shale took another.

Shale latched onto Blake's hand so neither of them got separated. Weaving through the horde of people was disorienting, but Shale's height allowed her to stay fixed on their desired destination, and she pulled Blake through behind her. Sometimes a clearing appeared in front, and Shale amusedly noted that several townsfolk scurried to get out of her way, obviously determining from her clothes and musculature that she was a warrior. Shale smirked—the weapons didn't hurt either.

Shale abruptly whirled around and grabbed a hand that was sneaking toward Blake's satchel. The potential thief yelped in alarm as Shale dragged him out of the crowd, and up close and personal with her. She bent his hand back sharply, causing him to squeal and drop to a knee.

He whimpered pathetically. "I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

"Ha," said a nearby trader, leaning out from behind his stall. "Don't believe that weasel, he's here every week."

There was a sudden lull in the conversation around them, and Shale realized all eyes were upon her, as if waiting to see what she would do.

The trader winked subtly at Shale. "You know, in this town, you have the right to take off his hand."

Shale played along, intending to teach the thief a lesson. She really wanted to point out that he'd tried to rob an Amazon queen, and she could drag him back kicking and screaming to their tribe to await severe punishment, but it wasn't wise to alert everyone to Blake's high-ranking status. She'd be asking for trouble. Instead, she feigned simple interest, the threat of losing a hand would scare him enough.

"Is that so? What do you think, Blake? It was you he was trying to rob."

Blake, it seemed, quickly caught on to the ruse. "Remove the hand he used." She shrugged nonchalantly, her regal mask of indifference firmly in place. "He has another one."

Shale felt her eyes widen, and had to fight to keep her composure.

"No. Please!" The thief began to struggle, trying to extricate himself from Shale's grip.

Shale put more pressure on his wrist, subduing him easily.

"I'm sorry!" The thief began to cry, tears leaving clear tracks down his filthy cheeks. "Please, I beg you."

Shale withdrew the dagger on her hip, though she stopped at Blake's touch to her forearm.

"Sword would be best. The cut will be cleaner." Blake's lips twitched slightly, but nothing else gave her away. Shale herself only noticed because of their close proximity.

The thief was blubbing now, sobbing hysterically.

Shale hauled him up, back onto his feet. “Remember what could’ve happened here today. I’d strongly advise you find yourself some honest work.” She released the thief and he stumbled away, pushing through the murmuring crowd.

The trader who had spoken applauded them from his stall. “If that doesn’t right him, nothing will.”

Shale smiled at the bearded man, then followed Blake, who’d apparently seen something of interest on his market stand.

“I am Pathos, reputable trader of fine wares.” Pathos extended a cordial hand to Shale, and out of courtesy she took it.

There were several necklaces on the stall, and as Blake picked one out, Pathos moved keenly toward her.

“You have excellent taste,” he said. “But if I may say, a beauty such as yourself deserves a more befitting pendant. Something more exquisite.”

Blake’s tone was droll. “And no doubt more expensive.”

Pathos wagged a finger at her. “You cannot put a price on beauty.”

Shale gave the trader a wry smirk. “You just did.”

“I see I’m not going to get anything past you two.” Pathos sighed, though it was good-natured. “The gods blessed you both with beauty and intelligence. How refreshing. But extremely unfortunate for my business. Would you really begrudge me a living?” He traced a hand across his podgy, plain face. “We weren’t all blessed by the gods.”

Shale chuckled, tickled by his banter. “You are good at this, Pathos. I think the gods blessed you with a sharp tongue. Go on and show us the pendant.”

Pathos grinned and ducked beneath his stall for a moment. He could be heard rustling around, searching. When he reappeared, he was holding a dark colored cloth. Pathos placed the cloth in front of Blake, lowering his voice as he leaned toward her. “I reserve the best, for the best.” Then, almost as an afterthought, he said, “It also doesn’t hurt to keep the most valuable trinkets out of the way of thieving hands.”

“Given the experience we’ve just had, that’s probably wise.” Blake peeled back the cloth, her eyes lighting up when they landed on the necklace underneath. The pendant was an unusual teardrop design, made of silver filigree, and beautifully embellished with diamonds and an emerald centerpiece. “It’s stunning, Pathos. Look, Shale.”

“It is lovely,” Shale said, her voice sincere. “Though it would look even more attractive if it was on you, Blake.” She smiled, enjoying the faint blush that crept across Blake’s skin. “Don’t you agree, Pathos?”

The trader didn’t miss a beat. “Absolutely. Why don’t you try it on?”

Blake looked eager for an instant, then she reluctantly shook her head. “I can’t justify spending that amount. It’s a small fortune.” “Just try it.” Shale was already lifting the necklace and seating the silver chain around Blake’s neck. She fastened it in place, then took a step back to view the complete picture.

“My goodness,” Pathos whispered, almost to himself.

Shale simply stared, a devoted look on her face. “Helen, herself, could not be more radiant.”

Blake’s blush deepened, but the smile she gave Shale was dazzling.

“She’ll take it.” Shale handed a gold coin to him in payment.

“Shale, no, it’s too much.”

“It’s as if it was made just for you, Blake. It brings out the color of your eyes perfectly.”

Pathos blinked at the amount in his hand. “I can’t make change for this,” he said, startled. He lowered his voice, clearly not wanting to be overheard. “Haven’t you got any silver?”

“Not enough.”

Pathos’s face fell, obviously not wanting to lose the sale of a lifetime down to incorrect funds.

“Shale,” Blake whispered to her. “That money is for you to spend on yourself. You each got two gold coins to do with as you wished.”

The handful of gold coins that Kale had found and brought up from the tunnel had been divided equally between Kale, Amber, and Shale. As a reward from their queen. They’d kept aside three of the gold coins to buy the supplies and tools that they’d need for the return trip, but that amount was excessive, and would more than cover anything they wished to purchase.

Though it was true there was more gold to be had, a bagful spilling over with it in fact, never mind what else they might find down in the caves, it would go to the Amazon tribe as a whole, to help and better the lives of all, rather than only themselves.

“Well, I wish to spend it on you.” Shale smiled as she fingered the necklace that was still around Blake’s neck.

“There must be something you want, Shale.”

“You know I don’t wear jewelry.”

Blake gave her a look. “Not here. I mean in general. How often do you have gold at your fingertips?”

“I have you. There’s nothing more I could possibly want.”

Blake smiled broadly. “You’re such a charmer.” She paused, as if forgetting her train of thought. “Stop trying to distract me.”

“Blake, honestly, making you happy, makes me happy. So please, let me get you the necklace.”

Seeing that Blake had no comeback for that, Shale grinned and turned back to Pathos. She picked out the necklace that Blake had originally selected, and held it up to Pathos. “I’ll take this as well. Does that seem fair?”

Pathos nodded, looking as if he couldn’t quite believe his good fortune. “More than fair. Do you see anything else you would like? No extra charge, of course,” he hastily added.

“Blake?” Shale asked, since a jewelry stall held little appeal for her personally. The only jewelry she wore, though she didn’t consider it as such, was her joining ring to Blake.

Blake scanned the stand once more. She shook her head.

Pathos held up a finger, then ducked underneath the table. He came back up holding two neatly designed pouches, each embroidered smartly on the top. He offered them to Blake. “For your necklaces.”

Blake smiled at Pathos, clearly appreciating his extra effort. “Thank you.”

“Thank you,” he said graciously. “Thank you both.”

Once the necklaces were tucked safely away in Blake’s satchel, they left Pathos and his stall behind, waving as he bid them a safe journey.

As Shale again led them through the crowd, heading toward the blacksmiths, Blake stretched up and whispered saucily into Shale’s ear. “You’ll receive your thank you later.”

Shale grinned over her shoulder, squeezing the hand that she held in her own. “I can’t wait.”

“KALE, STOP.” AMBER slapped Kale’s hand away from the satchel. “I see now why you wanted us to be responsible for collecting the food supplies.”

Kale munched on a mouthful of bread, which she’d torn off from one of the loaves they’d just bought. The bread was still warm, soft and delicious. “We’ve got more than enough for the four of us there, it’s not like we’re going to go hungry on our journey anytime soon.”

“We will if you keep eating it.”

Kale scoffed. “Fine. I won’t have anymore.” She tauntingly held up the chunk of bread. “I’ll just finish this piece.”

“I swear, your stomach is as deep as a well.”

“It’s an empty well at the moment.” Kale sighed dramatically. “That tavern better have good food.”

Amber gave Kale’s stomach a quick, comical rub. “I’m sure it will. Now, have we got everything?” She paused, as if thinking through a mental list. “Bread, cheese, meat, fruit…”

“You’re really not helping, Amber,” Kale said. “You’re meant to be taking my mind off food, not tormenting me with it.”

Amber laughed. “All right, all right. Since we’ve purchased the supplies we need, we are free to do as we wish. What do you suggest?”

“I know of one thing that will distract me.” Kale let her gaze rake slowly across Amber’s body, a seductive smile forming.

“In case you hadn’t noticed, we’re in the middle of town, with a busy marketplace a mere stone’s throw away.”

“We could always get a room at the tavern?” Kale said.

Amber seemed to consider it. “We could, but the walls are parchment thin in those places, and you know I have difficulty controlling myself.”

Kale grinned. Amber was very vocal while making love, which Kale found to be highly erotic. “Nor would I want you to.” Her eyes scanned the surrounding area. “I have an idea.”

Kale grabbed Amber’s hand and pulled her toward the outer edge of town, between two buildings, leading them down the dimly lit passageway to the far end. The noise of the market had faded considerably, and as Kale stuck her head around the back of the building, she saw that it was deserted, not a soul could be seen, everyone was at the market.

She stopped and regarded Amber. “It’s hardly the most romantic place, but at least there’s more privacy than at the tavern.”

“I’m with you, that’s all the romance I need,” Amber said.

It wasn’t as if romance didn’t factor into their relationship, because it did, but they were both warriors, and it wasn’t a particularly high priority for either woman. The physical act of being intimate was enough for them, they didn’t particularly care about the setting.

Amber teasingly waggled her eyebrows. “I’m suddenly feeling selfconscious—you may need to convince me.”

Kale smiled and stepped closer, reaching behind Amber and cupping her rump with strong, firm hands. Though her mouth was tantalizingly close to Amber’s, Kale simply watched her, seeing desire flood through Amber as she began to knead her buttocks. Kale knew this simple action never failed to inflame Amber, and as she continued her massage, Amber pressed herself intimately against Kale, groaning at the contact.

Kale swallowed hard, the touch stimulating her also. As she kneaded Amber’s rump, squeezing with more pressure, their mounds rubbed against one another, causing a delicious friction. With one hand, Amber drew their mouths together, tongues thrusting out to caress and duel. Her other hand wound its way down Kale’s stomach, and was about to dip beneath Kale’s skirt when a loud clatter distracted them.

Their heads whipped toward the sound—a man was sprinting toward them. The noise had come from a barrel he’d just knocked over. His face was filthy, but had been washed clean in some places by a trail of tears. The man was blubbing, crying heavily, and kept glancing back over his shoulder as if in fear of being chased.

His direction was such that he clearly intended to run right past them, but when his eyes landed on Kale horror appeared on his features.

“How did you...?” He looked behind himself, then back again to Kale. “Please, I’m leaving. Don’t take my hand.”

Kale shared a confused look with Amber. When she turned back to the man, he was already fleeing, scampering away in a different direction.

“What in Artemis’s name?”

“I have no clue as to what...” Kale recalled how he had looked at her, as if he recognized her. The pieces suddenly clicked into place. “He must have had a run in with Shale.”

She let out a frustrated sigh as Amber took a step back—the interruption had ruined the mood completely. “And whatever it was,” Kale said as she clenched her jaw, “there had better be a damn good reason for it.”

Amber chuckled. “Look on the bright side, it distracted you from food.”

“Yes, but now I’m left with a different kind of hunger. And this kind is a lot worse.”

Amber soundly kissed her. “Hold that thought.”

Kale felt her body respond to the kiss, her desire still very close to the surface. “Amber, again, you’re not helping.”

AS BLAKE ENTERED the blacksmith’s shop, a mere step behind Shale, she immediately noticed a huge bear of a man standing over a forge, working a piece of metal.

The blacksmith’s bulging muscles were a testament to hard labor. It was uncomfortably hot, so he wore no shirt, only a grubby leather apron, which revealed his powerful body to full effect. He cut an imposing figure.

Blake surmised from the blacksmith’s surprised expression that he didn’t get many female customers. Still, that was no excuse for his rude demeanor. His gaze glossed across Blake in a belittling fashion, paying her no heed as he overlooked her and went straight to Shale—likely figuring that he might get some business from a warrior.

“Something I can get you, Amazon?” His voice was gruff, fitting for such a man. He put down his well-used hammer and came their way, though his focus remained only on Shale.

Shale reached overhead, her long body stretching upward to the lantern that hung from the rafters. She gave it a tug to get the handle over the supporting nail, then handed it to Blake.

Blake studied it for a moment, keeping the blacksmith waiting. The lantern was sturdy enough, and she always appreciated good craftsmanship. She was pleased to see that it already held a candle inside.

Shale nodded to the impatient blacksmith. “We’ll take four of these, and four spare candles too.”

The blacksmith looked pleasantly surprised, as if he’d expected them to be time-wasters.

Shale turned to Blake. “Do you think four spare will be enough?”

“I would’ve thought so. Still,” Blake raised her voice. “Better make that six candles.” The blacksmith released an unintelligible grunt as he went about collecting the items.

“Can I see the list, Blake?”

Blake unfolded the parchment, scanning it along with Shale to see what else they required. When the blacksmith returned, carrying everything easily in his ample arms, he set them down on a counter next to Shale, and again only addressed her, ignoring Blake completely.

“Anything else?”

Blake felt her skin prickle in annoyance. If there was one thing she didn’t tolerate well, it was rudeness. As queen, she’d had little of it in her life, and because of that she couldn’t endure it for long. Still, she made herself bite her tongue, they needed these supplies, and this was the only blacksmith around.

“She has the list,” Shale said to the man, clearly reading Blake despite her attempt to suppress her irritation. “The money too.” She moved aside, and picked up an item on a nearby shelf.

Blake could have kissed her, and she had to fight to keep from outright smirking at the ill-mannered blacksmith. She was quite impressed with Shale’s diplomacy. Shale had chastened the blacksmith with subtle effectiveness, correcting him in such a way that wouldn’t cause him offense, but righting the situation nonetheless. Not for the first time, Blake thought that Shale would make a fine addition to the council.

“Right, well,” The blacksmith finally acknowledged Blake. “Tell me what I can get you.”

Blake read from the parchment. “We’ll start with some twine, a good length of it. And the strongest hammer and chisel you have.” She waited while he fetched the objects. Blake took the chisel from him, testing it to ensure its quality.

“It’s good and strong,” he said. “My steel does not yield.”

Shale came back and tested both the hammer and the chisel. “It is as he says,” she said to Blake.

A fragment of a smile appeared on his unshaven face. “I do not lie. Ask anyone and they will tell you, Diokles makes tools like Hephaestus himself.”

Blake raised an incredulous eyebrow. “That’s quite a boast.”

Diokles scowled at her skepticism. “Woman, it is but the mere truth.”

“It better be,” Blake hardened her tone. “Because the last thing we need is for your tools to break.”

Diokles obviously took affront to her words, for his voice rose in anger. “My tools will not fail you. You have my word as a blacksmith.”

Blake held his glower for a long moment. Though Diokles towered above her in the confrontation, she felt perfectly safe, for she could feel Shale's protective presence against her back.

"Very well," Blake said finally, his impassioned defense telling her what she needed to know—Diokles believed his words to be true. "We need a solid hammer." She read from the list. "What length is your longest rope?"

Diokles scratched his stubbled chin. "Fifty coils." His gaze condescendingly assessed Blake's smaller frame. "But it's very heavy."

Blake put a hand on her hip, not liking his insinuation that she was incapable of carrying such a load.

"We'll take three fifty coils, and one thirty coil," Shale said.

As Diokles went out back to fetch the rope, she added, "The rope we already have with us is thirty coil, it would weigh almost twice that."

Blake hadn't realized that. The rope they had was heavy enough. Since she didn't have a warrior's muscle mass, she assumed Shale had ordered the single, lighter rope for her to carry. It made sense for the three heavier ropes to be distributed between Shale, Amber, and Kale. Blake nodded at Shale, a touch sheepishly. "I was about to order four just to spite him."

"I know." Shale rubbed her back. "Don't let him vex you." She moved to a selection of tools that were hung on the wall, and selected a couple, adding them to the ever-growing pile on the counter. "You know, Blake, it might be an idea to leave this stuff here, and we'll pick it up later. It'll be difficult to lug all this back through that crowd."

Blake could see her point. Before she could respond, Diokles returned, carrying all of the ropes at once, two over his bull-like neck and one over each arm.

"One thirty coil." He placed it on the countertop, next to the other goods. He slid the other rope off his arm, then removed the two from around his neck. "And three fifty coil."

"That's everything." Shale smiled politely at him. "I added a few extra tools to our load."

If Diokles was surprised by her honesty, he didn't show it, his eyes flicking across the purchases as if to tally the other tools onto the amount. "A gold piece."

"What?" Blake uttered in disbelief. "I'd want these tools to be made by Hephaestus for that much."

The blacksmith merely shrugged. "You have many items."

Blake's eyes narrowed. "Half of what you ask would be extortionate, never mind a gold coin."

"You are not from around here. In Pyrrhos, these are the prices."

"That's horse dung and you know it."

Diokles snorted. "And what would you know of it? A woman knows nothing of trade."

Blake knew well the prices acceptable for trade, she'd written plenty of trade negotiations in her time. "Well since I am a poor, simple woman," her tone dripped sarcasm, "why don't you break the cost down for me, tell me what each item is worth." At his hesitation, she continued. "No? Well let me do it for you."

Blake held up a lantern. "All of these, plus the candles, come to no more than a bronze coin. The tools are two bronze each. The twine isn't worth mentioning. And the rope," she hesitated briefly. "Only because of their length, they could be worth a silver each—if you racked up the cost. Though of course the thirty coil would be under." Blake made a show of tallying the amount. "So, I make it under four silver. That's nowhere near a gold coin."

Blake was honest enough with herself to know that by being rude to her, Diokles had unwittingly done himself out of money. And his greed had only incensed her further. Though it was true they had plenty of money with them, it had now become about the principle of it, rather than the actual cost. After all, Shale had just been exceptionally generous with Pathos, the kindly market vendor—though he hadn't been trying to rob them blind.

Diokles was frowning, clearly annoyed that his attempt to extract more coin from them had backfired. "Fine." He huffed out a breath. "Five silver. But no less. I'm the only blacksmith around, and that--" he gave Blake a dagger-like glare. "You cannot quibble with."

"Five silver." Blake held up a finger to forestall him. "But only on the understanding that we can store our goods here, until we come back to pick them up."

Diokles folded his massive arms on his chest. "If you're taking up working space, I want paying extra."

"Oh no, what I've given you is more than enough. Take it or leave it."

Diokles grunted as he nodded. "Five silver."

Blake flipped a single silver coin, which he caught in his meaty fist. "You'll get the rest when we collect our things."

Diokles gave a nod of reluctant acceptance. "Women," he muttered, as if it were a curse.

The transaction now complete, Blake led the way outside.

Shale called back to Diokles. “Nice doing business with you.”

Blake chuckled, slapping Shale amusedly on her midriff.

“What?” Shale batted innocent eyelashes at Blake. “You didn’t like him?”

“What gave it away?” Blake felt the tension drain from her as Shale took her hand. “I owe you a kiss for that list comment.”

Shale smiled. “The man was an ass.” Her voice lowered in obvious imitation of him. “A woman knows nothing of trade.” Shale nudged Blake with a hip, admiration written on her face. “You certainly showed him.”

Blake allowed herself a moment of self-satisfaction, and she grinned at Shale. “I did, didn’t I?”

“Definitely. He didn’t know what hit him.”

“It’s a good thing we went, for I think Kale might’ve tossed the foolish oaf into his own forge.”

Shale tilted her head, a small smile appearing. “I can just picture that.”

Chapter Twelve

PEERING UP AT the position of the sun, Shale was surprised by how much time had passed. They’d been in the blacksmiths for a long while. “Do you wish to look at the market stalls? It’s a lot less crowded now.”

“Amber and Kale will be waiting.”

Shale pointed farther down the marketplace—Kale and Amber were busy admiring a stall themselves.

Shale tugged Blake to a clothes stall. The items there giving her a sudden revelation. “We’ve forgotten something vital.”

Blake’s brow creased in puzzlement. “We have?”

“How are we carrying all these supplies? Our own bags are full.” She leaned in and spoke quietly into Blake’s ear. “Not to mention anything we find in the caves.”

“Of course. We need bags.” Blake smacked her temple in disgust at the oversight. “Though I’d have thought any gold would already be in bags. The thieves had to get it there somehow.”

“True. But the bag that held the coins was useless,” Shale said. “Its age had eroded its strength.”

“Then we’d better buy some. But I have no idea how many we’ll need.” Blake paused, then answered her own question. “Since we’ll only be able to carry one bag of gold each, I’ll get four.”

Another idea came to Shale. “It was freezing down in the caves. Perhaps trousers and long tops would be wise? We don’t know how long we’ll be down there.”

“You came up wet,” Blake said. “What about extra blankets to dry ourselves off?”

Shale clasped her shoulder in recognition of a smart proposition. “Yes. Good. We’ll get soaked by the river, and we don’t want to risk losing our bed blankets.”

An old lady behind the stall came forward. She smiled in a friendly manner. As Shale listed off the items, the woman selected the articles and placed them in easy view.

“I think these will fit you, dear,” she said to Blake, handing her a folded pair of trousers and a thick, warm-looking shirt. “I have the trousers in brown or black, and the shirt in red, green, blue, and...” She checked through the pile of clothes. “Black also.”

Blake held the trousers against herself, as if to check the length of the leg, and the width of the waist. She looked up in surprise. “These are just right.”

The old woman tapped her nose. “I have a good eye.”

“I’ll take the brown trousers, and,” Shale pushed the green top her way, causing Blake to smile. “And the green shirt.”

“It brings out your eyes,” Shale said simply.

She inspected the four bags, assessing their strength. She found them to be of good quality, quite suitable for the trials ahead. She felt through the selection of blankets, choosing the thickest by its feel between her thumb and forefinger. She selected four of that kind, and placed them alongside the bags.

“My, you are tall,” the old woman said to Shale. “I’ll have to give you trousers meant for men.”

Blake laughed, and Shale made a face at her. “That’s fine.” She held out a hand for the clothes. “Trousers are trousers.”

As Shale tried the trousers against herself, she found the length was right, but they were too wide. “Any smaller around the waist?”

“Afraid not. That’s the closest I’ve got.”

“Any belts?”

“Of course.” The old woman handed her a shirt. “The arms may be a bit short. I could give you a man’s, but that will hang off you.”

Shale bit her lip, and regarded Blake in amusement. “Now you see why Kale and I have so few outfits.” The shirt, upon examination, actually wasn’t too bad—the sleeves came to just below her elbow. “This will do. It’ll still be considerably warmer than what I’m wearing now.”

Blake nodded. “If it’s too baggy it’ll get in your way. That one’s fine.”

“I’ll take two of everything.” She might as well get some for Kale too, while they were here. “Belts too. Black trousers and,” Shale laughed as Blake copied her earlier action, though the shirt Blake pushed toward her was blue. “Blue shirts.”

The old woman nodded eagerly, gathering all of the items together.

“I know Amber already has trousers, but I wonder if her shirt’s warm enough.”

“We’ll ask her when we see her,” Shale said, assisting the old woman by opening one of the bags they were about to buy so she could slip the now neatly folded clothes inside. The belts went in next, and the blankets went into another bag. Shale chivalrously shouldered the lot as Blake paid for their purchases, the old woman smiling happily as they talked.

Shale walked on to the next stall, but as she passed the gap between the stands, she noticed a man sat slumped against the wall of the house behind. He was unmoving, so she slipped between the stalls, intending to see if he needed aid. As she closed in on him, she saw that the tattered rags he wore were in such a state they barely resembled clothes anymore. Her nose scrunched up. The man stank of stale sweat and he desperately needed to bathe. He clearly hadn’t done so in a while, for he was covered from head-to-toe in filth, his long matted hair and bushy beard unruly and unkempt. It was obvious that he was homeless, with either no one left, or no one willing to take care of him. It seemed even he had given up on himself.

Shale squatted down beside the man, though she was careful to keep some distance. “Hello?” she said quietly, not wanting to startle him. “Do you need help? Are you hurt?”

Dark blue eyes blinked. The man looked startled by her mere acknowledgment of his presence. Shale guessed that most people would walk right on past, not even caring enough to give him a second glance.

He straightened as his gaze landed on the sword strapped to her back.

Shale was quick to reassure him. "I have no intention of harming you. I just wanted to see if you were all right. Are you hurt?"

His gaze remained suspicious. "Only by life," he finally said.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Shale didn't inquire further, it wasn't her business to pry. Keeping her motions slow, she gestured toward the marketplace. "There is a stall that sells good clothes, blankets that will help keep you warm."

Between two fingers, Shale held out her remaining gold coin. The last of her reward. "This will be enough. And it'll keep you in food for a while."

The man's bloodshot eyes nearly popped out of his head. "That's more money than I used to earn in a season, at least when I had regular work." Suspicion turned to accusation. "What do you want for it?"

"Nothing. Though I'd prefer you not to waste it on drink. That said, it's yours to do as you will."

The gold coin was plucked from Shale's fingers. "Why'd you give this to me?"

Shale shrugged. "Do I need a reason?" At his nod, she said, "Perhaps the gods are smiling on you."

He scoffed, though his crooked teeth showed in a smile. "It'd be a first."

"Believe me, I know what it is to feel like the gods have abandoned you."

"Pissing on me more like," he muttered.

Shale grinned. "That, too." She'd felt that way when her tribe had been killed, when everything she'd known had been taken from her. "But things got better for me, and they will for you too. You can't give up on yourself." She paused to let that sink in. "If you use that coin I gave you to clean yourself up, it'll be a fresh start. And once you find work, there'll be no stopping you."

He leaned forward, a hopeful yearning appearing on his face. "Things got better for you?"

"Much better. They will for you too," Shale said again, drumming the point home. As she stood, she reached out and lightly squeezed his arm. "Don't give up."

His nod had some life to it, as well as newfound belief. “You’ve been kind enough already, but may I ask your name?”

“It’s Shale.”

“Shale.” He smiled as he said it. “Well, Shale, I don’t know how to thank you. I’m in your debt.”

“There’s no need.” Shale waved him off. “Just remember what I said. Don’t give up.”

The answering nod was steady now, sure. “I’ll do my best.”

Shale smiled. She turned around, and was surprised to find Blake between the two stalls, watching her with such loving tenderness that Shale felt her breath catch. Her smile grew as she closed the small distance. “How long have you been there?”

“Long enough.” Blake stretched up and kissed her on the cheek. “If I wasn’t joined to you already, Shale, I’d ask for your hand right this instant.”

Blue eyes sparkled back at her. “And I would say yes.”

THE FOUR AMAZONS all entered the tavern together, having met up in the marketplace. It was busy inside, and nearly all of the patrons were men, most of which directed curious stares their way. Surprisingly, no one commented or jeered, as drunkards often did when liquor had taken their reason and loosened their tongues.

Blake suspected the unusual restraint was down the three warriors by her side, each well-armed and oozing confidence. She had to smile as they protectively nestled her in between them, Amber in front of her, Shale behind. Kale led the group to the counter, each woman taking in her surroundings with a careful and meticulous eye.

The tavern was dark and dingy, the light from the day outside all but lost in the shadowy room. The only useful light came from the lanterns, which were fixed along the walls, or hung overhead from the low ceiling. The drab gray stone of the walls only added to the gloom. The excess of wooden furniture—in particular the tables and chairs—seemed to only clutter up the space, drawing the room in on itself so it was almost claustrophobic, even though in reality, it was actually a good size.

Upon reaching the counter, which was worn smooth from years of use, they waited for their turn to be served. When the serving girl came to them, though in truth she was much more woman than girl, she reacted to the twins as most people did, staring at them in disbelief, as if they were some trick of her imagination.

Blake gave her a moment to recover, but still she stared, not-at-all-subtle. Blake cleared her throat in annoyance, frowning when the long stare continued. The woman was looking back and forth between Shale and Kale with obvious interest, seemingly fascinated.

“They’re twins, yes,” Blake said irritably. “Now will you serve us some drinks?” The woman appeared to remember her manners, for she tore her eyes away, focusing instead on Blake. “Sorry. What can I get for you?”

“What meals do you serve?” Kale asked, drawing the server’s attention back to her.

“We only have chicken broth or rabbit stew left. The best food goes at lunch.”

Kale smacked the counter loudly in disappointment, making Blake start a little. She noticed the server didn’t so much as blink, and assumed she likely had to deal with such antics all the time.

“She’ll take rabbit,” Shale said for Kale. “I’ll have the chicken. Blake?”

“Chicken for me also, please.”

“The same,” Amber said. “And four mugs of ale.”

The server talked to them as she poured their drinks. “I haven’t seen an Amazon around here for a while. I’d heard the tribe east of here was wiped out.”

“It was,” Shale said freely. “Kale and I here are all that remains.”

The server shook her head sympathetically. “How awful. You wouldn’t believe half of the stories I hear, with people passing through. It seems that no matter what direction you live, there’s a dispute of one kind or another.”

“Dispute?” Kale raised an eyebrow. “We had no dispute. Our tribe’s fate was decided on the whim of a mad man.”

The server’s jaw clenched. “I meant no offense.” She passed out their drinks, then gestured across the room. “A table has become free. Why don’t you go and sit down, and I’ll bring you your food. My name is Tanis, so if you need anything further, just call out.”

Blake smiled at her, feeling somewhat bad for the woman. She’d only been trying to make conversation, it wasn’t her fault that she didn’t know the full story. “Thank you, Tanis,” she said, by way of an apology. Tanis looked surprised by the response, but she nodded and returned Blake’s smile.

“What’s got into you?” Amber asked as she followed Kale toward the empty table, weaving their way around chairs and other patrons.

“Rabbit stew,” Kale said.

“That’s no reason to snap at the woman.” Amber pulled out the chair next to Kale’s and sat down. “She was merely being friendly.”

“I don’t like being stared at.” Kale took a swig of her ale. “I thought her eyes were going to pop out of her head.”

Shale set her mug down on the table before taking a seat opposite Kale. “Her stare was excessive.”

“And that reminds me,” Kale said. “Earlier I ran into a man, or rather, he ran into Amber and I, who was crying like a babe. He started ranting about not wanting me to take off his hand. I take it that had something to do with you?”

“He tried to rob Blake.” Shale shrugged. “We threatened to take his hand for punishment. A simple scare tactic.”

Kale chuckled and clinked their mugs together. “Well it worked. He was petrified when we saw him, wasn’t he, Amber?”

Her red hair bounced as she nodded. “I think he’s learnt his lesson.”

Blake leaned beneath the table and began to search through her satchel. She came up holding the two embroidered pouches that contained her new necklaces, and she passed them to Amber. “Look what Shale got me,” she said, casting a doting smile Shale’s way.

Amber’s eyebrows shot up as she withdrew the necklace, letting out a low whistle of approval. “It’s so elegant. It really suits you, Blake.” Blake smiled at the compliment, but before she could respond, Amber added, “I bet it cost a fortune.”

Blake nodded. “It did.”

“Blake’s worth it,” Shale said seriously, smiling when Blake raised her hand and kissed it.

“Gods,” Kale muttered at their affectionate display. She took another swallow of her drink. “The ale is good at least.”

They all ignored her as Amber opened the second pouch. “Ooo, this necklace is nice as well.”

Kale’s voice rose a notch. “Do you have any money left?”

Shale crossed her arms defensively. “I wanted to get something nice for Blake.”

“How sweet of you.”

Amber pointedly cleared her throat. "Look what Kale bought me." She produced a finely-worked hair clasp.

Shale shook her head at Kale. "You were saying?"

"It's lovely, Amber." Blake studied the hair clasp, smirking across at Kale as she returned her earlier taunt. "Kale, how sweet of you."

"Mine isn't sweet," Kale said. "My gift is practical." She scowled at Amber. "Did you have to show them that now?"

Amber's look was innocence itself. "Why not? Blake was showing me her gifts."

Kale harrumphed and folded her arms. "Where's the damn food?"

As if the words conjured her, Tanis appeared, two steaming bowls in hand. "Here you go." She put the food down on the table, hesitating as she glanced confusedly between the twins.

Shale kindly pre-empted her question. "Mine was the chicken."

Tanis pushed the bowl filled with chicken broth to Shale, while Kale simply took the other. Tanis retrieved Blake and Amber's meals, then she returned once more with a plate piled high with bread for them to share.

Rather than leaving them to their meal, Tanis hovered uncertainly by the table. "I do not wish to pry," she said tentatively, "but do you have a long journey ahead of you?"

Blake dipped a piece of bread into her broth. "We do. We have business to the east of here. Why?"

"Sorry. I simply meant to ask if you have shelter for the night." Tanis motioned toward the door, to outside. "I heard a patron say that the weather is clouding in, and I wondered whether you'd need any rooms?"

"Is it clouding in?" Blake craned her head to try and see outside, but she could see little from her position. "Well, it might be wise to seek shelter while we can. We can start out first thing in the morning."

"Let us think about it," Shale said to Tanis, who was stood waiting for an answer.

Tanis didn't budge. "The rooms go quickly, especially in times of bad weather. We don't have many."

Shale's brow bunched up a fraction, clearly not liking the coercive pressure. Her tone hardened. "Let us think about it."

Tanis nodded, graceful now. “Of course.” She retreated, and was soon back behind the counter.

“Don’t you want to stay?” Blake asked. “Shale, you said yourself that sleeping outside wasn’t nice in the rain. Plus, it would be great not to wake up and find a snake coiled next to me.”

“That’s not a very nice thing to say about Shale,” Kale joked, laughing along with Shale as they both creased up in hysterics. They were soon exchanging jibes and taunts, leaving Blake and Amber to have their own discussion.

Blake dug hungrily into her meal, pleased by its tasty flavor. Despite the limited selection, the food was good.

After several mouthfuls, Amber reached out and squeezed Blake’s hand. “Kale told me what happened with the snake. You must’ve been terrified.”

“Thank Artemis Shale was there, that’s all I can say. I’d have probably got myself bitten otherwise.”

“It isn’t likely to happen again. It’s a rare occurrence.”

Blake nodded. “Shale said the same. Though I must admit I’m apprehensive about sleeping outside again. Especially so soon after.”

Shale rested her hand on Blake’s knee, as if she’d heard the confession. She rejoined the conversation. “It’s settled then. We’ll stay the night here at the tavern, give your nerves some time to recover.”

Blake knew she’d have to sleep outside soon enough, she wouldn’t have much of a choice on the return journey home—much of the land they crossed was uninhabited, so it simply wasn’t feasible to keep diverting off track on the off-chance they’d find lodgings. Even so, Blake was grateful for the reprieve, and she intended to make the most of it. She appreciatively squeezed Shale’s hand.

Shale smiled as she stood. “I’ll reserve the rooms, then go and collect our things from the blacksmiths. It’ll be quieter now.”

“I’d better come too.” Kale finished off the last of her rabbit stew. “Don’t want you getting lost.”

Chapter Thirteen

NO RAIN HAD fallen, but still, no one regretted their decision to stay at the tavern. The evening had been pleasant, and the four women were still seated at the same table, happy to converse with one another until closing, at which time they would retire to their rooms. Shale had reserved two, one for her and Blake, the second for Kale and Amber.

Only the hard-drinkers remained at this later hour, the tavern now empty of its earlier crowds. A dozen or so patrons were scattered around the room, most seated in pairs, but a larger group of five sat along the serving counter, as if to be as close as possible to be served their refills—of which they'd had many.

To Shale's taste buds, the ale was unusually sweet, but it was nice just the same. She downed the rest of her drink and stood. "Anyone want another?"

Kale nodded as she drained her mug. Amber and Blake shook their heads.

Shale headed for the counter, carrying the two empty mugs in hand so Tanis could reuse them. A fresh mug was out of the question. Like similar establishments, they had enough to go around, but patrons were expected to reuse the tableware they were given, as there simply wasn't enough to keep on providing a steady, unused supply.

"We're closing now." Tanis took the mugs. "I will refill them, but you'll have to take them to your room."

"Fair enough." Shale waited while Tanis poured in more ale. She nodded her thanks before heading back to the table.

"We're closing." Tanis's voice lifted to address the room. "Finish up your drinks."

"Can't we have one more?" a man at the counter said.

"Lykos, you already know the answer. You ask every night." Tanis added the answer anyway, as if to avoid any misunderstanding. "No. Finish your drink and leave."

Lykos gestured emphatically to Shale, who'd just returned to her table. "How come she gets served and I don't?"

"She has a room here. They're taking it back to their room. They have to leave just the same as you."

The rest of the patrons got to their feet, and headed for the doorway. Some left their empty mugs on the tables, others were kind enough to place their mugs on the counter as they passed.

Lykos practically fell out of his chair, staggering around for a few moments before he seemed to get his bearings. His friends along the counter laughed loudly at him. Instead of leaving, Lykos stumbled to the table of women. "I hear you girls have a room. Fancy sharing?"

"We're already sharing," Kale said bluntly. "There's no room for you." Her eyes narrowed in warning as one of his companions approached. "Or any other man."

The companion held out a defensive hand. "I get it, Amazon." He took hold of Lykos's shoulder in an obvious attempt to try and turn him around. "The women are armed to the teeth, Lykos, it's not wise to provoke them."

Lykos sneered derisively. "They're just women, Acacius, what can they do?"

Kale grabbed his arm. "Want me to show you?"

Shale placed a restraining hand on her. "Leave it, Kale. He's drunk."

Lykos blinked as he looked between them. He rubbed at his eyes with a palm. "I must be. I'm seeing two of you."

Acacius laughed. "Come, let's go." He tried to guide his friend away.

"You go." Lykos shoved him aside, leaning heavily against the table to right himself. The slight scuffle caused Lykos's shirt to open, revealing a small knife tucked beneath his belt.

In complete contrast to her earlier placating words, Shale leapt up with ferocious intent. Both men jumped in alarm, and before Lykos could react, Shale pinned him firmly to the table. Lykos spluttered as some ale splashed out of its mug and landed on his face.

Kale bolted up and kept a protesting Acacius at bay, since Shale now had her back to him.

"Where did you get that knife?" Shale said hotly. She knew exactly where he'd gotten it, for she recognized the craftsmanship, but she wanted to hear him admit it.

"It's mine, I didn't steal it."

"Where?" she shouted.

"I found it at some burnt out village. There was a whole bunch of weapons."

"That was an Amazon village. That knife wasn't yours to take."

Lykos shrugged. "It's no good to the dead." He made an attempt to get up but Shale kept him pinned in place.

Shale felt Amber's discreet tap to her side, which alerted her to the other three men in the group, who were making their way to them, looking annoyed and ready for a fight.

"Get this bitch off me," Lykos yelled.

"Shale, let him up," Blake spoke quietly, but the order was clear in her voice.

Shale's eyes lifted to Blake's in shocked disbelief. The man had scavenged off their dead sisters. She had every right to be mad at him. She wanted an explanation from Blake, a reason why she should let him go. When Blake wasn't forthcoming, Shale reluctantly released Lykos and took a step back.

Lykos confronted Shale as he unsteadily stood, squaring off against her with a smirk on his face.

Shale returned his stare, but made no further move to obstruct him. Lykos shouldered roughly past her, colliding with her so solidly that she rocked back on her heels. She knew his intention was to best her resolve, to get her to react, and she very nearly did. Her fists clenched by her sides, but she managed to keep her temper in check.

Kale, however, did not. As Lykos passed by her, she stuck out her foot, tripping him up and sending him sprawling to the floor.

The three men and Acacius attacked. Kale backhanded Acacius swiftly, sending him to the floor beside his fallen companion. The men were smarter than they looked, attacking all at once instead of one at a time. Still, they weren't trained warriors, so posed little threat.

Shale met the tallest of the three, and a precise kick to the stomach doubled him, winding him so he had to fight to get his breath. Amber dropped the second man just as easily, though her kick was to his groin.

The remaining man picked up a chair, swinging it at Kale like it was some sort of club. To those who'd seen Kale fight, they knew she was in little danger—she would no doubt duck, step up to the man, and put him down. But to anyone else, it appeared as if the chair-swinger had the upper hand, and was about to deliver a nasty blow.

Before he could complete his swing, Tanis suddenly materialized behind him and smashed a bottle over his head. The man slumped to the floor, the chair dropping from his grasp with a clatter.

All of the men were still conscious—bar the man Tanis had just knocked out—and none seemed badly hurt. The men apparently knew when they were beaten, for they had the sense to stay down. All except for Lykos, who started to clamber back to his feet, muttering obscenities and insults. Fortunately for Lykos, Acacius pushed him and sent him tumbling back down again.

“I could’ve handled that, you know,” Kale said to Tanis, sounding peeved that Tanis had stepped in and finished the fight for her.

Tanis frowned. “I thought he had you.”

Kale scoffed. “That drunken leech? Hardly.”

“Kale, don’t be so ungrateful,” Shale said. “Tanis was only trying to help.” She rewarded Tanis with a genial smile. “Thank you.”

“Yes, thank you, Tanis,” Blake added. “It was brave of you to step in.”

Tanis’s cherry colored lips curled up at the corners. She pushed her slightly wavy brown hair behind her ears, though the locks didn’t reach much below her square-shaped jaw. She was an attractive looking woman, but her brown eyes were a touch too dark, making her gaze seem cold and aloof.

Tanis nudged the man by her feet. He didn’t stir. “Acacius, come here and help Panthera. Make sure he gets home all right.” Acacius got up slowly, his hands out in a submissive gesture.

Shale noticed that the rest of the men were eyeing them warily, some glancing to the door as if thinking of making a run for it. “You others help, then be on your way.”

The group was visibly eager to do as she wished, and the men hastily left the tavern. Tanis locked the door behind them.

“I’m curious about something, Tanis,” Blake righted an overturned chair. “If those men are acquaintances of yours, why did you side with us?”

Tanis took a moment to respond. “For exactly that reason.” At Blake’s puzzled frown, she said, “As you say, they are acquaintances of mine, so I know well what they are like. They often cause trouble.” She shrugged indifferently. “They’re not my friends. Far from it.”

Blake gestured to the mess around them. “Would you like a hand to tidy up? It’s the least we can do.”

Tanis immediately shook her head. “That’s a kind offer, but I have my own routine, and I’d rather get on with it myself.” A brief pause. “You should all retire to your rooms.”

The four Amazons left Tanis to it, heading toward the rooms that they’d reserved for the night.

WITH A TRAINED eye, Shale took in the dimly-lit room as she entered. Though she registered the Spartan decor, only two pieces of furniture could be seen—a double bed covered with wolf skins, and a washstand with a bowl of water on top—she paid little note to it, turning to Blake as soon as the door closed and they had some privacy.

Shale crossed her arms angrily. “Why did you order me to release that pig of a man?”

From a bag, Blake brought out one of the lanterns they’d bought from the blacksmith and lit it using the single candle already in the room. The lantern glowed bright, giving off a good light to see by. She hung the lantern from a nail in the wall. “If Lykos had been alone, Shale, I would’ve left you to it. But he wasn’t, and I didn’t want a fight to break out.”

Blake sighed. “Though it did anyway, making my order redundant.”

“Not to me,” Shale said. “I didn’t even get to strike him, he left completely unscathed.”

“Beating him would change nothing.” Blake’s voice rose to match Shale’s. “Events would stay the same.”

“He’s no better than a grave robber,” Shale said hotly. “He should’ve been punished.”

“If Lykos hadn’t taken the knife someone else would have—people will make profit wherever they can, you know this. And though what he did disgusts me, I wasn’t about to risk my warriors.”

Blake held up a quieting hand, as if expecting Shale to comment. “And before you inevitably say that you were more than a match for those drunken thugs, I agree, but if one got lucky, and you, Kale, or Amber had been hurt, where would we have sought treatment? We are too far away from home to risk such altercations, Shale. I was simply protecting you.”

Shale’s anger deflated somewhat. Giving Blake a rueful look, she sank down onto the bed, arms uncrossing as she rubbed her temple in frustration. “And I thought I was the warrior.”

Blake crossed to her and knelt by her feet. Her voice was now soft, calm. “Look, Shale, I know what he did upset you. It upset me too. All Amazons are sisters, no matter their tribe.” She placed her hands on Shale’s knees. “And I understand that it’s deeply personal for you, so if you want to be cross with me for the decision, go ahead. I won’t take it to heart.” Blake caught Shale’s gaze. “But first, I want to thank you for following my command. I could see it was difficult for you to do so.”

Shale nodded, though she stayed silent, working through Blake’s reasoning in her head. She could see Blake’s point, but her annoyance about the injustice of the situation remained. She suspected her emotions were clouding her judgment, but knowing that did little to assuage her feelings.

“Perhaps I overreacted,” Shale said finally, surprised to find that Blake was no longer in front of her. She’d been so lost in her thoughts she hadn’t noticed her move. She found Blake by the wash stand, drying her face on a cloth.

“I didn’t say that, Shale.” Blake placed the cloth down next to the bowl of water. “Nor do I believe it. I just have the luxury of thinking with a clear head.”

Shale nodded, accepting that. “Though I don’t like your decision, I can see why you made it.” She met Blake’s green eyes directly. “You were right.”

Blake sat next to Shale on the bed and draped an arm around her taller shoulders. “Neither of us were wrong, Shale. It was only the situation that dictated the course of action.”

Shale released a heavy breath, exhaling the last of her bad temper. She tried to lighten the mood with humor. “I should have known better, it’s always a bad sign when I react more than Kale.”

Blake chuckled. “Kale reacted, too. Don’t think I didn’t see her stick her foot out.”

Shale sniggered at the memory, her smile growing when Blake patted her back.

“Come on, let’s go to bed.”

Needing no further encouragement, Shale rose and went to the washbasin as Blake undressed. Shale soon joined her in bed, and they snuggled against one another, for comfort more than warmth.

“What did you make of Tanis?” Shale said. “I’m not sure.” Blake raised her head off Shale’s chest to regard her. “Why’d you ask?”

“It just surprises me that a trained fighter would choose to work at a tavern. There’s plenty of other work more suited to those talents, certainly better paid.”

Pale eyebrows rose. “Tanis is a trained fighter? How do you know that?”

“From how she moved in the fight. It was finished so quickly I got only a glimpse, so I can’t tell you how good she is, but I saw enough to know that she’d been taught. Usually I can tell by simply watching a person—their build, their gait, their eyes.”

At Blake’s questioning look, Shale continued. “A warrior’s eyes are alert, taking in their surroundings, the people around them. Even their attitude. Fighters often have a confidence that isn’t there in the average person. Anyway, until Tanis fought, I hadn’t picked up on any of that from her, which is odd, because I usually do notice those things.” She paused to ponder her next words. “It’s as if Tanis was trying to disguise that fact about herself.” Shale shrugged in bewilderment. “Though I have no idea why she’d do such a thing.”

“If that was true, I don’t think she would’ve helped Kale out,” Blake said rationally. “That hardly fits with such a notion.”

“I know. It’s absurd.” Shale chuckled as she shook her head at herself. “I must be more tired than I thought.”

Blake smiled and brushed her lips against Shale’s, lingering when Shale returned the kiss in kind.

An impish expression appeared on Blake’s face. “I thought you were tired?”

A slow, seductive grin formed. “I’m never that tired, Blake.”

UPON ENTERING THE poorly illuminated room, Kale lit their newly acquired lantern. After returning from the blacksmith, she and Shale had divided up the items accordingly, so everyone would carry a manageable load.

Raised voices suddenly came from next door, and it was clear that Shale and Blake were arguing.

Kale quickly moved to the adjoining wall between their two rooms. She pressed her ear to its surface. “Sounds like there’s trouble in paradise.”

“Don’t exaggerate. It’s merely a disagreement. It must have been hard for Shale to let Lykos go.” Amber moved to Kale’s side and tugged at her wrist. “Come away from there.”

Kale perched on the bed instead. “It’s a good thing I wasn’t holding that pig, because I wouldn’t have released him.”

Amber gave her a stern look. “It was a queen’s order.”

Kale nodded. “I know. But I’d rather have taken Blake’s punishment for defying her.”

Amber shook her head. “It isn’t as easy for Shale. She’s joined to Blake, which makes things a lot more complicated.”

“I’d have thought that fact would buy Shale some leeway. She should learn to use it when she can.”

“Shale isn’t the type to take advantage in that way.” Amber prodded a knowing finger into Kale’s chest. “She’s not you.”

Kale smirked, neither denying the accusation, or looking the least bit repentant. “Well, we can’t all be perfect.”

Amber scoffed. “I’d better sleep on the floor. I don’t think there’s room for both me and your big head.”

Kale made an indignant noise, and pulled Amber down onto the bed, tickling her in torment.

Amber giggled. “Kale!” She reversed their positions, flipping Kale onto her back. “Ha.”

“Looks like you’ve got me.” Kale ran her hand up the length of Amber’s leg. “Now what do you plan to do with me?”

Amber playfully hovered over Kale’s lips for a moment before capturing them. The kiss was slow and sensual, but when Kale tried to deepen it further, Amber withdrew.

“Sorry.” Amber grinned down at Kale, not looking apologetic at all. “Thin walls, remember?”

Kale groaned in response. “You’ll be the death of me, Amber, teasing me like this.”

Amber winked flirtatiously. “I promise it’ll be worth the wait.” She left Kale on the bed as she got up and went to the washstand. She stood perfectly still, as if listening for voices from next door. “They’ve quieted down now. They must have resolved their disagreement.”

Kale huffed out a breath. “They’re likely having sex.”

Amber sniggered. “You would say that.”

Chapter Fourteen

AMBER SHOOK KALE for the third time, trying to wake her. “Kale, get up. We’re leaving.” She tossed several articles of clothing onto the bed, then shook Kale once more, smiling as her blue eyes finally opened.

Kale yawned as she sat up. “What? Why?”

“I’ve put a note under Blake’s door, telling them we’ve gone on ahead. We’ll meet them on route to the cave.”

“It’s still early, Amber, what’s the rush? If we leave now, we’ll miss breakfast.”

Amber shouldered her share of the supplies, satchels packed and ready to go. “You can either have breakfast, Kale, or you can have me. Your choice.”

A broad grin of comprehension dawned on Kale’s face. “As much as I like my food, there’s really no comparison between the two.”

She hastily began to put on her clothes, and was soon dressed. As Amber helpfully hooked a bag over Kale’s shoulders, Kale drew her in for a quick kiss. “I’m so glad you thought of this.”

“You and me both.” Amber eagerly led the way out of the room, passing the other rooms quietly to avoid disturbing anyone inside. The front door to the tavern was already unlocked, so they slipped through with ease, the town outside deserted at such an early hour.

As they set off, Amber said, “I left some money with the note for Blake, to cover our share of the rooms. I did try to find Tanis first, to pay her myself—she’s clearly up for the front door to be open—but I had no luck.”

“She must start early. Perhaps she’s out fetching water?” Kale moved closer and took Amber’s hand. “You’re well-prepared. How long have you been up?”

“In truth, the idea struck me last night, but I wanted to surprise you with it.”

Kale gave a pleased nod. “You certainly did that.”

Gratified, Amber increased her pace, keen to put some distance between them and the rest of civilization. Not another word was spoken as they left the town behind, crossing through several planted fields, and meadows where only animals grazed. They were already alone, but still they didn’t stop, neither wanting to risk being disturbed again. They had plenty of time, and both instinctively knew where they were headed, without ever communicating the destination. They had passed by a thick, dense wood on the way to town, and though the wood was set back from the main trade route, it was the trees’ unusual boughs that offered the secluded privacy they sought. Each large bough drooped heavily downward, hanging low to the ground, so low that the tips of the bottom branches actually scraped the ground. The thick foliage completely hid the base of the tree, and the space around it.

They walked for a good distance, and when they finally reached the wood, they pushed their way through the thicket, going deep into the trees.

Amber selected a large bough and lifted it so Kale could duck underneath, surprised by the hefty weight of the branch, and the effort required to move it. Once beneath herself, Amber

heard Kale fumbling in her bag. She heard her, but she couldn't see her. The foliage was so thick that the daylight from outside was completely blocked out.

Amber was just about to lift up the branch again, to allow some light in, when she recognized the sound of stones striking against one another. The lantern came to life, the flame illuminating the underside of the tree in a soft yellow glow, creating the perfect ambience for a romantic encounter.

Amber took a moment to look around. Astoundingly, the space under the boughs was more substantial than the room they'd recently vacated. Near the trunk, she could see farther up the tree, though not very far, as the boughs above blocked out the light in a similar fashion. The ground beneath her feet was spongy but dry, the thick moss like a bedroll made from nature herself.

She turned to face Kale. She watched as Kale raked lustful eyes across her body, and Amber felt a shiver of expectation run through her. She started toward Kale, stripping out of her clothes and leaving them disregarded in her wake. Kale did the same, and met Amber halfway, their mouths melding as their naked bodies came together.

As the kiss deepened, and their passion rose another notch, Amber cupped Kale's mound intimately and squeezed. In response, Kale pushed Amber backward, moving with her and slamming her none too gently against the tree trunk.

Now pinned in place, Amber released a frenzied growl, and as their tongues battled, she lifted a leg onto Kale's hip.

Kale's fingers delved up into Amber, the fervent entry pressing Amber hard against the tree. Amber's ragged moan seemed to excite Kale further, and Amber writhed in delight when Kale began to move in her, long, slow strokes building the tension ever higher.

"I want you so badly, Amber." Kale tapped Amber's rump, and Amber understood her wishes. She eagerly latched onto Kale's neck and pulled herself upward, raising her other leg onto Kale's hip so Kale now supported her completely. Her legs and arms wrapped around Kale, Amber lowered herself back onto Kale's waiting fingers.

It was a testament to Kale's strength that she could keep Amber in such a position with only one arm. Amber clung to Kale tightly, gasping in need as she felt Kale's strong, yet slender fingers inside her, impaling her. "Deeper, Kale. Please."

Amber cried out as Kale thrust farther into her, fingers in all the way to the hilt. Kale withdrew then plunged back inside, driving into her with a force that rocked Amber to her very core.

"Yes, Kale. Yes!" Amber was panting now, rocking herself faster with an urgency that only kept on growing. Then, suddenly, she was on her back, clawing at the moss in wild abandon as Kale, now on top of her, rammed into her with swift, powerful strokes.

“Oh! Yes, Kale. Faster.” Amber’s hips rose up to meet Kale’s thrusts, and she screamed as ecstasy flooded through her. Still, Kale didn’t stop, pounding into Amber with firm intent. Amber pressed her thigh between Kale’s legs, and as Amber began to writhe and thrash, Kale surged against her, clearly desperate to peak.

Amber’s breath came in ragged gasps, and Kale moaned as they kissed, tongues caressing as they slid against one another.

Amber whimpered as she began to tremble in climax, and as Kale rubbed her clit, she jerked and cried out, thrashing wildly. Her thigh pressed harder against Kale’s hot center, and that sent Kale reeling over the edge with her.

Kale collapsed on top of Amber, each taking a few moments to gather themselves, and to catch their breath. When they’d recovered, Amber tenderly guided Kale’s face to hers, their lips meeting slowly now, the passion still present, but no longer ruling them.

Amber rolled Kale onto her back, then began to kiss her way down Kale’s long, toned body, stopping to lavish attention on her full, round breasts. She took a nipple into her mouth, feeling it harden as she licked and sucked. She nipped it lightly between her teeth, smiling when Kale groaned and arched into her touch. The nub was rigid now, standing erect on Kale’s chest.

Amber moved to her other breast, lavishing it with the same loving attention. She lapped at Kale’s navel as she descended farther, though she didn’t have much time to linger as Kale encouraged her downward with a hand to the top of her head.

Amber savored Kale’s taste as her tongue slipped into her warm, slick folds, each caress making Kale surge up against her.

“Amber...I need you inside me.” Kale sat upright using only her stomach muscles, and as Amber rose up to meet her, Kale drove her back to the mossy floor, straddling Amber’s stomach with a burning passion in her eyes.

Amber didn’t keep her waiting, pushing into Kale with a sure hand. Fingers plunging deep, Kale gasped and her hips began to gyrate, grinding herself forcefully onto Amber’s hand. Amber tried to sit up herself, and Kale assisted, wrapping her arms around Amber’s back as Amber began to suckle at her breasts.

Kale began to pant as she rolled her hips, the sound intensely erotic to Amber’s ears.

As Amber increased the pace of her thrusts, Kale released a long moan, her body tensing, then shuddering in climax.

Kale again pressed Amber to the ground, and as they kissed, Kale rubbed Amber’s clit, fast and hard. Amber’s release was immediate, and Kale caught her short, urgent cry as Amber pulsated against her.

Utterly spent, they held one another close as they recovered. Amber kissed Kale's forehead, which rested in the crook of her neck.

"You did say it would be worth the wait." Kale released an impressed sigh.

Amber giggled. "It certainly was."

"You know I'm not one for setting the scene, but even I have to admit that this place is special. I'll remember it."

"So will I." Amber glanced up at the large tree, its boughs nestling them protectively inside, sheltered and safe. It was the same feeling she had whenever she was in Kale's arms. She gave Kale's body a squeeze, and waited for pale blue eyes to raise and meet her own. "I love you."

Kale's smile was touching, her expression open and sincere. "And I love you, Amber."

AMBER AND KALE had decided to stop early for lunch, to allow the others to catch up with them. They weren't at all worried about being passed by, as Shale could detect Kale anywhere—all Shale had to do was follow her senses.

They'd picked a nice spot to wait, the vast meadow filled with bright, multi-colored flowers. Amber was searching through the bushes along the edge of the meadow, trying to find berries that were both safe to eat, and would go nicely with their meal.

She sniffed the air as a delicious aroma reached her—the ducks were nearly ready to eat. She glanced toward the center of the meadow, to where Kale was roasting the ducks over an open fire. One was for her and Kale to share, the other for Blake and Shale when they arrived.

"Ah-ha," Amber said in success, as she spotted what she was rooting around for. She'd had the foresight to bring a wooden dining bowl with her, and as she started to pick the ripe red berries off the stems, she dropped them into it. Though many of the berries had been taken by animals and birds, a good few were still present, and she filled her bowl with them.

Amber suddenly had the feeling she was being watched, and she stepped back from the bushes, her sharp gaze scanning the area. Though she couldn't detect any movement, the nape hairs on the back of her neck stood on end—she definitely felt eyes on her. Amber quickly placed the bowl down in the grass, wanting her hands free. She knew something or someone was moving closer, readying for an attack, but she was going solely off her gut, nothing she could physically see around her revealed any such threat. A woman sprang out of the bushes, her features blurred by the speed at which she moved. She was as fast as lightning, and tackled Amber to the ground with a thud. Amber's swift reflexes saved her, getting a foot beneath her opponent and flipping her over her head.

The attacker collided solidly with the ground as Amber had, though she sprang up as if unaffected. Amber rolled to her feet, her fighting stance coming as naturally to her as breathing. She blinked in shock when her eyes registered the person in front of her.

“Shale!” Amber lunged at her, and playfully punched her bicep.

Shale wore a smug grin. “I’m just testing your skills.”

Kale could be heard laughing in the background, and Amber shouted accusingly at her. “You knew she was there all along, didn’t you?” Kale only laughed harder, confirming her suspicions. Amber punched Shale again, since Kale was out of reach.

“That’s not fair,” Shale said. “Kale’s the one laughing.”

“That’s tough for you.” Amber swiped at Shale a third time, but didn’t connect as Shale dodged out of the way.

“Too slow.” Shale tutted critically as she shook her head. “What would Aris say?”

Amber darted toward her, but Shale was already on the move. Amber couldn’t continue the chase, for she had to backtrack to collect the bowl of berries.

As Amber walked through the soft grass, she heard Blake’s voice— Blake was already at the campfire.

“Smells good,” Blake said to Kale. “Thanks for making us some.”

Kale smiled and handed Blake a full plate, the dark meat letting off steam as it cooled.

Amber popped a berry into her mouth, enjoying the sweet tang of the juice. She sat down on the grass beside Blake, and offered her some. With a smile, Blake took several berries. Amber playfully withdrew the bowl when Shale reached out for some, scowling as if upset with her. Shale pouted in response, and looked at Amber with big doleful eyes. Amber relented, passing her the bowl.

“You could convert a virgin priestess with that look, Shale,” Blake said.

“That was Kale.”

Blake jostled Shale humorously as she chuckled. “Very funny.”

Shale regarded her with a straight face. “I’m not joking.”

Blake’s mouth dropped open as Amber broke into a fit of giggles. They both stared at Kale incredulously.

“Her name was Cleonia,” Kale said, her grin broad and self-approving. “And she isn’t a virgin priestess anymore. She had to drop the first part of the title after she met me.”

Amber howled with laughter, holding her side as she got a stitch. Blake didn’t seem to know whether she should be amused or mortified, but she ended up laughing just the same.

“I can’t believe you, Kale,” Amber said between laughs. “The nerve.”

Kale shrugged a single shoulder. “I was young.”

Shale scoffed. “That’s your excuse for everything.”

“It’s not an excuse, it’s a valid reason.”

“Which god or goddess did Cleonia serve?” Blake asked. “Please don’t say Zeus.”

Kale shook her head. “I don’t have a death wish. It was Aphrodite.”

Blake looked slightly relieved. “Well, at least the goddess of love can understand such an act.”

“I figured the same.”

“So, Shale,” Amber said, now in control of herself. “What were you doing while Kale was out dishonoring the local virgins?”

Kale’s voice rose in indignation. “It only happened once.”

Shale went quiet for a moment, as if thinking about the question. “Helping out at home. Covering for Kale by doing her chores as well as my own.”

Blake smiled. “Never have your differences been so apparent than in the last few sentences.”

Kale sniggered. She looked skeptically at Shale, then surprise crossed her face. “So you were. Did I ever thank you for that?”

Shale waved her off. “You just did.”

Kale cut some more meat off the duck. She placed the slices onto the wooden plates, then dished out the food, serving herself last when everyone else had a plateful.

They ate in companionable silence for a while, the berries complimenting the meal nicely.

“Did you see Tanis on your way out?” Blake asked.

“No. We left early, too. But the front door of the tavern was unlocked, so she had to be about somewhere.” Amber took a drink from her water skin. “Why’d you ask?”

“The cook, who told us he also owns the tavern, was spitting curses at her when we left. Said she’d just up and disappeared without a word. Left him in the lurch for a server.”

Kale put down her now empty plate. “She probably got fed up of having such a miserable job.”

“Maybe,” Blake said. “But he told us it was the first time he’d had any problems with Tanis, so he just couldn’t understand the reasoning behind her abrupt departure.”

“I’m sure she had her motives.” Shale shrugged. “Though I don’t suppose we’ll ever find out what they were.”

Chapter Fifteen

“I WAS THINKING we could build a pallet, bring the gold and whatever else we find back that way? We can drag it between us. It’ll be too heavy to carry home.”

“Kale, let’s not get ahead of ourselves. There may not be much left to find. But if we do find the relics, I imagine we’ll take the urn back with us, and a larger group will likely be formed and sent out to collect the rest, depending how much there is, of course. Probably with an armed escort.”

“Mm, you could be right. We’ll have to return also, show them where to look.”

Shale gave her a knowing glance. “You just don’t want anyone to steal your glory.”

“Quite right,” Kale said. “We’ll have done all the hard work. Why should someone else get the credit?”

Shale didn’t respond. She stopped abruptly in her tracks as her body snapped straight in alert, her head tilting as she listened intently. Kale held up a warning hand to Blake and Amber, who were trailing behind a short ways. They both halted without question, clearly trusting the twins’ judgment.

The sound of voices carried on the slight breeze, one male, one female. The man's voice was raised in anger, so they could make out some of what he was saying.

"...pay for making a fool out of me...you're going to regret...not so clever now..."

An impact of some kind split the air, followed closely by a woman's cry.

Shale and Kale bolted into motion, tracking the sounds with ease. Amber and Blake followed in hot pursuit.

Another strike was heard, but this time it was the man who cried out. "Argh! You bloody bitch!" The woman, it seemed, was fighting back, and the ensuing sounds were that of a scuffle.

Rounding a bend in the trail, they all saw the attack up ahead. The man had the woman pinned beneath him, and both were frantically wrestling with a knife. The knife was pointed downward, the blade's deadly tip dangerously close to the woman's stomach. The man was only a moment away from stabbing her, using his weight to force the knife down.

Seeing that they wouldn't reach her in time, Shale released a battle cry, hoping to distract the man from his purpose. It worked. The man glanced up, startled.

Shale recognized his face—it was Lykos, the drunk from the tavern.

Lykos suddenly gasped in shock, and blood spilled out of his mouth. The woman had reversed the knife and buried it deep into his chest. Lykos coughed, his expression one of utter confusion. He wheezed out his last words. "What have you..."

The woman twisted the blade, silencing him forever. She shoved his body off her, and accepted Shale's hand of assistance to be helped to her feet.

"Tanis," Shale said in surprise, seeing her own bewilderment reflected back at her.

"It's you." Tanis appeared equally baffled by the unexpected reunion. "What are you doing here?"

"We're traveling home," Shale said.

"Good thing for you we were." Kale nudged the dead man with a boot. "This scum nearly had you."

Tanis nodded, swallowing hard as that realization seemed to sink in. "You saved my life. Thank you."

"It's the least we could do." Shale smiled. "You helped us out at the tavern."

"Why did Lykos attack you?" Blake asked.

“He’d taken offense to how I handled the situation last night. He was ranting about how I’d shown him up in front of his friends.” Tanis held the knife out to Shale. “Do you want this? You said it was an Amazon blade.”

Shale tilted her head to the left. She could see that Kale was keenly eyeing the weapon. “Kale will take it.”

Kale accepted the knife from Tanis with a smile, bending down and sheathing it inside her boot.

“That seems a bit extreme.” Doubt was evident in Blake’s tone. “He was going to kill you because you hurt his pride?”

Tanis shrugged. “That’s the only reason he gave me. Besides, I’m not sure he started out with that intention. It was only when I fought back did he escalate to that, but I wasn’t about to sit still and let him beat me.”

“Of course not.” Blake looked rueful that she’d questioned Tanis’s explanation. As if in apology, she gestured to Tanis’s bloody cheek. “May I take a look at that cut?”

Shale was quietly studying Lykos’s body. He was far from being in prime condition, and she wondered how a mere thug like Lykos had managed to get the best of Tanis—Shale had again seen traces of her fighting ability, but they’d been brief she couldn’t ascertain Tanis’s level of skill. She knew only that Tanis had some, whereas Lykos did not.

As if reading her thoughts, Tanis said, “I can’t believe that filthy lowlife almost had me. That will teach me to pay attention instead of being lost in my own thoughts.” She swept an annoyed finger through the blood marring her cheek, gazing at the crimson fluid in obvious contempt for herself. “For my stupidity.” “We’ve all lost focus at one point or another.” Shale knew the truth of that personally.

“I received word through the night that my cousin is perilously ill, and I haven’t been able to think of anything but her since. I’m ashamed to admit that I didn’t even tell Agathon, the tavern’s owner, that I was needed elsewhere. I just left as quickly as I could.”

Shale felt bad about being suspicious—nearly every doubt or question she’d had, Tanis had answered, some without even being prompted. The reasons made sense, nothing contradicted the other. Tanis had even put herself on the line for them, and she’d nearly been killed for her selfless efforts. Shale decided there and then that she was being overly paranoid, when Tanis had given her little, if any, cause.

Blake laid a sympathetic hand on Tanis’s shoulder. “I’m sorry about your cousin.”

Tanis gave a small nod. She attempted to neaten her brown wavy hair, as if to bring it to order after the struggle. “I don’t suppose I’ll have a job to return to now either.” She sighed heavily. “How quickly things can change.”

“Shale and I actually saw Agathon before we left. He was annoyed, yes, but he did seem genuinely upset that you’d gone. When you return, if you explain yourself, he may indeed give you your job back.”

Tanis seemed pleased by the information. “I’ll do that. Thank you for telling me. Apologies, but I don’t know your name.”

A smile. “It’s Blake. This is Shale, Kale, and Amber.”

Tanis nodded to each of them in greeting. When Blake again pointed to her cheek, Tanis said, “Go ahead.”

Blake set her satchel down on the ground and rifled through it. Tanis knelt beside her, and Blake carefully started to clean the wound.

“Are you hurt elsewhere?” Shale asked. Since Tanis wore trousers and a long top like Amber, she couldn’t see if Tanis had any more injuries.

Tanis shook her head. “Just bruises. They’ll heal of their own accord.”

Silence reigned while Blake continued with her ministrations. It was Tanis who finally broke the quiet, though she appeared somewhat self-conscious. “I don’t mean to be presumptuous, but I take it you’re traveling east?”

“For a few days, yes,” Blake said.

“My cousin lives in a small village called Nepsus. It’s a day and a half’s journey, two at the most. Would you mind if I tagged along with you? That attack has shaken me.”

Blake glanced around, as if to see if anyone had issue with the request. She clearly found no opposition, for she nodded to Tanis. “Of course. You’d be most welcome.”

SHALE HAD BEEN given the task of building a campfire, while Kale and Amber were off refilling everyone’s water skins from the fast-flowing river nearby. Blake was busy collecting more firewood, and Tanis had stayed behind to help Shale, even though she needed none.

Despite assuring herself that she was being paranoid, there was still one matter niggling at Shale, so she decided to just come out with it. “Tanis, who taught you to fight?”

Tanis’s expression revealed nothing. “Who says that I can?”

“I do.”

Tanis smiled flirtatiously. “You must’ve been paying me a lot of attention.”

Shale didn’t like the insinuation. “I’m merely observant.”

“You must be.” Tanis’s tone made it clear that she didn’t believe Shale. “Anyway, you’re correct, I can fight. My older brother taught me. When I was young, my home, like yours, was attacked and destroyed. My parents were murdered, only my brother and I survived.”

Shale grimaced, again feeling awful for pressing Tanis. “Please forgive me. I didn’t wish to bring up bad memories.”

Tanis regarded her for a long moment, her gaze sincere. “I know you didn’t. You understand, Shale. You and I have been through the same thing.”

Shale quietly laid some more kindling on the fire, which was now starting to take hold.

“The only difference is you’re fortunate enough to still have your sibling.”

Shale looked up at Tanis. “Your brother is dead?”

Tanis sadly nodded. “Yes, murdered also. It wasn’t that long ago, actually. He was slain by a fierce warrior.”

“I’m so…”

Tanis firmly cut her off, as if to try and veer away from emotional matters. “Now you can see why I was so annoyed with myself about Lykos.” She shook her head at herself. “My brother would’ve despaired at such a careless mistake.”

“You said yourself,” Shale found herself defending Tanis from her self-recrimination, “you were upset, and distracted by news of your cousin. Which is understandable.”

“I haven’t had cause to fight in a while, bar the odd scuffle at the tavern.” Tanis smiled at Shale. “Perhaps I’m out of practice?”

Shale’s ears pricked up, that might explain why she hadn’t detected Tanis was a trained fighter straight off. Feeling foolish, she said, “If we get chance, I could give you some pointers.”

Tanis looked keen. “Great. Fighting with an Amazon,” she held up a warning finger, “I can’t promise you a good outcome.”

Shale raised her eyebrows as she laughed. “I see you already have a good handle on the fighting talk.”

Tanis clapped Shale on the back, laughing with her. “I worked at a tavern, remember?”

The fire now burning strong, Shale got to her feet. Tanis rose alongside her, gesturing to Shale's midriff.

"Those scars are unusual." Tanis circled around Shale, seemingly studying every small white ridge on Shale's skin. As Shale watched her, she noticed that Tanis's gaze glossed across the larger scars. She only appeared interested in the small. Tanis touched several, and in such a manner that made Shale uncomfortable. "They weren't made by any dagger or sword blade that I know of."

Shale stepped away from her touch. "No, they were made by a whip."

Tanis's brown eyes grew wide, but then doubt formed. "How could a whip leave such marks? Lashes leave a different pattern."

"Usually, yes. But this whip had shards of metal embedded into it."

"How awful." Tanis lifted a speculative brow. "Though I bet it was effective?"

Shale gave a begrudging nod. "It certainly was that."

"Barbaric is what it was," Blake said strongly as she joined them, her arms full of firewood. As she piled the wood next to the burning fire, she glowered at Tanis, as if she'd seen how Tanis had touched Shale. "Like the man who wielded it."

Tanis seemed unfazed by the extra addition to the conversation. In clear defiance of Blake's look, she leaned closer to Shale. "Did you get those scars when your tribe was wiped out?"

"No, that happened later." Shale again backed away from Tanis, ensuring her personal space. "Though it was done by the same man."

"He sounds formidable."

Shale frowned at the underlying respect that could be heard in Tanis's voice. "He was formidable. Until Kale killed him."

Tanis smiled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "You got your vengeance. Every survivor understands that need."

With that, Tanis simply turned and walked away.

Once she was out of earshot, Blake said, "I don't trust her."

"No?"

"I think you were right last night. She's hiding something."

“Actually, I think I was mistaken. Tanis explained a few things, all of which make perfect sense.”

Blake shook her head. “Something’s not right with her. Something’s...off.”

Shale had an inkling as to why Blake had suddenly changed her mind about Tanis. She decided to test her suspicions. “She does like to stand rather close.”

“Only with you.”

Shale grinned, her suspicions confirmed. She was perversely pleased by Blake’s jealous response. “And you don’t think you’re reacting to that?”

“No. Well, maybe.” Blake sighed. “But what if it’s more than that? We’ve both questioned her character now.”

Shale wound a reassuring arm around Blake’s waist. “We’ll keep an eye on her. We won’t be with Tanis for much longer. This time tomorrow our paths will separate.”

Blake nodded, still looking annoyed. “Surely she can see the ring on your finger?”

THE ROAR OF the waterfall drowned out all surrounding noise, and Kale had to strain to hear Amber, even though she was yelling and stood right next to her.

“Next water skin,” Amber shouted. She replaced the stopper on the skin she held, and passed it back to Kale.

Kale tossed the freshly-filled water skin behind her, where it landed on top of a steep bank. She and Amber were at the bottom of the bank, carefully balancing at the river’s edge.

Kale handed another water skin to her, careful to ensure Amber had a good purchase on it before releasing it. She knew if the water skin, or anything else for that matter, fell into the fast-flowing river, it would be swept away by the unstoppable current, and end up over the falls. It would plummet a vast distance, likely never to be seen again.

Before they’d begun the task of collecting and refreshing their water supplies, Kale had insisted on taking a look at the impressive waterfall. She had always admired its beauty. The waterfall itself was massive, the wide sheet of water plunging over a sheer cliff and onto the jagged rocks below.

Amber had teased Kale, daring her to jump off this waterfall like she had the other, but Kale knew her limitations, and sometimes she even listened to her sense of reason. This was one of

those times—as she’d mentioned earlier to Blake, she didn’t have a death wish. Going over these falls would kill a person. Kale had no doubt about that.

“Next,” Amber yelled, passing a filled, dripping water skin to Kale.

Kale threw it onto the bank, and gave Amber another. She held tightly to the rear of Amber’s top as Amber leaned forward, dipping the neck of the skin under the water for it to fill. They were in a precarious position, and Kale was pleased they were almost finished. Though she greatly appreciated waterfalls, she had no wish to plummet to her death over one.

They transferred the skins once more, and Amber filled the last. They climbed up the steep riverbank without incident, and were soon out of harm’s way. At least, that’s what they thought—but their sole concentration had been on the danger that the river presented, and the loud roar of the water had drowned out all other noise—even the approach of a person.

Chapter Sixteen

BLAKE WATCHED, AMUSED as Shale picked up yet another bag. She had already searched through three. After rummaging inside, Shale discarded it and moved on to another satchel.

Blake laughed. “What are you looking for?”

“My sharpening stone. I split the supplies throughout the bags, but we’ve now got so many I can’t remember which one I put it in.”

Blake shook her head in fond exasperation. “We’d better be able to find our bed rolls.”

Shale regarded her with a wry expression. “I should probably start looking now. If everything’s going to take this long to find, it’ll be dark before I locate them.”

Blake got up from her seat by the fire. “Here, let me help.”

Shale selected a bag which was slightly apart from the others, but before Blake could protest, she’d opened it and dug inside.

“Shale, that’s not one of ours. It belongs to Tanis.”

“Oops.” As Shale withdrew her hand in contrition, she grimaced. “Ow. Something pricked me.” Clearly wondering what it was, Shale peered inside. Unexpectedly, Shale dropped the bag in horror and jerked back, colliding with Blake.

“Shale? What is it?” Blake’s first thought was that a snake had somehow slithered into the satchel, and it had bitten Shale when she’d reached inside.

Shale gave her a haunted look, as if she’d seen a spirit from the underworld. “I don’t understand. How did she…”

“Sit down for me, Shale,” Blake said, noting concernedly that all the color had drained from Shale’s face. She was pleased when Shale didn’t resist, and Blake guided her to the ground, keeping a supportive hand on her. Blake’s worry for her wife overruled any fear that she had about snakes lying in wait. She opened the bag with her free hand, to see for herself what had rattled Shale so.

“Careful, Blake.” Shale held up a bloodied little finger, which had a deep slice along its side, stretching from its tip, to half the finger’s length. “Just tip it up.”

Blake did so, emptying the satchel’s contents onto the ground. Many objects fell out, but she knew instantly which had caused Shale to react the way she had. Blake sucked in a sharp, shaken breath. Lying in the dirt before them was a weapon that neither woman thought they’d see again, nor did they have any wish to.

The whip lay coiled, lifeless, yet it was worse than any snake Blake could have imagined, and her fear of snakes was extreme. The metal barbs protruding along its length verified that it was indeed the same weapon, and she was reminded of the savage attack that was bestowed upon Shale by its former master—the twins’ brother, Theron.

Shale said what they were both thinking. “That whip is unique to Theron. I’d recognize it anywhere.”

Blake nodded in agreement. “But how did Tanis get hold of it? And why does she have such a brutal item in her possession?”

Shale’s eyes met Blake’s, and an understanding passed between them. They both leapt to their feet.

Blake tossed the satchel that contained their medicinal supplies to Shale. As they took off toward the river, Blake snagged another bag, and also a coil of rope. She had no idea what awaited them, but she wanted to be prepared.

AMBER WAS PATIENTLY waiting by the collection of water skins. She selected hers and took a long, refreshing drink. She was alone for the moment. Kale had disappeared amongst the trees, citing a call of nature.

The roar of the waterfall drowned out all surrounding noise, but Amber sensed movement behind her, and assumed it was Kale returning. She was surprised by her swift return, and since she couldn't verify it was Kale by the sound of her familiar footsteps, she turned to check.

A glint of steel caught her eye, and Amber lurched backward, the honed reflex saving her life. A dagger whipped across her skin, cutting savagely across her collarbone instead of the intended target—her throat.

Amber sprang clear, giving herself some breathing room. She looked at her attacker in disbelief and confusion. “Tanis, what in Gaia’s name are you doing?”

Tanis didn't respond, this time lunging forward and stabbing outward, clearly aiming for Amber's stomach. Amber caught her wrist and bent it sharply back, forcing Tanis to drop the dagger. Amber took a blow to the side of her head, as Tanis lashed out with her other hand. Amber stumbled sideways, but recovered quickly, and as Tanis leapt toward her, she thrust an elbow into Tanis's face, blood erupting from a now broken nose.

Tanis fell solidly to the ground, but she flipped back onto her feet, seemingly unfazed. Her dark gaze latched onto the dagger between them, and she grinned threateningly at Amber, then darted toward it. Seeing her intent, Amber raced for it also. Tanis was closest, so she reached the weapon first, and Amber had little choice but to backtrack as Tanis swept the dagger in an arc, nearly cutting into her flesh once more.

Her collarbone was burning painfully, and Amber could feel blood trickling down her chest. She realized she should try and stem the bleeding, but the fight came first, any distraction could prove disastrous.

Amber lashed out with a leg, kicking Tanis's knife hand aside, then she pivoted full circle, and delivered a round house kick to Tanis's head.

Tanis fell a second time, and landed with a thud. She took longer to get to her feet, though she still retained the dagger. Amber knew that disarming Tanis was of the utmost importance, for a single landed strike with the sharp blade could be lethal.

Before either woman could launch their next attack, Kale reappeared out of the trees, and from the other direction, Shale and Blake arrived. Kale looked as shocked as Amber had, though Shale and Blake didn't. How they could have known was beyond Amber, for they couldn't possibly have heard the fight above the roar of the river. Kale obviously hadn't heard, and she'd been a lot closer.

“What's going on?” Kale yelled as she drew nearer.

“Tanis, what’s this about?” Shale asked, shouting to be heard above the rushing water.

Amber noted that Shale, Blake, and Kale formed a half circle around herself and Tanis. The river bordered the other side, so Tanis now had no means of escape.

Everyone drew to a halt.

Blake stared confrontationally at Tanis. “Your cousin isn’t really ill, is she?”

Tanis made no attempt to deny it. “No. I don’t even have a cousin. I have no family left to me, thanks to you.” She fixed Kale with a menacing glower.

Kale seemed completely taken aback, looking clueless as to why Tanis would make such an accusation. “I’ve never even met you before! And if you’re after me, why attack Amber?”

“She wouldn’t have idly stood by and let me kill you, so I decided my best chance was to pick you off one-by-one.” Tanis coldly tipped her head toward the fast-flowing water. “I was going to toss her body in the river. You’d never have suspected.”

“Sorry to disappoint you,” Amber said, her tone dry.

“We would.” Blake looked furious. “We found the whip in your bag.”

Tanis shrugged. “That I didn’t know.”

“What whip?” Kale asked, clearly trying to figure out what was going on.

“Theron’s whip,” Shale said.

“Theron? What does Theron have to do with it? He’s dead.”

“You killed him!” Tanis jabbed an accusing finger in Kale’s direction. “You killed my brother.”

“Not another one.” Amber couldn’t believe her ears. “First it was twins, then triplets. And now this?”

“She’s lying.” Shale slowly set down her satchel, as if wanting to be free of any encumbrance. “Our mother had triplets.”

“Tanis looks nothing like Theron.” Kale gestured to herself. “Or us for that matter.”

“Adopted brother,” Tanis said. “The Amazons gave Theron to my family to be raised. When Xerton later came and killed my parents, he took me and Theron for himself. Xerton trained us as warriors, but as you can imagine, life in his army was hard for me, being the sole female in a mass of men. Theron protected me.”

She smirked at Shale, looking down at her scars. "Our brother had a knack for torture. You can vouch for that. It kept the army in line."

"Then where were you, when I was being held captive?" Shale spoke quickly, as if keen to hear the answer. "I never saw you once."

Amber recognized that Shale wasn't questioning the truth of Tanis's words. After all, her possession of the whip proved them to be true. Shale merely wanted an explanation.

"I was out scouting for other Amazon clans," Tanis said. "When I returned, Theron was dead, his army dispersed. The few soldiers that had stayed behind to pick through the supplies, filled me in on what happened. Nobody knew where Theron had found you, but I knew the location of the tribe you'd been born into. I figured you'd return there someday, and since I couldn't just set up camp at a ruined village, the nearest town was my best bet. The tavern was the main place, so I got work there, thought there'd be a good chance you might show up. It was a gamble, but I was right. You've proven that."

Tanis indicated each twin with the point of her blade. "I almost couldn't believe my eyes when I saw you both at the tavern. You look so like Theron did."

"I misinterpreted your stare." Blake's jaw clenched in anger. "It wasn't because they were twins, it was because you've been waiting more than a year for them to show, biding your time until you got a chance for revenge. You helped Kale at the tavern to lull us into a false sense of security, but only so you could attack later yourself. You stopped the drunkard's strike, just to try and deliver a fatal blow."

Tanis condescendingly clapped her hands. "Aren't you a clever girl?"

"What about Lykos? His attack on you?" Blake slapped her thigh, as if berating herself. "I knew something about that didn't ring true. Was it all a setup?"

Tanis nodded in a self-satisfied manner. "I had to play on your sympathies so you would allow me to tag along. I set off early from the tavern to get ahead of you, fetched Lykos, and we laid in wait. I paid Lykos to attack me. He didn't even need an explanation why, he was only interested in the money." She sneered mockingly. "He was quite shocked when I killed him though. The fool simply didn't see it coming." "And you didn't bother to tell Agathon you were leaving because you no longer need the job, not now that you've found your target."

"I'm starting to genuinely like you, Blake." Tanis grinned at her. "I tell you what, if you stand aside, I promise not to harm you."

"I'm an Amazon," Blake said. "From your warped perspective, isn't that reason enough to kill me?"

“I have no qualms with the Amazons. That was Theron’s fixation, not mine.” A carefree shrug. “Abandonment issues. I followed because he looked out for me my entire life. I owed him.”

Amber couldn’t imagine Theron watching out for anyone. He was a monster. Though, apparently, not to the adopted sister he’d been raised with.

“Theron tried to kill us,” Shale said angrily. “We merely defended ourselves.”

“Doesn’t change the outcome. The one person who cared about me is dead. I will have vengeance.”

“To what end?” Shale asked. “Avenging him will not bring Theron back to you.”

“Vengeance has no end. As a warrior, you should know this.”

Blake took a threatening step forward, the usual warmth in her green eyes now replaced by chips of ice. “If you hurt anyone here, I’ll kill you myself.”

“See!” Tanis released a high-pitched laugh. “You’ve proven my point. It’s neverending.” Her gaze latched onto Kale. “I challenge you to a fair fight. To the death, with no interference.”

Amber scoffed. “Why should she accept such terms? We outnumber you four to one. You had your chance—you failed.”

“To pay me the same honor that I paid you.”

“Honor?” Blake barked a laugh. “What do you know of the word? You’ve been sneaking around behind our backs, waiting to stick a knife in.”

“Or in my case,” Amber tapped the bloody cut that Tanis had inflicted. “To slit my throat.”

Tanis sniggered, looking completely unrepentant. “Very true. But those are at least physical attacks. I don’t think you realize I could’ve killed you all that first night.”

“Oh?” Kale sounded highly dubious. “How so? With that cowardly whip of Theron’s? Look how it worked out for him.”

Tanis’s fists clenched in rage. “I’m starting to regret my lenience.”

Her knuckles whitened, as she clearly fought to control her temper. After several moments, an insidious grin appeared. “I could’ve simply poisoned your food, and watched as you writhed around in agony, twisting and moaning until you died.”

Around her, Amber saw the horror as that realization sank in. She felt slightly sick, recognizing that Tanis could have indeed killed them if she’d so wished.

Shale noticeably swallowed. “So why didn’t you?”

“I’m a warrior. I want the satisfaction of feeling your blood on my hands.”

Kale nodded to Tanis in consent. “I will fight you. But first let me see to Amber. She’s bleeding pretty badly.”

Tanis narrowed her eyes in obvious distrust. “Fine. Only you though. Everyone else stays where they are.” She paused, then amended her conditions. “In fact, everyone else sit down.”

Shale and Blake sat down without argument. Amber remained stubbornly standing as Kale moved toward her.

“Down!” Tanis yelled at Amber.

Amber reluctantly dropped to one knee, though she kept the other raised, entwining her hands around her upright calf.

“Shale, do you have anything that I can treat Amber with?” Kale asked.

“The medicine bag’s here.” Shale leaned sideways and picked up the satchel, hefting it over her head to launch it the distance needed to reach Kale.

As the bag flew through the air, everything happened at once. Kale, in her distraction to catch the bag, left her side unprotected to Tanis, who shot forward as if she was an arrow, and had just been fired from a tightly strung bow.

At the same time, Amber threw her weight forward and rose up from her knee, bursting into motion as if starting a race. Amber pushed Kale roughly aside to get her out of harm’s way, then bodily blocked Tanis, tackling her back toward the river as they both wrestled with the dagger.

Since Tanis had cleverly insisted that everyone sit, neither Shale or Blake were now in a position to help. The moments lost in getting to their feet, though fractional, were enough to delay them from reaching the altercation in time.

Amber disarmed Tanis with a swift blow and shoved her back, intending to send Tanis to a watery grave. But Tanis somehow managed to reach out and snag her, and they both fell headlong into the churning river.

IN THE SAME instant that Amber fell into the raging river, Shale took the offered rope from Blake, relieved beyond measure that Blake had brought it along.

Shale sprinted to the river bank, readying the rope to throw as she scanned the turbulent water for Amber.

“There!” Kale shouted, pointing downstream.

Shale spotted Amber’s bright red hair. Even though it was sodden, it still stood out, allowing her to easily identify Amber from Tanis, who, like Amber, was trying valiantly to swim against the current. Though they’d fallen in together, Tanis was now on the far side of the river, whereas Amber was in the middle.

“Amber! Here comes the rope,” Kale yelled.

Shale watched the flow for a moment, trying to gauge where the rope would end up. The last thing they needed was for Tanis to get hold of it. They only had the one rope so she had to make it count. Shale threw the rope upstream of Amber, and the current pushed it toward her.

“Swim, Amber!” Blake encouraged frantically. “You can do it.”

As if seeing the rope, Amber began to swim with renewed determination, but as she was forced downstream, the onslaught of water visibly increased, the current pushing faster as the waterfall neared. Amber’s dogged persistence paid off, and she snatched hold of the rope with both hands.

The rope quickly snapped taut, and Shale, Kale, and Blake all heaved in unison, pulling hard. Amber came to an abrupt halt, but they struggled to make any headway against the strong flow. The three of them together had impressive strength, but it still wasn’t a match for the relentless rush of water—they couldn’t reel Amber in.

“This isn’t working,” Shale said. “We need to think of something else, and fast. Amber can’t hold on forever.”

Blake’s response was immediate. “I have an idea. Can you hold the line without me?”

Shale nodded. “Be quick.” She didn’t question what Blake intended, she simply trusted her to do it.

Blake’s part of the line fell slack as she released the rope. She then picked up the rope’s tail end, running off with it as it uncoiled behind her. She raced to the closest sturdy tree and threw the rope around its thick trunk, grabbing the end once more and returning with it.

Blake reeled in the slack, and once it was taut, Shale transferred her hands on to that rope, comprehending Blake’s plan. Kale copied an instant later.

“On three,” Shale said. “One, two, three, pull!”

Using the tree as leverage, the trio pulled Amber through the water in heaves, the anchorage of the tree helping immensely.

They felt little sympathy for Tanis as she was washed over the edge—her scream, like her body, was swallowed whole by the waterfall.

They were reeling in Amber quickly now, and as she neared, Kale climbed down the steep riverbank to haul her out of the cold, tumultuous water. Amber could barely stand, her strength seemingly depleted from her extra-strenuous efforts. Kale lifted Amber up to Shale, who sat her down on the higher, flat ground.

Blake wrapped a blanket around Amber's trembling shoulders, and Amber produced a shaky smile.

Kale hopped up beside them a moment later, busily drawing in the rope.

"I really don't see your fondness for waterfalls, Kale." Amber coughed several times. "They're bloody awful."

Kale chuckled as she enfolded Amber in a hug, rubbing her arms as if to try and get the heat back into them.

"That was quick thinking with the tree, Blake." Shale rewarded her with a proud smile.

Kale thumped Blake on the back. "Yes, well done."

"Ow," Blake said pointedly. "I don't think I like your type of praise, Kale."

Kale shrugged. "There's no pleasing some people."

"What happened to Tanis?" Amber looked back to the river. "I wasn't able to keep track of her in the water."

"Dead," Kale said. "She went over the falls."

"You saw? She didn't manage to get out on the other bank?"

Shale nodded. "We saw."

Despite witnessing it, she realized it'd be wise to check that Tanis hadn't somehow survived, as a vendetta like Tanis's could only be sated by blood. She patted Amber's knee reassuringly. "Don't worry, I'll go and take a look, make sure Tanis hasn't resurfaced."

Chapter Seventeen

BLAKE LOOKED UP as Shale strolled back into camp. “Anything?”

“No sign of Tanis.”

Kale shrugged. “Well, if the fall didn’t kill her, she drowned. Can’t say I’m sorry about it.” She tipped her head toward a section of freshly dug earth. “I buried Theron’s whip. I didn’t think you’d want to see it again.”

As Shale patted Kale’s back in obvious gratitude, Blake felt herself smile—Kale could be quite thoughtful when she wanted to be.

Shale sat down opposite Kale, and smiled across at Amber. “Did these two take good care of you?”

Kale snorted in outrage. “Of course we did.”

Amber still had a blanket around her shoulders, and she tugged it tighter to herself. “They did indeed. I’ve been stitched, treated, and bandaged.” She tapped the steaming mug in her hands. “And the herbs in the tea are helping with the pain.” Amber took a sip of the drink, then nodded. “I’m feeling better already.”

Kale’s smug look was easy to read, it said, I told you so.

“I’m going to have a beauty of a scar.” Amber’s gaze flitted between the twins. “I was starting to feel left out, what with you two picking them up left, right, and center.”

“You’d think it was a competition.” Blake shook her head despairingly. “Oh, wait, it is with you lot.” Three sets of expectant eyes turned her way, as if waiting for a specific response. Blake didn’t disappoint them. “Warriors.”

The three warriors laughed, clearly not the least bit offended.

“Do you have any scars, Blake?” Kale asked.

Amber’s laughter increased. “Oh, she does. But I’m telling you now, you’re not going to get to see it.”

Kale looked intrigued. “It’s in a compromising position, I take it? Hold on.” She waggled a finger at Amber. “If it’s so compromising, how come you’ve seen it?”

“I was there when it happened.” Amber paused, as if thinking back to the incident. “We were barely into adulthood at the time.”

Blake frowned. “I think Amber must’ve struck her head on something in the river.” She gave her friend a cautionary look.

Kale sniggered. “That bad, huh? Oh, come on, Blake. Now you have to tell us.” She glanced at Shale. “Do you know about this?”

“I’ve seen the scar,” Shale said. “But I don’t know the cause.”

Kale’s voice lifted in disbelief. “You’ve never asked?”

“Of course I have. But Blake’s always been too embarrassed to tell me, so I respected that.”

Kale made a tutting noise. “Now, Blake, you’re joined to Shale. Doesn’t that mean you share everything with one another?”

Blake narrowed her eyes at Kale, not liking the emotional blackmail. “You’re right.” She nodded once. “I’ll tell Shale.”

“You don’t have...mpfh.” Shale’s sentence was cut off as Kale leaned in and clapped a hasty hand over her mouth.

“Hush.” Kale’s eager gaze fixed on Blake in anticipation.

“In private,” Blake added, not bothering to restrain her smirk as Kale’s face fell.

“It can’t possibly be worse than Senna’s?” Kale asked. “A boar tusk in the behind would take a lot to beat.”

“No, it isn’t as bad as that.”

“Well then,” Kale said. “Since we’ve already heard worse, yours won’t seem so bad. And you know if you tell Shale, I’ll get to know about it anyway.”

Shale shook her head. “Not if Blake asks me to keep it to myself, you won’t.”

“Amber, my love, you’ll tell me, won’t you?”

Amber laughed, clearly seeing through the blatant attempt to manipulate her. “Nice try, Kale. The term of endearment was a good touch...but no, I won’t tell you.”

“Aw, this isn’t fair.” Kale sulkily crossed her arms. “Then everyone will know but me.”

“All right, I’ll tell you.” Blake relented with a sigh. “But only if you swear on your honor that it goes no further.”

Kale nodded seriously. “I swear.”

Blake tipped her head in acceptance, knowing Kale’s oath could be trusted. “And you’re not to tease me about it.”

“But that’s half the fun,” Kale said.

Blake shrugged. “Take it or leave it.”

“Fine, I won’t tease you.” Kale grinned cheekily. “At least, not about this.”

Blake sighed again. “The scar isn’t very big, and it’s on the underside of my breast.”

Kale sounded impatient to learn the cause. “How’d you get it?”

“Amber and I had gone out to the woods. I’d asked her to teach me how to shoot a bow. Being the princess, I often felt an added pressure to succeed, and was always under scrutiny, so I wanted to get a feel of the bow in private.” Blake rubbed her face self-consciously. “To learn to shoot at some targets, and hopefully improve my aim.”

“Makes sense.” Shale rested a supportive hand on Blake’s knee, as if able to see her discomfort.

“Amber had brought along her fancy metal shield, which in those days, went everywhere with her.”

Amber chuckled. “I thought I looked so tough carrying that shield.” She pointed at Kale with amusement. “I’m going to use your excuse—I was young. I grew out of it.”

Kale pointed right back at her. “You still have it displayed in our cabin.”

Amber’s tone grew defensive. “It’s sentimental.”

“Anyway,” Blake said. “We piled all our things at the base of a tree. Amber marked a cross into the trunk a lot farther up so I had something to aim at. With my very first arrow,” Blake paused to keep them in suspense. “I shot way too low, and it deflected off the metal shield. Before I knew what was happening, the arrow was flying back at me, and it struck me in the chest.”

Kale erupted into laughter. “You shot yourself?”

“I nearly died in fright.” Amber laughed with her. “I thought I’d got my best friend, the princess no less, killed!”

Shale was laughing also, though Blake noticed she at least was trying to control her humor. “Were you all right?”

Blake nodded. “Fortunately, the strike to the shield took away most of the arrow’s speed. Though clearly it was still deep enough to scar.”

“That’s much worse than Senna’s, Blake.” Kale smacked the ground with a hand as she howled with laughter. “At least a boar attacked her. You attacked yourself!”

Blake felt Shale squeeze her knee in silent support. “Well, excuse me for not being born a natural warrior like you three.”

“I can certainly see why you chose to fire the bow in private,” Kale teased. “Did you ever learn to use it after that?”

Amber nodded. “She did. I eventually convinced Blake to give it another shot. No pun intended.” She giggled. “Blake’s actually a very good archer now.” Amber gave Blake a jovial, yet affectionate look. “It just took some practice.”

Kale grinned. “Sounds like it.”

Shale patted Blake’s knee. “You did well to stick with it. An accident like that could’ve easily put you off.”

“It did for a while,” Blake said, letting go of her embarrassment. “But Amber pestered me into submission.” She smiled as she joined in with the banter. “And this time, the shield stayed at home.”

BLAKE ADDED ANOTHER log to the fire. She warmed her hands over it, enjoying the heat. She sat down next to Shale, who was staring into the fire as if hypnotized by the flickering orange flames. She noticed Shale was fiddling with her little finger, though the cut had healed itself and needed no further attention.

“Is it bothering you?” When she got no response, Blake rested her head on Shale’s shoulder to get her attention. “Shale?”

Shale blinked as she looked at her. “Hmm?”

“Your finger. Is it bothering you?”

Shale peered down at her hands, seemingly unaware of her motions. She stopped fiddling. “No, it’s fine. It’s not even that deep.”

“Tell me what’s on your mind,” Blake said softly. Shale had been quiet since Kale and Amber had left to make their own camp for the night, and Blake could tell something was niggling at her.

“I was just thinking about Tanis and Theron.”

Blake stayed quiet, knowing Shale would continue of her own accord.

“I was thinking about how awful their lives must’ve been, to end up so…” Shale hesitated, as if searching for the right word. “Pitiless.”

Blake tenderly tucked a strand of dark hair behind an ear. “Shale,” Her tone was gentle. “Only you could find sympathy for people who tried to kill you.”

Shale gave her a look. “Is that a nice way of saying I’m crazy?”

“Not at all. I’m saying your compassion amazes me.”

Blake reached out and took hold of Shale’s hand, bringing it to her lips. She brushed each knuckle in turn, then lightly kissed her injured finger. “But please don’t upset yourself.” Blake had been mulling something over herself, and she paused briefly, wondering whether now was the right time to broach the subject. She decided that it was. “Shale, I want to ask you something.”

Shale gave a sultry smile. “Don’t worry, the rest of my fingers work fine.” She wiggled them in demonstration.

“Tch.” Blake elbowed her in the ribs, despite the pleasant tingle that her words invoked. “That’s not what I was going to say.”

Shale looked unabashed. “You were just kissing me. My mind automatically went there.”

“I’m trying to be serious.”

“Sorry.” Shale straightened her face. “Go on.”

“I want you to consider joining the council.”

Shale barked a laugh. “I thought you were being serious?”

“I am.” Blake wasn’t the least bit fazed by her response. “I think you would make a fine addition.”

“But I’m a warrior, Blake. I don’t know that I’m suitable for such a role.”

“Why not?” When no answer was forthcoming, Blake said, “Aris is on the council. She’s a warrior.”

“She’s the *chief* warrior.”

“As were you in your previous tribe. I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t think you were right for the council, Shale. It’s an honored position.”

“I know that. And please don’t think I’m not flattered, because I am, but people are bound to think I only got the position because I’m joined to the queen, and I wouldn’t want that.”

“Some may well believe that to start with, at least those who don’t know you well, but I have faith that you’ll prove them wrong.” A sudden thought struck Blake. “Shale, you don’t believe that yourself, do you?” Shale firmly shook her head. “I know that you take your role of queen seriously, and wouldn’t offer such a high position to someone you thought was undeserving.”

Blake turned Shale’s head toward her so she could back up her statement with eye contact. “That’s very true. And you are deserving, Shale. You would be a great council member.” She lightly caressed her cheek. “Trust me.”

“I do.” Shale ducked down and captured Blake’s lips. “It means everything, Blake, your belief in me.”

Blake’s smile was adoration itself. “So you’ll think about it?”

Shale returned the smile. “Only if you kiss me again.”

KALE SAT BACK against a tree stump, making herself comfortable. “Do you think you’ll be able to manage the rope down the shaft? It’s quite a way down to the cave.”

Amber picked up a stick and began to stoke the fire. “I’m not going to miss out on the find of a lifetime. If we do recover Zephyra’s urn, we’ll be telling the story for decades. I don’t want my part to be— ‘Amber stood idly by while everyone else had all the excitement.’”

Kale smiled, knowing she would feel the same way herself if the roles were reversed. “You should be all right when you’re down, it’s just that main shaft. The climb will pull on your stitches.”

“You managed with your arm,” Amber said.

“True. But now my arm’s had a good time to heal. Your wound is fresh.”

“I still have a few days before we get there. The gods willing, the worst pain will have passed by then.”

Kale nodded. “Shale and I can easily lower you down if you need it.”

Amber raised a challenging brow. “And what about back up?”

“Sure. But you’ll have to cut back on your food. We barely managed to reel you in from the river today.”

Amber giggled. “I think that may have had something to do with the water’s current.”

“If you say so.”

Amber narrowed her eyes. “I don’t know how you dare. You’re the one who’s always eating.”

Having no comeback for that, Kale grinned. “You’ve got me there.”

Amber left the fire and joined Kale by the tree stump, sitting alongside her. “I’d rather climb up the rope myself anyway. There’s no rush, and I can stop and rest if I have to.”

“Fair enough.” Kale knew that Amber, like most warriors, preferred to do things herself, only asking for help as a last resort. Though she understood this, she didn’t want Amber to push herself unnecessarily. She met Amber’s brown eyes directly. “But Shale and I can assist if needed.”

Amber smiled at the offer. “I’ll see how things go.”

Kale leaned closer to Amber, serious now. “Amber, when you jumped in front of Tanis to protect me—”

Amber held out a forestalling hand. “I know what you’re going to say, Kale, that you didn’t need any help. But I wasn’t about to stand by and take that chance, I did what—”

Kale interrupted her. “Thank you.”

“W...What?” Amber looked shocked, as if the words were completely unexpected.

“Whether you saved my life or not is irrelevant. You put your own on the line to save me. So, thank you.”

Amber’s smile was warm. “You’re welcome. I know you would’ve done the same.”

“In a heartbeat.” Kale affectionately ran a hand through Amber’s hair. “But if there’s a next time, will you do me a favor?”

“What’s that?”

“Stay away from waterfalls.”

Chapter Eighteen

THE NEXT FEW days passed quickly, and without any further mishaps. When the four Amazons reached the entrance to the cave, they began to plan their descent.

Any supplies that might be useful down in the cave were put into one satchel. All of the other supplies, bed rolls and such, were to be left up top on the surface.

They now had six ropes. They’d had two on their first trip down, and the rest they’d got at the blacksmith’s. However, they were only able to take four with them, as the women soon found that no one could manage to carry two bulky ropes and still be able to climb comfortably. The fifth rope was to be used in the main shaft, so that left one remaining. In the end, they decided to leave it up top with their other supplies.

As well as lugging the ropes, Kale, Shale, and Blake carried an empty satchel, so if they were to find the hidden loot, they had something to transport the items back in. It was decided that Amber was only to carry a rope and a water skin, given her injury, and she wasn’t to carry anything further.

Since Shale offered to carry the supply satchel, Kale insisted on taking her own—though this was filled with food for the trip. It also contained Senna’s greave. Though they were in the middle of nowhere, and it was very unlikely anyone would come along, Kale didn’t want to chance that Senna’s greave could be stolen. The item was irreplaceable, and since it was personal to her and Shale both, Kale felt better knowing she had it with her.

When they were finally ready to descend into the cave, Kale offered to lower Amber down the shaft, and was pleased when she accepted, saying she wanted to conserve her stamina for below.

The group followed Amber down, and Kale came last, the rope securely tied above, around the same large pillar that they’d used before.

As Kale landed, she was surprised by how much brighter the cave was, now that they were using lanterns. Blake and Amber were looking around in wonder, clearly awed by the immense vastness of the cavern.

“I didn’t expect it to be so large.” Blake held her lantern high, as if to shine its light farther afield.

“It closes up from here,” Kale said. “Some parts of the tunnels are quite narrow.”

She led the way forward, leaving the cavern behind as she strode to the tunnel. She waited a moment for the others to catch up, then followed its winding path, heading ever deeper into the rock. The rumble of water couldn’t yet be heard, and Kale took that as a good sign.

“Last time we could hear the water by this point.” Shale spoke up from the rear, saying Kale’s own thoughts aloud. “Hopefully the lack of noise means that the level and force of the river has dropped.”

“Let’s hope,” Amber said. “I’ve had enough of water lately.”

AFTER ROUNDING A bend in the tunnel, Blake glimpsed the skeletal remains of a body. A wicked-looking axe protruded from the side of the ribcage. A torn bag of gold was beside the remains, but it went untouched as they continued on, the tunnel’s descent downward ever-increasing, the once gradual slope now steepening to a treacherous gradient.

“We’re going to have to use a rope if it gets much steeper.” Blake was finding it difficult with only one hand, and she knew the others had to be in a similar predicament—the lanterns, though necessary to light their way, were hindering them on this stretch.

“It’s not much farther,” Shale said, the warmth of her tone a stark contrast to the cold stone surrounding them on all sides. “Just take it slow.”

Carefully watching her step, Blake pressed on. She was relieved when the ground leveled out. That relief faded as she realized the ground in front simply ended, and they were suspended on a high ledge.

Amber held up a cautionary hand as Blake neared the edge.

“The next tunnel is directly below us. We have to climb down.” Kale set down her lantern. “Blake, I need the short rope.”

Blake was carrying the lightest rope, since she wasn’t as strong as the warriors. She unshouldered the coils, pleased to be unburdened by its cumbersome bulk. Now that she wasn’t

carrying anything, she took the supply bag away from Shale, and draped its carry strap around herself. She wanted to take her fair share of the weight.

Kale secured the rope around an outcrop of rock.

“We’re clearly not the first people down here.” Blake crouched to examine the other, much older rope that was already around the outcrop.

“It was likely used by the marauders.” Shale paused and tilted her head, as if listening. “I still can’t hear the water.”

Kale swung over the edge, though she held in position for a moment. “I’ll go down, then you’ll have to lower the lanterns to me.” She glanced to Shale. “We can’t drop them like we did with the torches, they’d break and be rendered useless.”

They all waited for Kale to descend, then Shale pulled the rope back up. She threaded the rope through the metal handle on top of the lantern, fastening it in place with a secure knot. Once it’d been lowered to Kale and unhooked, Blake saw the tug on the line, letting Shale know to reel the rope back up. The procedure was repeated twice more.

“Amber, you go now. Blake will come next. I’ll attach the remaining lantern before I,” Shale hesitated. “It might be wise to leave a lantern here, or whoever climbs up first won’t be able to see. It’s not so bad going down a rope, but coming up, especially onto a ledge...”

“You’re right. Leave it here.” Blake moved the remaining lantern aside so it wouldn’t be in the way of someone climbing back up. “We’ll still have three lanterns to see by.”

Amber cautiously clambered onto the rope, obviously trying not to jar her injury.

Blake watched her closely for any signs of discomfort. “How’s the collarbone?”

Amber looked pleasantly surprised. “The pain’s actually not bad. The real test will be climbing upward, but at least it’s a positive start.” Moving quickly now, she disappeared down the rope.

Blake drew blue eyes to her by touching Shale’s face, her fingertips a light caress. “And what about you? How are you holding up?”

Shale held her gaze. “I’m fine, Blake. Honest. I’m not quite sure what came over me last time.”

“Bad memories,” Blake reminded gently. “And if it happens again, I want you to tell me right away.”

“I will.” Shale smiled, as if to reassure. “Go on. I’ll be right behind you.”

Blake gave Shale's arm a squeeze, then she descended the rope. As her feet touched the ground, she detected the rumble of an underground river.

Kale tapped her ear. "That bodes well for us. It's not half as loud as before."

Shale landed beside them. "We'll find out soon enough."

Amber offered Shale her lantern. "Take it. I'm in the middle, so I'm already getting light from in front and behind."

Shale accepted the lantern, nodding in thanks.

The tunnel grew narrow ahead, and Kale stopped in her tracks. "I would remove what you're carrying, take it through by hand. We'll have to turn sideways as is, and we won't fit with all this as well."

As if in demonstration, Kale turned sideways, carrying the satchel and lantern in her leading hand, and in the other, the trailing rope. She slipped into the tight-looking passageway. "I'm pleased we left the majority of our supplies above ground, and only brought the necessities with us."

Amber went into the passage next, then after waiting several moments, Blake followed her in.

The tight space restricted Blake's movement considerably, and each small step forward seemed to take an eternity. "Gods, this is awful."

"Now you see why I said to remove everything," Kale called back.

"You wouldn't want to get stuck."

Blake had a sudden image of what it would be like to become trapped—the unbudging stone would never give way to her, no matter how hard she tried to free herself. She would be in deep trouble. "Kale, I really wish you hadn't said that." Laughter reached her ears, telling her that Kale had done it on purpose. "You're such an ass."

"I second that," Amber said.

"Now, now, ladies." Kale chuckled. "There's no need to get nasty."

"If you make any more stupid comments, you're going to feel nasty when I get out of this tunnel," Amber threatened. "Mark my words."

"Ahh, the voice of love," Kale joked.

At the rear end of the line, Shale burst into laughter.

“Don’t you start,” Blake said in a warning tone. “This isn’t funny.” Her protestations only made Shale and Kale laugh harder, as if she’d told a hilarious joke.

When the tunnel finally started to open back up, widening again so the stone walls released their smothering grip, Blake inhaled a deep, relieved breath. As she emerged into a broader space, Kale was still sniggering, so Blake solidly smacked her in the stomach.

“Ow! Shale, you’d best hurry up. Your wife’s attacking me.”

Shale’s laughter echoed through the tunnel. “Take it like a warrior.”

IT WASN’T LONG before the four women came to a stop before the underground river.

“The force has dropped considerably,” Shale said. “The level too. The pool of water has gone.”

Before there’d been so much excess water, the river had overflowed into the tunnel where they now stood. In fact, they were now stood next to the rocks that she and Kale had waded out to peer around, to gain a view of the river’s course. Now Shale was simply able to point to the right, upstream, to show the tunnel they were aiming for. “Do you see it?”

Blake nodded. She cast her gaze downstream as well, as if looking for other tunnels. “Yes. I only see one, on the opposite side of the river.”

“Shale.” Kale motioned her forward.

Shale handed the lantern off to Amber, as Kale set hers down on the ground. Kale removed the rope from around her shoulders and tied an end around Shale’s waist. Without any preamble, Shale waded into the water, feeling the current pushing against her legs as she reached the middle. As she’d hoped, even at its deepest, the water now only came up to her mid-thigh. Given her height, Shale knew the water would reach higher on both Blake and Amber, but the current wasn’t that strong, so she wasn’t particularly worried.

Shale turned and waded back out of the river. “I’d suggest two ropes. I’ll go on ahead to the next tunnel, fix this line, and you can guide yourselves up using that. Amber, use your rope to tie around whoever’s in the water, then if anyone loses their footing, they’re not at risk of being swept away.”

“I’ll come last,” Kale said. “Tie myself onto the guiding line.”

Now that a plan had been decided, Shale collected a lantern and went back into the frigid cold water, holding the lantern high so that it wouldn't get splashed, extinguishing the flame inside.

Shale was shaking by the time she emerged into the next tunnel, having spent longer than she'd needed to in the icy water. She'd been thorough in her search, wanting to make sure that this was indeed the right tunnel, and another wasn't simply farther upstream.

It hadn't helped that she'd fallen, her warrior's sure footing failing her. Part of the rock must have been covered in slime or moss, for she'd slipped and was now soaked through, up to her chest. She'd thankfully managed to keep the lantern raised, so the flame still burned inside. There was no escaping the fact that she'd fallen though—the ends of her hair were dripping wet, as were her clothes. She knew Kale would no doubt tease her about it.

Shale rubbed her hands together to warm them, then untied the rope from her waist and fastened it around a suitable, rigid boulder. The boulder was actually big enough for two people to sit on, and Shale clambered onto it to get a better view of downstream. She waved the lantern back and forth, signaling it was now fine for them to cross.

Blake came next, holding her satchel overhead in one hand, while using the other on the rope. "Here." Blake passed the still-dry bag to Shale when she arrived. "There's a blanket in there. Dry yourself off."

With a grin, Shale pulled Blake close and kissed her. "What would I do without you?"

SINCE SHE NO longer knew what awaited ahead, Kale was being more cautious. The tunnel was pitch black beyond the light of the guiding lantern, but at least this tunnel was more spacious than the others—all four women could stand side by side if they so wished. This passageway also inclined upward instead of down, heading toward the surface above, instead of ever deeper into the bowels of the cave.

The dip in the freezing river had made them all uncomfortably cold, so they'd taken the time to wring their clothes out and dry themselves off before continuing on with the search. Their trousers were still damp of course, and in Shale's case, also her shirt, but there was little that could be done about that—they wouldn't dry easily with the low temperature of the caves.

Kale had to chuckle as she tuned in to their group march. Boots were squelching with every step. Even though the excess water had been tipped out, the soles still retained the moisture.

"The farther we go on, the more my hopes rise that the urn is still here," Blake said, breaking the silence after a long spell of walking. "I don't see why anyone would have cause to come

down here, unless they knew of the bounty of course. That river especially, would put people off. It's a brilliant hiding place."

"It certainly is," Amber said. "But though we appreciate that now, we'll be cursing like crazy harpies on the way back. It's going to be hard work to carry gold and such back through those obstacles."

Worry crept into Blake's voice. "Mm, you're right."

"Well I hate to add more obstacles," Kale drew to a halt, holding the lantern out to illuminate the problem. "But we've just run into a pretty big one."

Lit up before them, stopping their path abruptly, was a gaping black hole. On the other side of the yawning void, the tunnel continued onward. Somehow, they had to get across.

"Hades." Amber stomped her foot. "Now what?"

Kale stepped forward and crouched next to the hole. She found a loose pebble and dropped it into the darkness below. Several moments passed, but she didn't hear it land. She repeated Amber's curse, and stood back up. "I was going to suggest we go down on the rope and cross the floor below, to see if we could climb up the other side." Kale used her lantern to see the texture of the rock. "It's quite rough. We might be able to climb it."

"You *were* going to suggest that?" Blake asked. "What's wrong with that plan?"

"I didn't hear the stone land. Our rope may not be long enough."

Shale ran a hand over the tunnel walls surrounding the hole. "These are a bit too smooth to grip well, but we could chisel out some holds if necessary."

"Are you sure there are none already in place?" Amber glanced around, clearly to see for herself. "How did the marauders get across?"

"You're assuming this hole was here in their time. This part of the tunnel could've collapsed afterward." Shale paused, then passed Amber the lantern. "Still, it can't hurt to check."

Amber visibly examined the walls, both in the hole and around it. Eventually, she released a sigh. "Shale's right, it must've collapsed afterward. There's not a hold in sight."

Kale stared across the wide gap between the tunnels. She shared a look with Shale. "What do you think?"

"It'll be close." Shale nodded. "Worth a try though."

"What is?" Amber asked.

“I’ll go this time, you went first in the river.” Kale smirked. “Don’t want you to slip again.”

As Shale rolled her eyes, Kale twisted her satchel around to her back, so it was out of her way. Kale took the rope from Amber’s shoulders. Since Amber was injured, she relieved her of the burden first.

“What are you going to do?” Blake looked worried, seeming to sense that they weren’t going to use the hammer and chisel after all.

“Kale’s going to try and jump it. She’ll set up a line for us to climb across.”

Blake shook her head. “No, that’s not a good idea.”

“What’s wrong with chipping out the holds?” Amber laid an anxious hand on top of Kale’s to stop her from tying the rope around herself. “It’s too far a jump. You won’t make it.”

“I might.” Kale shrugged, not at all fazed at the prospect. “If I don’t you can reel me in, and we’ll use the chisel like you want. If it works, it’ll save us a lot of time and effort.”

Blake’s voice lifted. “You’ll slam back against the rock wall.”

“Only if I miss.” Kale gave the knot a firm tug to tighten it around her waist. “Shale.”

Kale set down her lantern. She didn’t hesitate or delay in any way, not wanting to give Blake a chance to order them to stop.

“I’ve got you.” Shale backtracked up the tunnel.

With obvious reluctance, Amber followed, and took hold of the rope with Shale.

Releasing a loud exhalation, Blake joined the others at the rope, clasping on to it also. “You two are so stubborn.”

Kale grinned at her, then jogged farther up the tunnel, needing to get up to a fast speed if she were to have any chance at all of making it across the wide gap. She moved the rope around to her back also, so it trailed behind and wouldn’t get caught in her feet.

“Ready?” Kale called out.

“When you are.” Shale’s voice carried back.

Kale powered straight into a run, increasing to a swift sprint before she passed Shale and the others. Kale’s life was now in their hands, but she wasn’t at all worried, trusting each of them implicitly. She was racing full speed by the time she reached the hole, and she leapt up into the air at the last possible moment, driving herself forward with a boost of strength from her legs. She sailed through the air at an impressive velocity, but despite her speed, Kale knew as she

neared the far side that, though it was going to be close, she wasn't going to completely clear the hole. She drew her arms up, readying herself for the impact.

A grunt of pain escaped Kale as she collided with the unyielding rock, her arms and shoulders up on the ledge, but the rest of her body dangled precariously. She grappled for a hold as she started to slip downward, and her fingers latched around a slab of stone, stopping her slide. After some scrabbling, her left foot found purchase, and she managed to climb up the rest of the way.

"That was fantastic, Kale," Amber shouted across the void.

Kale rubbed her chest and stomach to try and take away the sting. She knew she'd have several flourishing bruises by morning. "Well, make the most of it," she called back. "Because I won't be doing it again."

SHALE FINISHED SECURING the line at her end. She saw that Kale had done the same, and the rope, now taut, was safe to cross.

"We'll leave this rope in place to use on our way back," Blake said. "It's too difficult to rig."

Shale nodded her agreement. She darkened two of the lanterns, wetting the candle's wick with her fingers. She placed one in Blake's supply bag, and the other in the empty bag she carried. When the others had crossed, and Shale was ready to cross herself, she would add the third lantern to her bag. One always needed to be alight, or they'd find themselves in pitch darkness.

Tying the lanterns onto the rope wouldn't work here, as they'd have to be swung across, so would likely break. Shale made sure the bags were fastened shut, not wanting anything to fall out.

"Hang out over the rope," Shale said to Blake, as she tied her rope, as an added safety, around Blake's middle. "And hook your feet up around it, like you're crawling upside down."

Blake nervously glanced toward the dark abyss below.

"Don't look down, Blake. Keep your eyes on Kale. She'll help you up at the other end." Shale ran a comforting hand down her arm. "You'll be fine."

Blake nodded, a little unsurely. Shale lifted her chin and gave Blake her best reassuring smile. As if finding the strength she needed, Blake clambered on to the rope and hooked her feet up. She started across, hand over hand.

“I’m glad I’m wearing trousers,” Blake suddenly said. “This would be quite revealing in a skirt.”

Shale and Kale both laughed outright.

Amber chuckled. “Now you know the real reason why I always wear such clothes.”

From the rope, Blake scoffed. “I might believe that if I didn’t know you, Amber.”

Amber’s voice rose indignantly. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“You don’t have a bashful bone in your body,” Blake said.

“She’s right.” Kale threw a wink in Amber’s direction.

Amber produced a guilty grin. “How ironic is it then, that I have to go around all covered up.”

“That’s why the gods made you fair-skinned. They knew it was the only way to stop you from sauntering around in the nude.”

“Blake!” Amber admonished. “As if I would do…” Her head tilted thoughtfully.

“You’re thinking about it even as I speak,” Blake said knowingly, though Shale knew she couldn’t possibly see Amber from the position she was in.

Amber giggled. “Well, I don’t suppose I’d be shy about such a thing.”

“I’m all for it.” Kale nodded encouragingly, as if she liked the idea immensely. She reached out and took hold of Blake’s elbow, and helped her up off the rope and onto the ledge.

Blake untied the rope around her, and Shale reeled it back in to use once more. As Shale fastened it tightly around Amber, she heard a flint striking against the rock, and an instant later a lantern glowed to life across the void—it seemed Blake had relit the wick.

Amber was soon across the rope, moving quickly as if to ensure the wound on her collarbone wasn’t put under too much duress. Shale imagined Amber would feel the injury more this time—having to support her weight on her arms would surely pull on Amber’s stitches.

“Shale, tie on to that end. I’ll use Amber’s end to hold you.” Kale grinned at her. “In case you slip. Again.”

Shale made a face, but did as Kale suggested. Once she was over the chasm, Shale lit the other two lanterns.

Blake, who was sitting on the tunnel floor, patted the rock beside her. "Let's rest a short while. Gather our strength."

Amber flopped down in a heap. "I hope there aren't any more drawbacks. The obstacles we have are plenty enough."

"I wonder how long we've been down here," Blake said. "It's hard to tell without the sun."

"Kale's stomach will tell us when it's time to eat, don't you worry about that," Shale said and ducked as Kale swiped at her. "We'll head back up before it's time for our evening meal, assuming we haven't found anything by then."

Kale lifted a lantern, and cast its light along the continuing tunnel. "Surely it's not much farther?"

Only silence met her words. No one knew the answer.

Chapter Nineteen

SHALE RELEASED A groan as she drew to a stop alongside the others. The tunnel ahead divided into two, and from the hesitation, it was clear no one knew which branch to take.

Kale indicated the left tunnel, then the right. "Blake, which do you think?"

"Oh no, I'm not making this decision. We'll take a vote." Blake gave Kale a knowing look. "I'm not having you moan at me if I choose wrong."

"Maybe we should split up?" Amber said. "It'll save some time."

Blake shook her head. "No, I think we should stay together, we don't want to lose one another."

"If the tunnels keep on splitting..." Amber let out a heavy breath. "We could be down here a while."

Shale patted the satchel that Blake carried. "We have the twine to mark our route if needed. But let's hope it doesn't come to that."

Kale stepped forward impatiently. “Let’s get on with it. If the tunnel splits further, or we have to backtrack, we may not have any time to waste. I choose the tunnel on the right.”

Shale nodded in agreement of the choice.

“That’s two for right,” Blake said. “Amber?”

“I honestly have no idea, so I’ll go with the majority.”

Blake tipped her head. “Right it is.”

As they started down the right fork, Shale, bringing up the rear once more, whispered into Blake’s ear. “And which would you have chosen?”

“I can’t tell you that.” Blake smiled furtively over her shoulder. “Because if I say the other, and this tunnel turns out to be the wrong one, I’ll get blamed for *not* making the decision.”

Shale chuckled. “It’s a hard life being the queen.”

The smile became a grin, and green eyes twinkled in the lantern’s light. “My wife makes it bearable.”

“Is that so?”

“Mm-hmm. She’s quite a woman.”

Shale was delighted by Blake’s words. Delighted and touched. She couldn’t wipe the silly smile from her face as she trekked along, and she focused her mind on thinking up ideas to try and change Blake’s mind about sleeping outside. She could kill that snake—if Kale hadn’t already done so—for scaring Blake and putting her firmly off the concept, especially as it was one of Shale’s favorite things to do. Though they had slept outside since the snake, a good few nights in fact, on their journey back here, she still hadn’t managed to convince Blake. Shale had hoped that once the shock had worn off, Blake would again come around to the idea. But it seemed that wasn’t to be. Shale ran through several different notions in her head, but none were special enough to overshadow the incident with the snake. She was struck by a sudden epiphany, and it was so obvious that she was surprised she hadn’t thought of it sooner.

Shale resolved to carry out her plan on the route back home. A smile crept across her face in anticipation, and it only grew as she thought about the details.

The tunnel was rather monotonous, and it just kept on going. Lengthening farther and farther, until the exploring Amazons were weary of travel. When it finally opened up into a cave, every woman let out a relieved sigh, though that relief was short lived.

“I don’t believe this!” Kale thrust her lantern toward every corner of the small cave. “It’s a dead end.”

“We’ll have to retrace our steps.” Blake sat down heavily, removing her satchel and stretching her legs out before her. “But not until we’ve had a rest.”

Amber plunked down ungraciously beside Blake. “At least this tunnel didn’t split further. We only have the one route now. Makes things simpler.”

“Shame we’re not on it though,” Kale muttered as she sat, folding long legs underneath her.

Shale copied her pose, then unshouldered the heavy rope and dumped it on the hard ground.

Amber drank thirstily from her water skin, then passed it around. Kale handed out apples from her supply satchel of food, and the group munched in silence for a while.

As Kale finished her apple, she tossed the core aside. “We’d better find the urn after all this.”

Blake wearily leaned against Shale, as if for support. “I hope the other tunnel isn’t as long as this one.”

Shale regarded Blake seriously. “If you’re too tired, we can always head back to the surface when we reach the fork.”

Kale’s voice lifted in protest. “But then we’ll have to repeat it all tomorrow.” The loud words echoed around the small cave. “We pass by the fork anyway, our goal might be round the very next corner.”

Shale shrugged. “And it might not.”

“No, we’ll press on,” Blake said. “But if the tunnels divide any more, we’ll have to try again tomorrow.”

Kale nodded, seeming to accept that. “Fair enough.”

FORTUNATELY, THE TUNNELS didn’t divide any further. The women had backtracked and taken the left tunnel, and though it was long, the distance wasn’t half that of the previous passageway.

Blake held her breath as the tunnel opened up into a mid-sized cavern, though her heart sank when she saw it was another dead end. She felt her temper rise when Kale, who was farther into the cave, started to laugh.

“I don’t see what’s so funny,” Amber said, her frustration evident. “All this has been for nothing.”

Kale lifted her lantern, raising it high and guiding its glow toward one of the corners. Blake began to laugh herself as the light reflected back off something, and a dazzling golden shine cut through the surrounding shadows, revealing a large mound of treasure.

“We’ve found it!” Amber happily threw an arm around Kale in celebration.

“Is Zephyra’s urn there?” Blake rushed forward excitedly, her pace slowing as the approaching lanterns lit up another, more ghastly surprise.

Dotted all around the cavern, most around the gold, were the remains of bodies, all in a similar skeletal state.

“By the gods,” Blake said. “What happened here?”

Amber bent over a skeleton, and tapped a knife that stuck out of its chest. “This one’s been stabbed.”

Shale squatted next to a different body. “Same here.”

“This one, too,” Kale said.

“I think I can guess what happened.” Shale put down her lantern and picked up a sparkling gold chalice. “We already know that they were marauders, thieves. My bet is they got greedy, didn’t want to share. They turned on one another. Killed their compatriots for a larger portion. That man we found with the axe in his side—he must’ve been the last alive. Clearly he was injured in the skirmish, mortally so, but he still made a try for the way out, tugging his stolen gold with him.” Her voice became reflective. “He did well to get so far with such an injury.” Shale paused for a moment, and looked up toward the stone ceiling. “This cave became their tomb.”

Blake nodded to Shale, impressed with her deduction skills. “That explains why the gold is still here. They never got to spend any of the loot.”

“It serves them right. They shouldn’t have stolen from our sisters,” Kale said. “Artemis cursed them for their greed, for taking what rightfully belonged to the Amazons.”

“Perhaps it was Queen Zephyra herself. That would be a fitting justice.” Blake’s own words reminded her of their purpose, and she keenly started to search through the pile of treasure, hunting for the sacred urn. She flicked the light across the gold, her eyes scanning the variety of trinkets, hesitating occasionally when she saw shapes that could be an urn.

Shale, Kale, and Amber joined in the search, the gold clinking loudly as they dug into it with eager hands. “Blake?” Shale carefully pulled an item out of the pile, smiling in triumph. “I recognize this from the drawing Zayla showed us.”

“Sappheire’s royal crest!” Blake shook her head wondrously, not quite believing her eyes. “I can’t wait to show mother. She’ll be delighted.” She tucked the crest into the empty bag she carried, one that they’d bought from the marketplace. “We’ll take it with us.”

With renewed hope that they would indeed find the hallowed, long lost urn of Zephyra, Blake shoveled aside a pail load of gold coins, inhaling sharply as a bejeweled metal urn suddenly revealed itself to her. Tears coursed down Blake’s cheeks at the sight. She would know that urn anywhere. With the utmost reverence, Blake lifted the urn to her lips and kissed it devoutly.

“Zephyra,” Amber whispered, as she and the twins dropped respectfully to one knee.

Blake unclipped the lid cautiously, heedful of the contents that she hoped were still tucked safely inside. She peered into the urn and saw gray dust below, then fastened the lid back into place. “Zephyra’s ashes are still inside.”

Thrilled exclamations greeted Blake’s words, but no one spoke, each seemingly overwhelmed by the discovery, and what it meant for their tribe.

Realizing she was monopolizing the urn, Blake passed it on to Shale, who kissed its bejeweled metal surface as Blake had done before her. It went to Kale next, then finally on to Amber.

Blake was wiping away happy tears as the urn came back to her, and she selected the satchel with the royal crest inside, opened it, and placed the urn carefully alongside it. Once the bag was safely closed, Blake held out both hands, one to each side of her. Shale took the left, Amber, the right. They in turn held out a hand, and Kale linked with them.

Blake regarded each woman in the circle. They were all connected, all family. She loved them all dearly, and she couldn’t imagine a life without each, and every one of them in it. Committing the moment to memory, she thanked the gods for the blessings bestowed upon her. She was truly grateful.

Blake smiled, and it outshone all the gold in the cave. “We’re taking you home, Zephyra. Back to the Amazon nation.”

BLAKE TOOK ONE last look around the cave. A large pile of treasure remained, but they were taking the important items, and plenty more besides.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t take anything else, Blake? Shale and I are more than capable of carrying the weight in those bags.”

“I don’t want the bags to split, Kale. And we still have a long trek home. Such a burden will take its toll.”

“Well, what about the rest?”

“I’ll send a group back, with a escort of guards of course. In fact, given the strength needed, the group will likely be made up of warriors.”

Blake looked to Shale for her opinion. “I was thinking the best way would be for the tunnels to be split into sections, and a person designated to each part. Then they could pass the gold along that way.”

Shale nodded. “Like the formed line we used for putting out Nephele’s cabin fire.”

“Exactly. Though the people who are designated around the problematic areas, like the river, will have to be swapped around quite frequently as they’ll have the hardest task.”

Kale shook her dark hair. “I’ll tell you who’ll have the hardest task—the poor soul who has to heave it all up the entrance shaft.”

“So you’re not volunteering for it then?” Blake raised a taunting eyebrow. “You’re always boasting about your strength. I thought you’d relish the opportunity to show it, Kale.”

“It’s not that I couldn’t do it,” Kale said quickly. “For, of course, I could. Actually, now that you mention it, Shale and I together would be best suited to such a vital position.”

Shale’s voice lifted in protest. “Don’t drag me into it.”

Amber began to chuckle. “Nicely played, Blake. Kale doesn’t even realize you goaded her into doing such a task.”

“What? Blake didn’t...” Kale scowled as the realization seemed to sink in, and her glower darkened as Shale smacked her in annoyance.

“Thanks a lot, Kale.”

“You should be thanking me,” Kale said. “Because we’ll be up on the surface, instead of being stuck below in these cold tunnels.”

Shale looked heartened by the news. “That’s true... All right, I’m in.”

Kale slapped Shale on the back, though Blake suspected it was more to repay Shale’s hit than it was for approval.

“Let’s get moving.” Blake started toward the tunnel. “We’ll leave all the ropes in place, including those we have to rig on the way out to assist with the gold. The only rope we’ll take away is the rope at the entrance shaft. We don’t want anyone to stumble across it.”

“It’ll save us carrying the ropes home.” Amber sounded pleased at the prospect. “And it’ll save the next group from bringing them back.”

Blake heard the relief in Amber’s tone, and was glad she’d insisted that Amber be burden free of the gold. Her collarbone was clearly still hurting, and the last thing Blake wanted was to add stress to the wound.

Shale and Kale carried a bag of gold each, though the bags weren’t fully packed. Blake carried the lighter satchel, which contained only two items: the crest and urn. When they reached the surface, Blake knew they would still have their own traveling supplies to carry, and given the distance they had to cover to reach their village, it was wise not to overload themselves.

They all trudged down the tunnel with renewed energy, filled with the buoyant triumph of success. Oddly, the journey back didn’t seem as long, the elation they felt adding a spring to everyone’s step.

The rope was still in place over the hole where the tunnel had collapsed, and Shale, then Blake climbed across to the other side. Kale and Amber remained at the far side of the hole, to send across the bags of gold.

Shale unshouldered her rope and threw one end of it to Kale, who caught it easily and tied it around a satchel’s carry strap.

Shale looked to Blake. “The bag will jerk the line when it hits the wall. When it stops swinging, we’ll reel it in.”

Blake sat down so as not to be pulled forward by the weight of the gold. Shale sat in front of her, taking the rope between her hands.

“Ready?” Kale called out.

Shale gave a nod. “Swing it.”

As Kale pushed the bag off the edge, Blake watched it swing in an arc across the void. It collided solidly with the wall, but nothing inside seemed to fall out—Kale had clearly fastened the bag tight.

“Actually, Blake,” Kale shouted. “It’s a good thing we didn’t fill the bags so they were full. Some objects may have been dislodged with the impact.” She made a show of peering into the black void below. “Never to be seen again.”

Blake's eyebrows lifted—it was rare for Kale to acknowledge she was wrong. Blake got on with the task, reeling in the rope in sync with Shale. As the strap rose over the edge, Shale grabbed it and heaved the bag upward, smiling at Blake as she turned and dumped it before her.

“That was easy.”

Blake was pleasantly surprised herself. She put the bounty behind her, next to the two lanterns and her other satchel, all piled off to one side so they were out of the way.

Shale stood to throw the rope back, then sat once more as Kale began to fasten on the next bag. As Blake's arms encircled her waist from behind, Shale said, “Are you trying to distract me?” Shale amusedly peeked over her shoulder. “Because it's working.”

Blake innocently batted her eyelashes. “I'm merely making sure you're warm enough. In case you hadn't noticed, it's cold down here.”

“Oh, I've noticed. But the exertion's keeping me from getting too cold.”

“Does that mean you don't need my body heat?”

“I didn't say that.” Shale leaned back into Blake's touch, and released a sigh as Blake kissed the side of her neck.

“When you two are quite finished...” Across the void, Kale was shaking her head. “We do have work to do, you know.”

Blake giggled and scooted backward, taking up the rope once more. “Ready.”

The next bag was swung across, and the rope tried to jump free of their grasp as the gold impacted with the rock and its weight pulled on the line. This bag was slightly heavier than the previous, so was more taxing to pull upward. It was fortunate that solid gold didn't break easily, or the trinkets would not have survived the swing.

The bag's rise abruptly halted, as if caught on something.

“Stop!” Amber called out. “The bag's snagged on an outcrop of rock.”

“Let the rope out a bit,” Kale said, clearly able to see the problem from her vantage point opposite, whereas Blake and Shale couldn't. “Right, try again.”

As the satchel rose, the outcome was the same, it still got stuck.

“Should I give it a yank?” Shale asked.

“No, you may rip the bag. It's wedged tight underneath the outcrop.”

Kale paused, as if thinking up a plan. “You need to let the rope out again and swing it from side to side. When the bag’s at full swing, if it’s reeled in quick enough, it should jump past the outcrop.”

Shale nodded. “All right. Tell us when to pull.”

As Blake and Shale let out the rope, one of the lanterns behind them flickered, then went out.

Now considerably dimmer, Blake glanced to the remaining light. She saw the issue instantly. “Hold up. The candles are about to go out.” She made the logical assumption that all of the lanterns were in an identical state, since the candles inside had all been used for a similar amount of time.

As if to verify her words, the lantern beside Kale and Amber began to stutter.

“Who has the candles?” Amber’s panicked voice echoed around them.

Blake couldn’t blame her, she herself was fighting the same rising fear. They’d be in deep trouble if all the lights went out. It would be pitch black without them. It couldn’t possibly happen in a worse place either, next to a gaping pit.

“I have them.” Blake looked behind to her bag. “Shale, can you...”

“I’ve got the rope.”

Blake didn’t hesitate and scrambled to her satchel, cursing as the third candle started to shudder. She found the flint easily, and her hands dug deeper into the bag, straining to reach the spare candles.

As if in league with one another, both remaining lanterns winked out.

“Nobody move.” Shale’s voice rang out into the sudden, all-consuming darkness.

Blake closed her eyes and reopened them—she was blind either way. Blackness didn’t accurately describe the lack of visibility, it was as if the void below had reached out and sucked every single trace of light from the world.

Blake fumbled frantically through her bag, having no choice but to go by feel. She found the blanket, the twine, a hammer, a chisel, other tools, but no candles. She kept a tight hold on the flint, knowing that if she were to drop it she would have great difficulty finding it again. She was annoyed with herself for not keeping an eye on the height of the candles. It was a careless oversight on all their parts, they’d gotten too caught up in the thrill of their find. And though they’d all achieved a remarkable feat, Blake knew that this mistake could have proven quite costly—it still could if she didn’t find a spare candle.

“How’s it going, Blake?” Shale’s tone was calm, soothing.

“I have the flint. The lantern is beside me. I just need to find... Ah-ha. I have it. Hold on.”

“Can we do anything else?” Kale joked.

Blake struck the flint against the rock floor. Nothing happened. She did it again, and a spark glinted in the darkness. A third try, and the candle flared to life. She carefully placed it inside the lantern, and light cut through the cloying darkness.

Kale and Amber began to clap, their applause echoing loudly along the tunnel.

“Nicely done, Blake.” Shale smiled at her.

Blake focused on lighting a second candle, not wanting to chance a repeat occurrence. Only when she’d shut the lantern’s door did she release the tense breath she’d been holding.

“That was frightening.” Blake placed a hand over her churning stomach. “And our own fault. It was quite remiss of us to neglect the candles like that.”

“I forgot all about them,” Shale said.

“So did I,” Amber added sheepishly.

“Do you need a candle?” Blake asked. “I can throw one across.”

A shake of red hair accompanied her answer. “No, your lanterns are enough. Besides, we’ll be joining you as soon as we get the rest of this gold over.”

“Oh, sorry, Shale.”

Reminded of the task at hand, and the fact that Shale was still hanging onto the rope which held the suspended bag of gold, Blake moved quickly to her. She sat down behind Shale and took some of the strain from the rope.

Shale looked humorously over her shoulder. “Let’s try this again. Swing it side to side.”

They swung the rope sideways, waiting for the signal to pull the bag upward.

“Now.” Kale and Amber instructed simultaneously.

Blake heaved as Shale did, the rope passing quickly through their hands as they hauled the bag up toward them.

“That’s it,” Kale said. “The bag has passed the outcrop.”

The bag rose easily now, and without any further delay. Shale lifted it up over the edge, then handed it back to Blake, who put it to one side of the tunnel. The last satchel was undemanding,

almost effortless in comparison to the others, yet it was the most precious, since it contained Zephyra's urn. They were all relieved when it reached the other side of the void safely.

After Amber and Kale were across, the rope they'd used to swing the gold over was left behind, along with the rope already fixed in place that bridged the hole. Their last remaining rope was to be used at the river, though they'd have no further use for it after that, so it'd be left to aid their fellow Amazons when they arrived.

Kale led the way along the tunnel. "When we get back to the surface, I think we should celebrate our success."

Shale let out a chuckle. "Let me guess, Kale, you want to celebrate by having a big meal?"

Kale gave a keen nod. "We deserve a reward for all this hard work and we'll be starving by the time we get back."

Amber scoffed. "What about the food in your satchel?"

"It's almost gone. Don't look at me like that. It was shared four ways."

"You shall have your meal, Kale," Blake said. "And when we reach our village, we'll celebrate properly with a feast in Zephyra's honor."

Kale hooted in delight. "We'll all be toasted as heroes. And deservedly so."

Shale leaned close to Blake and whispered in her ear. "Aren't heroes supposed to be modest?"

"I heard that."

Chapter Twenty

"I'LL GO FIRST. Shale, make sure you use the rope to guide you." Kale patted her arm condescendingly. "Wouldn't want you to slip again."

Irritated, Shale knocked her hand aside. "Gods, I'm never going to hear the end of that, am I?"

“I’m just watching out for you.”

“No, you’re trying to provoke me.” Shale pushed Kale toward the water. “Now get going before you say anything further, or I may decide to let you be washed downstream.”

“That could only happen if I slipped, which I won’t.”

As Shale watched her twin wade into the underground river, she felt a mischievous smile form. She waited for the water to reach Kale’s mid-thigh, then gave a moderate tug on the rope she was holding, which, for safety, was around Kale’s waist. She smirked as Kale had to quickly readjust her footing to stay balanced.

“Shale, don’t you dare!”

Shale chuckled, her point made. She let the rope play out between her hands, then when Kale reached the other tunnel downstream, she tied the rope around the large boulder so it was taut.

“Shale, I’ll go last,” Amber said. “The rope will have to be reeled in, and I’m the only one who isn’t weighted down with gold.”

Since the water level wasn’t that high, and they could wade across, they had decided to carry the gold-filled satchels, rather than pull them by rope. They knew it would be easier returning, since they were going downstream rather than having to fight against the current, but they still placed the same safety measures in place, and intended to use the rope, held securely at both ends, to help guide them.

“The rope is above the water line, so its integrity won’t be compromised.” Blake took hold of the rope and stepped into the river. “Why can’t it stay in place?”

“Because if there’s a heavy rainfall, the level will rise. Kale and I couldn’t cross the first time we came down, remember?”

“Of course.” Blake shook her head, seemingly at herself, then began to trek downstream.

“All right.” Shale nodded her consent to Amber, knowing the rope would be of more assistance while it was tied at both ends. “I’ll follow Blake.”

Shale didn’t relish the thought of going back into such icy cold water, but there was no other way to go. When it was her turn, Shale waded into the river. She found the current actually helped this time, pushing her through the water. She reached the tunnel downstream a lot quicker than expected, and took Blake’s helping hand as she sloshed out of the river.

“You look as cold as I feel,” Blake said.

“It’s certainly refreshing.” Shale bent and squeezed some water from her trouser legs. “Do you still have that blanket?”

Blake removed it from her bag. “It’s still pretty wet from the last time we used it. Hasn’t dried much in the cold of the cave.”

Shale took it anyway, and after rolling her trouser legs up, she ran it over her calves, drying them as best she could.

“You made it then?” Kale grinned at Shale. “And without mishap no less.”

Shale focused on drying herself off, then she balled up the blanket and threw it in Kale’s face. Kale snorted with laughter, then patted her own legs down with the blanket.

When Amber joined them in the tunnel, Shale coiled up the rope, and looked around for a place to leave it.

Kale walked up the tunnel a short way. “The water had risen up to about here, and that was after a massive storm. The rope should be safe past this point.”

Shale nodded and walked a bit farther, just to be doubly certain. She set the rope down on the ground, glad to be leaving it behind, so she was free of its heft. The day, though fruitful, had been long, and tiredness was starting to creep in.

The group trudged on, and soon the tunnel began to draw in on itself, tightening to a narrow gap.

Blake groaned. “I hate this part.”

“Kale.” Amber raised a warning finger. “No jokes this time. I mean it.”

Kale looked genuinely surprised. “It’s not that bad.”

“It is.” Blake said.

“Well, we’ll have to trail our bags alongside us like before.” Kale prodded her satchel. “But since the gold is so bulky, it won’t all fit through in one go.”

“What?” Blake grimaced. “We have to make more than one trip?”

“Afraid so.” Kale, Shale noticed, at least had the decency to keep a straight face, though it was clear she didn’t understand the issue.

Shale’s fingers softly encircled Blake’s wrist. “Why don’t you and Amber hold here a moment? Kale and I will take the bags through.”

“The gold and the supplies?” Kale’s voice rose an octave higher than usual. “That’s five bags, Shale. We’ll have to go back and forth three times!”

Shale gave her a stern look. “Then that’s what we’ll do.”

Kale sighed, but no further protest emerged. “Line up the bags by the opening. We’ll take them through.”

“Thank you,” Blake said, though her gaze was on Shale.

Shale squeezed Blake’s wrist, and returned Amber’s grateful smile. It was obvious the enclosed space troubled them both, more than she’d previously realized, but all she could do was attempt to shorten their ordeal. They had to go through to reach the surface.

Shale dragged one of the heavier bags of gold through first. As she worked her way sideways through the tight crevice, she heard Kale following in her wake.

“You owe me for this, Shale.”

“Fine. Take it off the list of things you owe me for.” Shale knew that Kale was indebted to her for many things—Kale’s personality being what it was—so her list was a lot longer. For as long as Shale could remember, she’d been getting Kale out of trouble.

Kale laughed. “Well, that’s one down.”

Emerging out the other side, into the wider tunnel, they dumped the gold before starting back through the crevice. They actually only had to make the journey once more, as Kale’s bag of food was nearly empty, so didn’t offer much bulk. Kale carried that and the other supply satchel, while Shale took particular care with the bag containing Zephyra, Blake’s honored ancestor.

The bags now through, Kale sat down on the ground, as if to rest her legs. Shale slipped into the crevice once more.

“Where are you going? We’ve brought everything through.”

Shale didn’t answer. She wedged her way sideways through the narrow fissure, feeling cramped as the stone pressed in around her. She expected Blake and Amber would be on their way, but as she continued there was no sign of either woman.

BLAKE RUBBED HER arms to try and warm herself up. She was apprehensive about the next part of the tunnel. The mere thought of the tight space made her palms sweat and her stomach knot. She took a deep breath and gathered her courage. “I suppose we’d best get this done.”

“I’d rather wade in that icy river again.” Amber exhaled heavily. “All right, let’s go.”

“Ladies.” Shale’s unexpected voice made Blake jump. “Your escort has arrived.”

Blake smiled, feeling the knot in her stomach lessen somewhat at Shale’s presence.

Shale leaned farther out of the crevice. “Blake, take my hand. Just hold on to me. Amber, take Blake’s. We’ll soon be through.”

Blake crossed to Shale and gave her an appreciative kiss on the lips. She was surprised when Shale pulled her closer and deepened the kiss, her tongue slipping inside and sliding wetly against Blake’s.

Overwhelmed by the rush of emotions, not to mention desire, Blake could only blink dazedly at Shale when she withdrew. When she regained her senses, Blake was astounded to find she was being led through the crevice. Better yet, she could already see the endpoint in sight.

Shale’s dulcet tones reached Blake’s ears. “You’re both doing great. Not much farther now.”

Amber gave Blake’s hand a squeeze. Sounding amused, she said, “Are you back with us yet?”

Blake was still somewhat flustered. “I am.” She blew out an impressed breath. “Gods, Shale, you can kiss.”

Shale responded with a pleased chuckle. “Thought you might be grateful for a distraction.”

Amber snickered. “Any more grateful, and I would’ve had to make myself scarce.”

Rather than being embarrassed, Blake laughed with her. “I’d be lying if I said the thought didn’t cross my mind.”

Blake stepped out into the wider tunnel, extremely relieved to have that part of the trip behind her. Off to the side, she noticed Kale sat waiting for them.

Amber grinned as she emerged from the crevice. “Well, it would certainly be one way to warm yourselves up.”

“What would?” Kale asked, clearly only catching the last bit of the conversation.

Amber wagged her eyebrows. “We were referring to sex.”

“Oh, typical.” Kale threw up her hands in despair. “The conversation turns interesting when I’m not around to hear it.”

KALE PEERED UP at the ledge above, but the lantern they'd left to light up the climb to the higher tunnel had seemingly extinguished, offering no help whatsoever. She realized the lantern had probably gone out at a similar time to the others—the candle burnt down until it was of no use.

“So much for leaving the lantern up there.”

“Never mind,” Shale said. “I’ll go up and relight it.”

Blake passed a spare candle, and Shale tucked it under her belt, clearly needing her hands free to ascend the rope.

Each woman carried their own flint. Whether it was for warmth, or to cook, fires were often a necessity, so it was vital to carry a flint. Kale carried hers in the pouch on her hip for easy access, and knew Shale did the same. Though Kale wasn't wearing her usual clothes, her pouch and weapons were still with her.

Leaving the bag of gold behind, Shale quickly disappeared up the rope.

Blake shook her head in disbelief. “Do you two ever get tired?”

Amber clapped a hand on Blake's back, as if she'd been thinking the same thing. “It's annoying, isn't it?”

Kale smirked at them both. “Would it make you feel better if I said yes?” Blake nodded. “It would, actually. I'm about ready to collapse from exhaustion, and you and Shale haven't even broken a sweat.”

“Do you think my clothes are only damp from the river?”

“Really?” Blake's voice rose a notch, sounding oddly hopeful.

“No!” Kale guffawed at their disheartened expressions. “It was the river.”

“I'm worn out too, Blake.” Amber sat down as if in demonstration. “It's not just you.”

“Thank you, Amber,” Blake said pointedly.

A lantern suddenly flickered to life from above, and a shrill whistle followed.

Kale made a move for the rope. “I tell you what. I'll go up next. Then if you load on the bags at this end, we'll haul them up.”

Blake smiled at the offer. “Sounds good.”

Amber pinched Kale's rump as she began her climb upward. “That's generous of you.”

Kale paused to look down at her. "I'm merely trying to hurry things along. The sooner we get back, the sooner I can have my meal."

Amber shook her head, undoubtedly knowing better. "You always have an answer. Gods forbid someone actually thinks you're doing something nice."

Kale scowled as she continued up the rope. "I swear, Amber, if you start with that sweet talk again, the offer's rescinded."

From below her, Blake and Amber chuckled. Kale muttered to herself as she climbed, and soon pulled herself onto the above ledge.

Kale sat down next to her twin. "They're loading on the gold as we speak."

As if to verify her point, the rope suddenly jerked as it was given a go-ahead tug.

By this point, everyone knew what they were doing, and what was expected of them. They all worked as a team, now proficient in their learned expertise. They labored at a steady pace, and before long all of the baggage was up in the higher tunnel: the group of satchels all laid out in a row.

Blake was red in the face when she reached the top, and Shale helped her onto the ledge.

"You look awful." Kale sniggered, though she stopped short when Shale nudged her in the ribs.

"Kale, I swear..." Blake was panting heavily, greedily pulling in air.

"Sit down, Blake." Shale pulled Blake down into her lap. "Catch your breath."

Moments passed as Shale repetitively stroked Blake's hair. "We only have this tunnel, then we're back in the main cavern. We'll stop and rest before we go up the shaft."

Blake nodded, then closed her eyes, visibly exhausted.

When Amber arrived, Kale helped her up onto the ledge. She noticed Amber's wince of pain instantly. "Your wound's hurting you, isn't it?"

Amber gave a tense nod. "I'll go up the shaft last, so I can take my time."

"Shale and I can help pull you up." Kale lightly rubbed Amber's arm. "We're already heaving up the gold, what's one more heavy thing?"

Amber produced a small smile. "Oi."

KALE RUBBED HER hands together in eager anticipation. She was in the main, and thankfully, last cavern, and the group was taking a rest before attempting to climb the shaft. “I fancy rabbit to eat, how about you three?”

“As long as you catch it, Kale, I have no preference.” Blake released a loud yawn. “I may just fall into my bedroll.”

“You can’t do that,” Kale said. “Although, on second thought, it means more for me.”

“I could eat some rabbit.” Amber stretched out on her back, lying flat against the rock floor. “Though I don’t know how you have any energy left to catch some.”

Shale chuckled. “You should know by now, Amber, Kale is unstoppable when it comes to food. I think she would take on an entire army for the last bread roll.”

“Laugh all you want, but you’d all be going hungry tonight if I wasn’t willing to put in the work.”

“I?” Shale raised a challenging eyebrow. “Don’t you mean ‘we’? I’ll no doubt get roped into it.”

Kale felt a slow smirk spread across her face. “Well, now that you mention it…”

Shale sighed. “I knew.”

Blake, as if following Amber’s idea, lay back on the ground and closed her eyes. A few moments passed in silence, then after regarding their prone partners, Kale shared an amused look with Shale.

“You two had better not be falling asleep.” Kale gave Amber’s outstretched leg a nudge with her boot.

“Just resting my eyes,” Amber said.

“Like I believe that.”

“It’s too cold to fall asleep,” Blake murmured drowsily.

Kale sniggered. “Sounds like you’re managing just fine.”

Shale moved and sat closer to Blake, who turned onto her front and rested on Shale’s legs.

“Shale, don’t encourage them. We’ll be down here all night.”

“That’s fine with me,” Amber said.

Kale glanced around the vast, but gloomy cavern. “Wouldn’t you rather sleep under the open sky than underground?” “My eyes are closed.” Amber’s tone was dry. “How will I know the difference?”

Kale had no answer for that. But she did have a way to get Blake moving. “I bet there are snakes down here.”

Blake didn’t so much as twitch. “There are snakes up top, too.” She peered at Kale out of one eye. “Nice try.”

Shale chuckled as she petted Blake’s hair. “Just be patient, Kale. We’ll have to go up before it gets dark so we can still see what we’re doing.”

At Blake and Amber’s groan, she added, “And if anyone wants a reason why we can’t stay here overnight, it’s simple. The candles will run out, and we’ll be left blind down here.”

Kale slapped her thigh in success, knowing that couldn’t be refuted. “That’s an excellent reason, Shale.”

“You don’t have to sound so smug about it.” Amber sat upright with obvious reluctance, and uncorked her water skin. She took a long drink, then passed it to Kale.

Kale swallowed a few mouthfuls, enjoying the fresh cool water as it slipped down her throat. She was pleased Amber had thought to refill the skin at the underground river. “Maybe you should both splash some of this water on your face? It would wake you up.”

“Kale, don’t even think...” Amber squealed as Kale compressed the water skin, launching a spurt of water in her direction. She quickly rolled out of its path and sprung to her feet, glaring at Kale with a strange mix of annoyance and amusement on her face.

“There, you’re up.” Kale grinned at her, totally unrepentant. “It worked.” She turned her attention to Blake, who was scrambling up also.

“I’m up!” Blake strode directly to Kale and snatched the water skin from her grasp. “Give me that.”

“I’ll have to remember this.” Kale pointed to Shale, who she could tell was trying, rather unsuccessfully, to stifle her humor at the situation. “Shale, take note, you might need to use this trick yourself someday.”

“Only if she wants to get kicked out of bed,” Blake said.

As if unable to restrain herself any longer, Shale broke into laughter. “You should’ve seen your faces.”

“You looked something like this.” Kale pulled a horrified face, exaggerating the emotion tenfold.

Shale and Kale both creased up in hysterics, leaning against one another for support. An instant later Kale spluttered in shock, as she and Shale received a sudden drenching from the water skin.

“Blake!” the twins exclaimed in unison.

Blake was grinning from ear to ear. “It’s not so funny now, is it?”

Amber giggled like a banshee. “Oh, I think it is.”

Shale made a show of wiping the water off her face. “Right, now you’ve asked for it.”

“Get them!”

Kale launched herself at Amber as Shale darted for Blake. They chased one another around the cavern, hilarity injecting new life into their weary limbs. Their laughter echoed all around them as it reflected back off the stone walls, carrying up the shaft and to the surface above.

SHALE STOOD AT the bottom of the deep shaft, waiting her turn to ascend. Like they had done on the previous rope, she and Kale were to go up top, and the gold was to be loaded on by Blake and Amber below. Kale had been impatient to get started, so was already on her way to the surface. But it was a long climb, and Shale knew it would take some time.

It would of course be quicker if two people were scaling the rope at once—the huge stone pillar above could certainly hold their joint weight, but it wasn’t wise to put too much strain on the rope.

“Can I have the water skin, Amber?” Shale saw Amber’s brown eyes narrow suspiciously—Amber clearly didn’t want a retaliative soaking. “To drink out of.”

Amber raised a warning finger before passing her the water skin.

Shale took several gulps, thirsty from the strenuous activities. “It’s certainly a good hiding place.” She gestured to the surrounding cavern. “If we ever have call for such a thing, we know to come back here.”

“Indeed.” Blake took the water skin and sipped from it. “I do wonder how such a place was discovered originally. I mean, I can see how someone would stumble across the entrance.” A wry smile. “Like I did, but it’s an odd place to explore. We wouldn’t have looked twice if it wasn’t for the map.”

“True.” Shale glanced around herself, taking in the vast chamber once more. “You would never imagine that the shaft opened up into a large cavern, never mind the structure of tunnels leading off from it.”

“It’s a remarkable place,” Amber said. “But I can’t say I’ll be sorry to see the back of it.”

Blake gave an emphatic nod. “Me either. It’s too cold for my tastes. I feel like I haven’t been warm for a month.”

“That’s my cue.” With an indulgent smile, Shale took a step closer and wrapped her arms snugly around Blake’s torso. She pressed into Blake from behind, sharing her body heat as Blake reclined against her.

“Mmm, that’s better.”

“I live to be of service, my Queen.” Shale didn’t use the title to tease, she whole-heartedly meant the words.

Blake tipped her head back and regarded Shale. She seemed to realize Shale’s sincerity, as she reached up and softly brushed Shale’s face. “Aren’t I the lucky one?”

Shale enjoyed the tender smile that formed, and returned one of her own, getting lost in Blake’s green gaze.

They shared a long moment, then remembered they weren’t alone. To Amber’s credit, she was looking discreetly away, obviously trying to give them as much privacy as she could. They reluctantly moved apart, Shale heading back toward the shaft to check on Kale’s progress. She hadn’t gone three steps when a sharp pain exploded in her head, and she released a grunt of torment. The suddenness of such a sensation made her stumble, but to her surprise she didn’t hit the ground. Concerned hands were instantly fussing over her, steadying her and keeping her upright. It took Shale a moment to register that it was Blake who had caught her, and that Blake was now talking anxiously to her.

“Shale? Talk to me.”

“Shale?” Amber was gripping her arm, as if trying to get her to focus. “What’s wrong?”

Shale slowly lowered her hands, which had risen to cradle her throbbing head. She squeezed her eyes shut and then reopened them, giving her head a slight shake to clear it. The abrupt pain had overwhelmed her senses for a moment, but now that she could think again, Shale knew instantly the pain didn’t belong to her—it was Kale’s—something had happened to her.

Though the pain had faded as quickly as it had appeared, the intensity of it worried Shale—she herself only felt a portion of it, and not the full amount that Kale did.

“Shale, please,” Blake said. “What is it?”

The desperate plea in Blake’s voice snapped Shale out of it, and she met Blake’s troubled gaze for an instant, then shifted to Amber. “It’s Kale.”

Without another word, not that any were needed, Shale tore loose of their grasp and ran for the rope, leaping onto it and scrambling up it as fast as her arms would take her. An urgent, insistent need was pulling at her, and she could think of nothing else but reaching her twin. The yearning was so great she ignored it when her arms grew tired, pushing on with a determination that knew no bounds, and had no limits.

Though Shale knew something bad had happened to Kale, she had no notion of what that something might be. An icy tendril of fear worked its way throughout her body, and she couldn’t shake the sensation that she was about to face the greatest test of her life.

Chapter Twenty-one

SHALE BEGAN TO lever herself up out of the shaft. Her eyes searched everywhere for Kale, but she couldn’t find her. She could, however, sense her.

She was halfway out when she spotted a crimson stain near her hand—it was blood. There was quite a lot of it, a small pool of red. Shale recognized that whatever had happened to Kale, it’d started here, as she was climbing out of the hole. Drag marks were near the blood, and Shale knew in that instant Kale had been attacked. The perpetrator had struck Kale on the head, then dragged her away to conceal it. Kale had likely been taken by surprise, and in her compromised position, hadn’t been able to react in time to defend herself.

Realizing that she was now in the same compromised position, Shale hurried to pull herself out of the shaft.

A shadow loomed above her, and she glanced up to see Tanis, looking alive but not well after her plunge from the waterfall. How she’d survived was beyond Shale, but she didn’t have time to speculate.

With a feral grin, Tanis swung a fist straight at Shale's head. Clutched in her hand was a large round stone, which was already marked by Kale's blood.

Shale was barely out of the hole, and she twisted away from the strike as best she could. The stone connected with the back of her head, sending a blinding pain through her skull and knocking her flat to the ground.

Shale fought to stay conscious, her eyes swimming in and out of focus. The stone had glanced her head as she'd turned, so she hadn't taken the full brunt of the blow. Even so, the impact was bad enough to stun her, making her mind foggy and dazed.

As Shale tried to gather her senses, she wondered how Tanis had found them. The answer came to her a moment later—all Tanis had to do was go back to where she'd last seen them, at the top of the waterfall, and track their trail from there. They thought Tanis dead, so hadn't seen a need to cover their tracks. Shale herself had gone down and searched for Tanis, and hadn't found any evidence that she'd survived the fall. Tanis must've somehow missed the rocks at the bottom of the falls, and allowed the river to carry her downstream a good way before emerging farther on. Shale had only searched so far. Tanis had either gone beyond that point, or she'd got out on the other side of the river and covered her tracks in case one of them came looking for her.

Shale begrudgingly gave Tanis credit for her survival skills, along with her skills for deception. She'd fooled them twice now.

Shale wondered why Tanis wasn't continuing her attack, and she forced her mind to focus on the task at hand. She rolled onto her side, her head spinning from the movement, and she spotted Tanis dragging an unconscious Kale out from behind a slab of stone. Tanis tugged Kale around to the front of the slab, so Kale was now in Shale's line of view, and propped her up in a seated position, grappling with Kale's limp form until she stayed in the posed position. Kale's head sagged forward, her chin to her chest—she was clearly out cold.

Tanis then left Kale and came back to Shale, who prepared herself for another assault. Shale was astounded when Tanis simply passed her by, crouching instead over the rim of the shaft. Tanis's body hid her motions from Shale, but as the rope began to move and twitch, she realized, with absolute horror, that Tanis was sawing through the rope. She knew without doubt that Blake would currently be on her way up, frantic to see what was going on. If the rope was cut, Blake would fall to her death.

Shale pushed herself to her feet, her body more doubled than straight, and zoned in solely on Tanis. She wavered slightly, dizzily, but knowing there was no time to waste, she launched herself at Tanis, tackling her away from the rope.

Tanis fell, as did Shale, but Shale landed on top, and punched Tanis once, twice, three times in succession. Shale flinched back as Tanis whipped the knife she'd been using to saw through the rope across her upper arm. A boot to Shale's chest followed, knocking her clean off Tanis.

A quick glance to the rope told Shale it wouldn't hold much longer, and Tanis was getting to her feet. She had no time to continue the fight, to finish Tanis off. Shale bolted back toward the rope, praying for a few more moments.

She didn't get them. The rope snapped.

AS THE ROPE snapped, Shale leapt through the air, body-sliding along the ground to catch the quickly disappearing rope. She heard Blake's cry of alarm: it sounded close. Her hand delved into the hole, but she found flesh instead of rope, and she clamped securely onto Blake's wrist. The rope tumbled away, plummeting straight down into darkness.

Shale had to use her free hand to brace on the ground to keep them both from going over the edge. "I've got you, Blake."

"Well, well," Tanis taunted. "Isn't this interesting? You only have time to save one, so who will it be? Your twin or your wife?"

With a mocking chuckle, Tanis started toward Kale, knife playing expertly between her fingers.

The situation Shale feared most had arisen, and the decision was too enormous for her to bear. Tanis was indeed Theron's sister, they both shared the same callous streak. Shale desperately tried to lift Blake, but her bracing hand slipped. She couldn't find a decent purchase.

"You have until I reach Kale," Tanis said in a warning tone. "Then I stab her in the heart. Seems fitting, since she broke mine when she took Theron from me."

Shale tried again to lift Blake, but again her hand slipped.

Shale could never choose, yet the gods in all their cruelty were now demanding a decision from her. Blake was her soul mate, lover, and best friend—she was everything that Shale could ever want in a wife. And though it was true that Blake wasn't spiritually connected to Shale in the same way as Kale was, her loss would still be as great.

And Kale, her twin, who was also her soul mate and best friend, and the only remaining blood family she had left. Kale had always been by her side. Shale simply couldn't imagine not having Kale with her, beside her—the concept alone was terrifying to her.

It was unbearable for Shale to even try to envisage her life without one of them, and tears of anguish fell from her eyes. Shale was unable to pick between them, knowing only that she couldn't bring herself to intentionally harm either woman, and if either were ever to be taken from her, she would never be happy again.

Her inaction, if she stayed with Blake, would kill Kale, but her action to save Kale would kill Blake. How could she ever make such a choice? Shale knew she couldn't bring herself to open her hand, to release Blake, for she would be killing Blake directly, by her own hand. She would have physically killed her wife, the woman she loved more than life itself. Tanis would be the person responsible for Kale's death, it would be Tanis's hand that took Kale's life, even though inadvertently, Shale had let it happen. However, Kale would still be dead, leaving Shale incomplete for the rest of her life, her beloved twin lost to her, half of a pained, broken soul that would never heal.

Inaction or action? Direct or indirect? What kind of choices were those? Shale entreated all the gods and goddesses on Olympus, begging them to intervene, offering them her own life to spare the women she loved. Not one of them responded. She cursed them all instead, with such vehemence she was surprised she wasn't struck dead on the spot. Shale didn't care. What could they possibly do that was worse than the torture she already faced?

Time was moving in slow motion, though Shale's mind was racing.

"Shale, let me go."

"What?" Shale thought she had misheard, but the resolve on Blake's face spoke the same message. "No! Never."

"You must let me go. Save Kale. I won't condemn you to suffering your whole life without your twin, without ever being able to feel complete again." Blake smiled, as if giving her permission, and to show she accepted her fate ungrudgingly. "I love you, Shale. I'll wait for you in the afterlife."

"Blake..." Shale had to swallow around the lump in her throat. "I cannot." She pushed back with her bracing hand, but found no resistance whatsoever, her hand slipping without any traction.

The choice, the decision, was tearing Shale apart. She put voice to the turmoil she was in, releasing a scream that was part fury, part hopelessness, and part devastation.

"I order you, Shale, as your queen. As a queen of queens, you must let me go so you can save Kale."

Tears streamed down Shale's face. "I will not."

"Your queen demands this of you." Blake's tone was firm. "You will let me go, Shale. You must."

"You're an Amazon queen, you're to be protected at all costs."

"A queen can be replaced. A twin cannot."

“A wife cannot.” Shale’s voice broke. “My Blake.”

Which came first? Her duty to her wife, or her duty to her queen? Shale knew the answer to this dilemma—if she had to disobey Blake, her queen, to save Blake, her wife, she would. Consequences be damned—there would be no greater consequence than the loss of her wife.

Now that quandary had been solved, the answer to her other problem suddenly came to Shale with such clarity that it should’ve been obvious all along. She couldn’t choose which woman to save, who she cared for more, because they were equal in regard. She had but to choose her own action, and as she could never bring herself to hurt either her twin or her wife, she kept her hand closed, secure around Blake’s wrist. If their roles had been reversed: Kale in the shaft, Blake up above, her decision would not have changed. It truly was an impossible choice.

Shale fixed Blake with an unrelenting stare. “I won’t let you go.”

“You would deny your queen?” Blake’s expression was one of annoyance, but her eyes were tear-filled, as if deeply touched that Shale had stayed with her.

“I would deny my wife nothing. Least of all her life.” Shale’s brain was in overdrive, and she called out to Tanis in an attempt to delay her. Tanis had now reached Kale’s side. “Kill me instead. Look at how much pain Theron’s loss has caused you. It’s worse than death, isn’t it?” Shale paused an instant to let that sink in. “Your best revenge would be to kill me, leave my wife and twin alive to suffer as you suffer now.”

Blake cried out in protest of such a plan. “Shale, no!”

Tanis seemed to think about it. “Good try. I intend to kill you all, after I finish Kale here.” She pressed the tip of the knife to Kale’s chest. “Last chance?”

“Kale! Damn you, wake up,” Shale yelled, hearing the desperation in her own voice.

If only Shale could pull Blake up, she could stop Tanis. Her bracing hand just couldn’t find any grip. It was the same problem they’d faced before when Amber had fallen into the river. Only Blake’s idea of using the tree for leverage had saved Amber from going over the falls. The same principle applied here. If she could just find something to help her...

If she hadn’t already been crying, Shale would’ve wept when she spotted the satchel around Blake’s middle. She’d assumed Blake had left it behind to be brought up with the gold, but fortunately for them both, Blake liked to be prepared. Since Blake had known something bad was happening, she’d obviously shouldered the bag and brought it with her.

“Blake, the chisel, throw it up. As near to my hand as you can get it.”

With one hand, Blake removed it from the bag. She tossed it up next to Shale’s bracing hand. Shale’s fingers crept toward it, clasping it when it was in reach. She tilted the chisel tip

downward, pushing it into a narrow gap between two large stones that were buried securely in the ground.

With considerable strength she wedged it down, firmly, deeply, until it was submerged up to its handle. Shale pushed against the now rooted chisel as she heaved Blake up with one arm, muscles bulging as they strained in effort. The chisel had good purchase, and now that she had a solid brace to leverage herself against, she began to make some headway in lifting Blake.

Shale glanced back to Tanis, just in time to see her thrust the knife into Kale's chest. "No!" she screamed.

Shale used her anger at Tanis, and at the complete injustice of the situation, and mightily hauled Blake upward, so her top half was out of the shaft.

Blake grabbed the chisel with both hands. "Go! I can manage from here."

Shale rolled to her feet and whipped out the dagger at her waist—the one Kale had given her for a joining present. As Tanis raised the knife to deliver another strike, Shale launched her dagger straight at Tanis. End over end the dagger flew through the air, its aim straight and true. It thudded satisfyingly into Tanis's back, right between her shoulder blades. The force of the impact not only drove the blade in up to its hilt, it spun Tanis around, her body crumpling as she fell bonelessly to the ground. It had been a fatal strike, delivered with deadly efficiency.

Shale sprinted across and dropped to her knees, calling out Kale's name again and again. She searched frantically for Kale's wound, frustratedly batting Kale's satchel aside, which had gotten entangled around her front, likely from when Tanis had dragged her along the ground. Kale had insisted on carrying her satchel of food up with her, saying that it was light and it would save her from hauling it up later.

Shale's tears were blinding her, and she couldn't find the injury. She hastily swiped at her eyes, but still she couldn't find the wound.

"Blake!" Shale yelled, desperate for her wife's unwavering presence. To Blake's credit, and to Shale's unending relief, Blake slid to a stop on the opposite side of Kale.

"Tanis stabbed her in the chest." Shale's hands trembled as they searched. "But I can't find ___"

"Let me." Blake gently but firmly moved Shale's hands away, as if to allow her gaze to look unhindered for the wound. "There's no blood."

Shale frowned in confusion. There was indeed blood on Kale's head, and on the side of her face, but none was on Kale's chest or torso. "I saw it with my own eyes. Please don't let her die, Blake."

Blake began to probe around Kale's chest and stomach, an intense concentration on her face—she clearly didn't want to overlook any damage.

Her heart breaking, Shale urgently tapped Kale's face, trying to rouse her. "Kale, please don't leave me. I beg you! I couldn't bear it."

Shale's plea was desperation itself, but she received no response from Kale. She noticed that Blake was also crying, though it was clear Blake was trying to be strong, trying to hold herself together.

Blake abruptly stopped her search. She tugged across Kale's satchel, which Shale saw had a hole in the side of it. After hastily digging into the bag, Blake withdrew Senna's greave. She showed it to Shale, pointing to a large dent that now marred its metal surface.

"Kale hasn't been stabbed," Blake said. "This greave deflected the strike."

Shale shook her head, knowing what she'd seen. The horrific image of seeing Kale grievously stabbed, perhaps even fatally so, was forever burned into her memory.

Blake looked at her worriedly. "Shale, listen, you're in shock, but I need you to try and take in what I'm saying. Kale wasn't stabbed. She's just unconscious from the blow to the head."

"I saw..."

Blake took Shale's face in her hands, forcing eye contact. "You felt Kale's blow to her head, an echo of it at least. Did you feel her stabbed? Did you get any pain in your chest?"

Shale frowned as she struggled to think, her mind in disarray. She recalled the fear she'd felt, the pain at the thought of losing Kale, but not actual pain. Shale blinked in confusion. She should have felt the pain of such a strike, she felt the pain of any serious wound. She tried to consolidate what she'd seen, with what she had felt. They contradicted one another. But her senses regarding Kale had never failed her, so she trusted them now, allowing Blake's words about the greave deflecting the blade to finally sink in. Kale wasn't near death, she was merely unconscious.

Shale burst into tears, relieved beyond imagining. She raised Kale upward, cradling her gently in her arms. Blake moved to Shale's side and embraced her, rocking Shale soothingly as her frame shook.

Kale groggily stirred in Shale's arms, and murmured. "Why are you both crying all over me?"

Shale cried all the harder, and unable to speak, she clutched Kale tightly to her.

“WHAT’S GOING ON?” Amber’s voice echoed up from the shaft. “Could someone pass me a rope?”

Shale crossed to the hole in the ground. “I’ll get a rope down to you, Amber.”

“Is everything all right?”

“Tanis attacked us. Kale took a nasty hit to the head.” Shale glanced to her twin, who was having her head wound treated by Blake. “But she’ll be all right. Her skull is thick.”

“Mocking me when I’m injured,” Kale said. “Have you no shame?”

Shale smiled at her, knowing Kale had to be feeling better to respond in her usual way. She moved away from the shaft to fetch the last remaining rope. The extra unused rope now came in useful, it was vital in fact. They’d already had two ropes before visiting the blacksmith’s shop, and had purchased four more, which made six. They’d carried one rope each, and all had been left down in the caves. Another was used for the shaft rope, which had now been cut, so that left one spare. They’d left it up top rather than take it with them, since no one could carry two bulky ropes while still being able to climb comfortably. It was a good thing they had left the rope on the surface, or they’d have no way of getting Amber out of the caves.

Shale unfastened the cut rope from around the pillar, the part that remained of it anyway, and fastened the fresh rope around the stone instead. She shouted a warning down to Amber before releasing the rope down the shaft.

“Do you want me to put the gold on?” Amber’s voice came back a few moments later.

“Yes, go ahead. I’ll pull it up myself.”

“Shale, are you sure?” Blake asked, her hands pausing over the gash along the side of Kale’s head. “I can go back down in the morning and tie it on.”

“No, it’s all right. I can bring it up. It’ll just mean extra hassle tomorrow.”

“What about your arm?”

Shale looked down at her upper arm, the blood flowing from the cut was barely a trickle now. “It’s not deep. It won’t hinder me.”

She saw the rope jerk as Amber pulled on it, and Shale sat down, legs apart and knees up to brace herself. She began to reel in the rope with a smooth, repetitive motion. Her muscles strained as she drew up the gold, but they didn’t quiver.

To distract herself from the monotonous task, Shale watched her twin as Blake cleaned her wound. Kale was doing a good job of being stoic, but on occasion she winced, causing Blake to apologize profusely.

As if wanting a distraction herself, no doubt from the pain, Kale met Shale's gaze. "Tanis certainly knew how to take advantage of a situation. She had me right in her crossfire. I was barely out of the hole when she clobbered me with that rock. I didn't even have chance to react."

"I know." Shale kept on drawing in the rope as she talked. "Tanis got me the same way."

"She hit you with the rock, too?" Blake threw a dark look toward Tanis's body. "It's fortunate for her that she's dead."

Shale smiled at Blake's protective streak. "I managed to twist out of the way. Didn't take the full force."

Kale sounded annoyed. "How come you managed that, and I didn't?"

"Because I knew something was wrong, so I was expecting an attack. You weren't. That split moment of delay was all it took to make a difference. As I said, Tanis still struck me." Shale wasn't trying to make excuses for Kale, it was the simple truth.

"After I finish treating Kale, I'll take a look at you." Blake's green eyes were sympathetic. "I bet you both have splitting headaches?"

Shale and Kale nodded in unison.

"I'll need some of that awful pain killer," Kale said. "Would you mix me some, Blake?"

"Of course." Blake gave Kale's shoulder a squeeze, as if knowing that Kale found it difficult to ask for help.

Shale smiled at the interaction. She watched quietly as Blake put down her cloth, and began to sprinkle some herbs over Kale's head wound. Shale knew from experience that the herbs would help to stop infection from setting in.

Kale uneasily eyed the needle that Blake was in the process of threading. "Shale, are you nearly finished pulling that bag up?"

"Almost. But I have two more to bring up."

As Blake reached out, needle in her grasp, Kale hastily leaned away. "What are you doing, Blake?"

"I'm going to stitch your wound closed."

"Oh, no you're not. Amber's told me about your lack of stitching skills."

Shale sniggered as she hefted the first bag of gold up onto the ground beside her. She untied the rope from it, then let the rope fall back down the shaft. Though she was now free to assist in stitching Kale, she made no move to do so. “Blake can do it.”

“It’s true I like scars, Shale, but I don’t want them to be a complete mess. Especially not on my head.”

Blake scoffed indignantly. “It won’t be a mess. Appollonia has taught me how to stitch.”

“Since when?”

“Since I knew I was going to be joined to a warrior. After Shale and I were betrothed, I had Appollonia teach me.” Blake’s voice lowered, as if sharing a secret. “You saw how much trouble Shale got into when you both first arrived.”

“That was hardly my fault,” Shale said loudly, scowling as Kale laughed at her expense.

Blake winked at Shale, then looked back to Kale. “As warriors, I knew you were bound to get injuries, so I thought it wise to learn how to stitch.” She shrugged. “I like to be prepared.”

“Speaking of,” Shale gave Blake a curious glance. “Is that what made you bring up your satchel?”

Blake nodded. “I wanted to be armed coming up here. I thought I could use one of the tools as a weapon if needed.”

“It’s a good thing you did.” Shale indicated the rope, which was waiting to be pulled up. “Kale?”

“Go ahead, Blake can stitch me.”

At Blake’s smile, Kale added, “I’d better not end up looking like a monster.”

Blake grinned. “I’ll do my best.”

Chapter Twenty-two

RELIEVED TO BE resting finally, Blake stretched her tired legs out in front of her. Her feet were sore from walking all day, and her entire body ached. She leaned against Shale, who sat beside her, and smiled as Shale draped an arm across her shoulders. Despite the exhaustion Blake felt, all she craved was Shale's touch, her presence a balm against all discomfort.

After patching Kale and Shale up, Blake had given them both pain medication. She was pleased Shale hadn't needed stitches, though she did have a nasty bump on the back of her head.

Blake was amazed that despite the injury, Shale had still managed to bring up all three bags of gold, which now lay beside the rest of their supplies. The rope from the shaft had also been removed. Blake was glad the hard work was behind them, and that they personally had no further need to revisit the cave.

Now that the important tasks were done, Blake turned her attention to the meal—the rabbits Kale had long been awaiting. Blake and Amber had taken pity on the twins, and after Amber caught the rabbits, Blake had set to and cooked them. Blake enjoyed every bite that she took, surprised by how hungry she was.

"I'm pleased I gave you that dagger," Kale said around a mouthful of meat.

Shale nodded. "Me too."

"I'm pleased you found that greave," Amber added. Blake had given Amber a full account of what had happened after she'd reached the surface. "Senna protected you."

Kale's eyes twinkled as she smiled. "She certainly did." She raised her mug toward the sky, as if in salute. "To Senna."

The words were echoed back by three different voices, all toasting Senna in the same fashion.

"Do you want any more rabbit, Shale? There's still some left." Blake held the plate of meat out to her, but Shale shook her head.

"Give it to Kale, she'll have it."

Blake saw that Kale's plate was nearly empty, and she offered the meat to her. Kale took the food with obvious eagerness, and quickly dug into it. Blake shared a humorous look with Amber.

Kale shrugged at the exchange. "What?"

"Nothing." Amber placed a hand on Kale's thigh. "I'm just pleased to see that your injury hasn't put you off your food."

Kale harrumphed. "It'll take more than a knock on the head to put me off."

“That’s a good sign,” Shale said. “Kale has to be practically on her deathbed before she stops eating.”

Kale patted her abdomen. “I have a strong stomach.”

“It has to be, to hold all the food you eat,” Shale teased.

Blake shared another look with Amber, though this one was pleased. She knew Shale and Kale had to be feeling more like themselves, to be bantering in their usual way.

“Amber, are you finished?” Shale gestured to her plate. At Amber’s nod, she said, “Come and help me set up our camps for the night. It’ll be getting dark soon.”

Blake’s surprise came through in her tone. “We’re not staying here?”

“We won’t go far.” Shale tipped her head toward the shaft. “But it’s probably wise to move away from that hole. You’d probably roll into it while sleeping.”

Blake’s eyes widened. “Me?”

“Yes, you. Twice now, you’ve nearly plummeted to your death.” Shale grinned at her as Kale began to snigger. “Now who’s the one finding trouble?”

“I...but...” Blake narrowed her eyes, having no defense, as Shale indeed spoke the truth. She couldn’t keep the scowl on her face. A sheepish smile formed instead. “That’s probably for the best,” she finally said. “Though the second time was hardly my fault.”

“I know that.” Shale became serious, her teasing seemingly forgotten. She took hold of Blake’s hand. “I’d feel better if we were away from here.”

Blake nodded. “Fair enough.” She read the unspoken words easily. Shale didn’t want to stay in a place where she’d almost lost her wife and twin, which was understandable. Blake raised Shale’s hand and kissed it, then rose to her feet, tugging Shale up with her. “I’ll help.”

Shale smiled, her gratitude clear. “And while we’re on the subject, we’re never setting foot inside another cave again. It always ends badly.”

“I’M SO TIRED I think I could sleep for a week.” Blake yawned, and politely covered her mouth with a hand.

“Mm. I know what you mean.” Shale was sitting by the campfire, idly stoking it with a stick. The fire was burning well, it needed no tending, but she wanted something to occupy herself

with. She kept dwelling on what had almost happened, what could have easily happened, and though she was weary from the long day, and her injured body was demanding rest so it could start to heal itself, her mind just wouldn't allow her to relax.

Despite their hostile feelings toward the woman, they'd buried Tanis, after checking to make sure she was definitely dead this time. They wouldn't be fooled on a third occasion. But even though the threat of Tanis was definitely behind them, Shale couldn't easily forget the situation Tanis had put her in. Asking her to choose, had been the worst moment of her life. Even though events had eventually played out in their favor, the memory still haunted Shale, and she knew it would for quite some time to come.

She felt an arm encircle her waist as Blake sat down beside her. "Aren't you going to bed?"

Blake gave one of her all-knowing smiles. "When you're ready."

Shale rubbed her temple. Blake always had been able to read her, even from the start. Now, as her wife, Blake was an expert at it. "Blake, you're exhausted..."

"So are you."

Unable to refute that, Shale closed her mouth, deciding to save her breath. She knew that if Blake had made up her mind to stay up with her, there would be no changing it. "Yet Kale and I are the ones with the reputation for being stubborn."

Blake rested her head on Shale's shoulder, a small smile playing on her features. "Only because no one dares to say that about the queen."

"I just did."

"Yes, but you did it in a nice way."

The corner of Shale's mouth curled upward. She turned her head so she was eye to eye with Blake. "You always make me smile, Blake, even when I think I can't."

"That wasn't a proper smile, Shale, far from it." Blake pressed her lips softly to Shale's cheek. "But I promise I'll keep working on it."

A single tear rolled down Shale's cheek, and Blake gently removed it with her thumb. "I wish my mother had never birthed triplets."

Blake's look conveyed that she wholeheartedly agreed with the sentiment. "She should've stopped at two."

"I almost lost you and Kale today." Shale swallowed convulsively, becoming choked up. "I couldn't bear the loss of either of you. I don't know how I'd have coped if... It was so close."

“Sweetheart, stop.” Blake twisted herself around, as if to see Shale better. “I’m fine. Kale’s fine—well, she will be. You didn’t lose us. We’re here with you.” She gripped both of Shale’s arms, the contact clearly meant to comfort and to verify her words.

Shale nodded, taking a shaky breath to try and gain control of her stampeding emotions. She leaned forward, seeking solace, which Blake instantly gave, opening her arms and enfolding Shale into a warm, secure embrace. Blake whispered words of reassurance in her ear, seemingly content to hold Shale for as long she needed.

When Shale eventually calmed, she found she was emotionally drained as well as physically and she thought now she might be able to sleep. But before she was willing to try, she still had one more thing of importance to discuss.

As Blake tenderly tucked a loose strand of dark hair behind her ear, Shale whispered, “I know you must be upset with me, Blake. Furious even.”

Blake looked confused for an instant, then recognition appeared to dawn on her. “I suppose I should punish you for defying your queen’s order.”

Shale nodded, straightening her back. “I’ll accept any you have to give. Gladly so.”

Blake sighed. “As a wife, I was moved deeply that you stayed with me, Shale. Please know that.”

Shale nodded again. “But?”

“But as your queen, I have to know that you’ll follow my command. Whether you like my decisions or not.”

“I understand. Truly. And though the realization that I’ve defied my queen brings me great shame, I’m not at all ashamed of the action I took today.”

“You were right, Shale. I admit that,” Blake said. “But your queen gave you an order. Not once, or twice, repeatedly. You should have followed it.”

“I don’t think…” Shale broke off, unsure as to how much she should say. She had never disappointed Blake before, let alone her persona as queen. She wasn’t sure where the lines as her wife ended, and the lines of her queen began.

“Shale.” Blake winced, looking hurt by her hesitation. “You can say whatever you wish to me, there are no divides between us.”

Shale gazed into Blake’s green eyes, and was completely assured by what she saw there. She finished her sentence. “I don’t think you were speaking to me as queen.”

As Blake went to protest, no doubt going to say that she couldn't have been any clearer in her instructions, Shale held up a hand to delay her. "Not from your heart anyway. You were speaking as my wife. You wanted to protect me, as I wanted to protect you. As queen, it made no strategic sense to lose the queen's life for a single warrior's. As a wife, you were trying to protect me from what you considered would be the worst loss."

Shale took a breath. "I think you ordered me to release you to spare me the ultimate decision of choice—so afterward I couldn't blame myself for what I'd done, and wouldn't be eaten up by guilt. That's not an action of a queen, it's an action of a wife. A loving wife who was intent on saving her spouse extra heartache."

Blake had been frowning throughout Shale's speech, but now her expression began to clear, as if Shale's reasoning was starting to sink in. Several moments passed, then Blake regarded Shale with awe. "You know me better than I know myself. When you screamed, I could see that the choice was ripping you apart. I wanted to spare you that."

Shale brushed her knuckles over Blake's cheek in a caress. "And I love you for such a selfless act. We were both motivated by the right reasons. We merely wanted to protect one another."

Blake nodded. "It comes with the vows."

"But I must confess that at the time, I thought you were speaking as my queen. Only now when I've had chance to reflect, did I see your true intentions." Shale paused, wanting to be truthful. "I still defied you as queen, Blake. I should still be punished."

"I appreciate your honesty." Blake delayed only an instant, as if she'd already come to her decision. "You defied a queen's order, but in so doing you saved my life. I'd say the two cancel one another out." At Shale's look of surprise, she added, "What you've been through today is punishment enough."

Shale didn't know what to say, so she leaned in and kissed Blake's forehead.

"There is one thing you can do for me," Blake said coyly.

Shale gamely tipped her head. "Anything."

Blake held out a hand. "Come to bed."

Shale finally smiled—properly this time, and with some feeling.

Blake's eyes sparkled in the firelight. "Now that's a smile."

The smile only grew as Shale took Blake's hand, stood, and followed her to the bedrolls. She lay down on her side, as the bump on the back of her head was still tender, and released a contented sigh when Blake snuggled into her.

It didn't take long for either woman to fall asleep, the trials and tribulation of the day melting away as they drifted into slumber, safe in one another's arms.

"I THINK WE should sleep till late in the morning. Maybe even noon."

"You have my vote," Kale murmured. She was curled up behind Amber, arms around her middle. She felt the blanket tighten as Amber tugged it closer. "You're still not cold, are you?"

"It's the remnants of that damned cave." Amber moved the hands that were around her waist. "You'd better hold me closer."

Kale released a chuckle. "I detect an ulterior motive." She pressed her body tightly against Amber's, so not a single gap was between them. "Better?"

"Much."

"Is your collarbone giving you much grief after that climb? You did well to manage the rope up the shaft yourself."

"My worry about you helped distract me. Though I'll admit I'm feeling it now. Still, I'm sure the pain's minor compared to your head."

"Those herbs I drank helped some. Mind I should think so, after such a repugnant taste." Kale scrunched up her face. It wasn't a taste that you soon forgot, but the herbs were strong, and they did help to relieve the pain.

"They are awful," Amber said, clearly knowing from personal experience. She twisted her neck and glanced back at Kale. "You look adorable with that bandage around your head."

Kale rolled her eyes. "So you keep saying, Amber." She released a long-suffering sigh. "But I'm telling you now, as soon as we start to travel it's coming off. I bet it looks ridiculous."

"No, you look ad..." Amber broke off at Kale's warning scowl. "Tough. Really tough."

Kale barked a laugh. "I bet."

"When we get home, we're going to hang Senna's greave up on our cabin wall, with the rest of our keepsakes."

Kale smiled, and pressed soft lips to Amber's shoulder. "I'd like that."

"Shale won't mind, will she? She did find it, after all."

“Not in the slightest. Shale knows we’ll take good care of it.”

“That we will. Senna saved you, I owe her everything for that. And when I meet her in the Elysian Fields, I intend to thank her for it.”

“That’s if you get in.”

Amber drove an elbow back into Kale’s ribs. “Very funny.”

“Ow. You definitely won’t get in if you keep attacking injured, defenseless women.”

“Defenseless, you?” Amber scoffed. “Hardly.”

“That may have been a bit of a stretch.” Kale chuckled at Amber’s pointed look. “All right, a lot.”

Amber grinned as she settled into her bedroll. A yawn soon overtook Kale, and she nuzzled into Amber’s neck.

“Are you still cold?”

“Not with you as my blanket.”

Kale gave her an affectionate squeeze. “Anytime, Amber. You know that.”

“I’M GLAD TO be back in my own clothes.” Kale looked down at herself. The shirt and trousers she’d worn yesterday had now been replaced by her usual skirt and top. “Don’t get me wrong, Amber, they certainly came in handy down in those caves, but I don’t know how you wear them all the time—I’d overheat, especially when training or sparring.”

“You get used to it,” Amber said. “Remember, I’ve worn such clothes since I was young, so I barely think about it. Though it’d be nice to have more variety to my selection of clothes.”

To Kale’s despair, she noticed Amber was mixing another concoction of herbs for her to drink. Unfortunately for Kale, her head was still hurting, so she needed the pain relief. The drink really was vile, but it was the better of two evils, so she’d just have to force it down. She was somewhat envious of Shale, whose pain had apparently eased, for she’d turned down the offer of pain relief.

Amber swilled some water into the mug, and stirred in the herbs with a wooden spoon. She carried it to Kale.

“Thanks.” Kale accepted the drink and took a sip. “Ugh.” She pulled a disgusted face. “On second thought, take it away.” She tried to pass the mug back to Amber, but Amber shook her head.

“Drink it down. You know it helps.”

Kale relented, pinching her nose to stop the awful smell from wafting into her nostrils. She concentrated solely on the mug, taking as long a drink as she could, trying to finish it in one go. She had to stop, and was discouraged to find the mug was still half full. “This is torture. It’s bad enough that you get injured, but then this? I don’t know which is worse.”

The only saving grace, in Kale’s opinion, was that breakfast was currently being served—Shale and Blake were nearby, dishing out food onto plates. Though given the late hour, it was actually time for lunch. They’d all slept in, relaxing after yesterday’s events. Kale felt rested from the long sleep, but a decision had been made to stay put for the day, or however long it took, to give Kale a chance to recover from her injury. Kale had insisted that one day would be enough, but Blake had told her to wait until the next morning, and reassess how she felt then. There was no major rush to return home, so they could delay if needed.

Shale brought a plate of food to Kale. Once Kale had finished her drink of herbs, Shale swapped her mug for the plate. “Here. This will help to take away the taste.”

Kale ate some quickly, more than relieved when the vile taste in her mouth was replaced by the much nicer taste of bread, then cheese, and finally apple. No one felt like hunting, so they were making do with the supplies they had leftover from their visit to the town of Pyrrhos. The bread was now a tad stale, but it was edible, so Kale didn’t complain. She gave Shale a grateful nod, since her mouth was full.

Silence fell as the four women tucked into their meal.

Kale felt eyes on her, and she saw Shale was regarding her oddly, her lips twitching as if amused by something. Kale immediately knew the reason—the bandage around her head. She realized that if the roles were reversed, she’d be teasing Shale non-stop, making every quip she could about how silly Shale looked. Though Kale had no wish to look stupid, she didn’t want the wound to become infected, so the ridiculous bandage would have to stay in place. At least for now.

Kale scowled at her twin. “Not one word, Shale.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“I can see what you’re thinking.” Kale raised a cautionary finger. “Not one word.”

Shale nodded seriously, then her face cracked into a smile.

“So, Blake,” Amber pushed a lock of red curly hair behind an ear. “Are you looking forward to being back in charge of the tribe?”

“Yes and no,” Blake said. “Yes, because it’s in my nature, and I miss the day-to-day running of things. I like the routine.” She bit into her apple and chewed it as she appeared to think about her next words. “But no, because when I get bogged down with work, or caught up in something that needs my immediate attention, I can’t always spend as much time as I’d like with Shale.”

Kale jostled Shale with her arm. “She’s worried what you get up to.”

Blake gave her a look. “I’m not even going to dignify that with a response.”

“I manage just fine, Blake,” Shale said. “I know you have important work to do.” Her voice lowered conspiratorially. “Kale’s always bothering me for attention anyway, so it’s not like I get lonely.”

Kale made an indignant noise in the back of her throat. Not satisfied with just that, she picked up the apple core on her plate, the juicy flesh of it long gone, and hurled it at Shale.

In an impressive display of honed reflexes, Shale’s hand whipped up and caught the core shooting toward her, just before it struck her in the chest.

Amber whistled. “Nice catch.”

Kale had the desire to throw something else, but there was nothing left on her plate. “I think you’ll find it’s the other way around, Shale.”

“That may be.” Shale shrugged a shoulder. “But you know you love me anyway.”

Three sets of eyes locked onto Kale, all clearly awaiting her response. Kale grew self-conscious, which was a rare state for her to be in. She narrowed her eyes. “Shale, I swear...”

“What?” Shale batted innocent eyelashes, though the eyes behind were chock full of mischief. “You don’t love me?” Her lower lip stuck out in a pout. “Your own twin?”

“We’re in public,” Kale said, from between gritted teeth.

“Don’t mind us.” Blake smiled amusedly, obviously enjoying herself.

“We’re hardly public, Kale.” Amber folded her arms, as if in protest. “I’m your partner, and Blake’s your sister-in-law.”

“Fine.” Kale released a sigh. “I do, yes.”

Shale shook her head, looking confused. “You do, what?”

Kale clenched her jaw. “You’re not going to relent until I say it, are you?”

A smirk. “No.”

“My head is starting to hurt again,” Kale said, in an attempt to get out of it.

Amber laughed. “No one’s falling for that.”

Another sigh. “All right, all right.” Kale kept them all waiting for a moment longer. “I love you, Shale.” As everyone smiled, she added, “But not so much when you embarrass me by emotional displays like these.” Shale grinned. “I love you, too.” She put down her plate, crawled to where Kale was seated and hugged her.

“What did I just say, Shale?” Despite her protestations, Kale returned the embrace.

Chapter Twenty-three

THE NEXT DAY the four Amazons left the stone forest behind, and headed toward home. Each woman was now rested and well enough to travel. The group walked at a slow pace, traveling back the same way they’d come—using the same routes that they knew were easily passable.

While on their journey, autumn had descended, and had now firmly taken control from summer. Many of the trees had changed color, from simple greens to a rich variety of browns, rusts, and oranges.

“I love this time of year.” Blake stopped to admire a particularly bright tree, its red leaves striking against the backdrop of blue sky. “The trees are so pretty.”

Though the seasons had changed, the weather hadn’t yet cooled enough to be of issue, and they were all hoping to make it back to the sanctuary of their cabins before the inevitable decline of nice weather.

Blake bent down and picked up a red leaf that had fallen off its branch. The color was vivid, and had attracted her eye. She studied it for a moment, then let it flutter to the ground once more. Most of the trees near their village were fir trees, and didn’t offer the variety of color change that these smaller trees did, so she was taking the time to appreciate their beauty. There was no rush to continue, as Amber and Kale were behind a short ways.

“I bet Zayla will be glad to see us,” Shale said.

“I’ll be glad to see Mother myself.” Blake smiled at the thought. “I’ve missed her.”

She enjoyed the close relationship she shared with her mother. She had always been able to confide in her, even when she went through the awkward adolescent phase that every young girl went through. Both she and her mother were similar in nature and temperament, and they shared the same views, so they rarely ever disagreed.

Shale linked her arm through Blake’s as they walked onward. “That’s understandable. You two are very close.”

“I can’t wait to show her what we’ve found. She’ll be moved beyond words to see Zephyra’s urn.”

“And I can’t wait to tell Zayla about our trip, and how much trouble you’ve been getting into.”

“It wasn’t just me, Shale!”

“No, but you certainly played your part.” A droll chuckle. “Don’t let me forget the snake.”

“As if I could,” Blake muttered.

“Oh, and that reminds me, I’ve thought of something that will change your mind about sleeping outside. Something special.” “You *hope* will change my mind.” Blake wasn’t at all convinced that she could be persuaded otherwise. “I highly doubt it myself.”

“Well, it’s the best I could come up with, so if it doesn’t work I give up.” Shale smiled impishly. “But let’s just say I’m pretty confident about it.”

Intrigued by both her tone, and by her mysterious smile, Blake nodded. “Go on then. What is it?”

“Not yet. The timing has to be right.”

Blake stopped in her tracks and turned to face Shale, raising her voice in disbelief. “You’re going to leave me wondering?”

Shale shrugged. “Anticipation builds suspense.”

Disgruntled, Blake placed her hands on her hips. “At least give me a clue?”

“All right.” Shale’s finger rose to her lips, tapping against them as if in thought. “It isn’t something I can tell you, it’s something that must be shown.”

“Show me the clue then.”

Shale sniggered. “No. You’ve misunderstood my meaning. That is the clue.”

“What?” Blake felt her brow crease in confusion. She ran through Shale’s words in her head. “That could mean anything, Shale.”

“Well that’s all you’re getting.” Shale gave another mysterious smile. “It will make perfect sense when you see what I have planned.” As Blake made an unhappy face, Shale said, “I promise you’ll like it. Trust me.”

Blake nodded, making herself content with that. She relinked her arm through Shale’s, and started forward once more. “I’m going to hold you to that.”

Shale grinned cockily. “You won’t be disappointed.”

SHALE WAS BUSY setting up camp for the night. She’d had to search for the perfect setting for a while longer than usual, because she needed the area to be sheltered, which usually meant amongst the trees. But for tonight, for her special plan, she needed to have a clear, open view of the night sky above. She’d finally found the perfect spot—a meadow which was encircled at its edge by trees. The meadow was beautiful. The surrounding autumnal trees added a lovely splash of color, though at the moment they were all shaded gray in the moon’s glow, and a small brook gurgled nearby, the sound giving the campsite a relaxed, soothing feel.

It was their last night under the stars, for tomorrow they’d reach their village, and Blake would consign herself to sleeping indoors only. Shale had worried that she wouldn’t even get a chance to carry out her plan, as the last few nights the weather hadn’t been suitable. Fortunately, tonight the weather was perfect—there wasn’t a cloud in sight, and the sky was crystal clear, leaving the stars free to shine down in all their splendor.

Shale hadn’t lit a campfire, though she had made one so she could light it later. She knew it got cold through the night, but she couldn’t light it yet, as the light of the fire would drown out some of the shine from the stars. The moon was big and bright in the sky, so the fire wasn’t needed to see, and Shale sat back to admire the camp, pleased by the setting.

She had told Blake to wait a while before coming to join her, so she could get everything set up for her special surprise. Blake had agreed easily, as if eager herself to see what Shale had in store.

They had been traveling for a while now, so making love under the open night sky was far from a new experience. However, it was one of those previous encounters that had inspired the thought behind tonight’s rendezvous, and Shale knew that it would be special.

As always, she had placed both bedrolls together, side by side. She crossed to them now, stripping out of her clothes and placing the items on her travel bag. Naked, she stretched out on her side, head propped up on an elbow, to wait for Blake's arrival.

BLAKE AMBLED THROUGH the meadow toward Shale. "I almost walked right by you, without a fire to guide me. How come..." Her trail of thought vanished completely as she saw that Shale was naked on their bedrolls. She grinned broadly. "Well. I like the look of this already."

Shale gave a flattered laugh as she stood. She walked slowly to Blake, the moonlight highlighting some parts of her bare flesh, while casting shadows over others.

"You're so beautiful, Shale." Blake couldn't stop herself from reaching out and touching Shale when she came into reach.

Shale moved Blake's hand up from her stomach, and brought it to rest over her heart. Her blue eyes held Blake's captive. "I love you, Blake."

A tender smile. "And I love you."

Blake held still as Shale removed her clothes, both women eager to be rid of the material between them. Once Blake was naked, Shale led her to the bedrolls, and as they lay down, she pushed Blake gently onto her back.

Fingertips caressing Shale's face, Blake guided their lips together, mouths melding as one. Blake flicked her tongue against Shale's lips, seeking access, and they parted willingly, taking her inside. Their tongues danced with one another, playful at first, but as their desire increased, the teasing was forgotten, replaced instead by a carnal hunger which threatened to swallow them whole.

Blake slid her hand down Shale's body, but Shale gripped her wrist, stopping its descent. Shale pinned the hand beneath hers, beside

Blake's head, and did the same to her other hand.

"I want you to lie still. Just let me pleasure you."

"Pleasuring you does pleasure me."

Still pinned down, Blake raised her head and captured Shale's mouth, kissing her with such unrestrained passion that Shale's grip faltered—allowing her hands a chance to try again. Blake

slipped a hand between their entangled bodies and crept downward, but before she could reach her destination, Shale stopped her once more.

“Blake,” Shale chuckled as Blake released a frustrated groan. “You’re not making this easy on me. Please, just lie still.” Shale started to kiss her way down Blake’s neck. “Just relax.”

By the time Shale reached her breasts, Blake was engrossed on the attention being lavished upon her, and her hands stayed in place when Shale released them.

“Don’t look at me, Blake. Focus on the stars overhead. Focus on what you feel.”

Blake did as Shale requested, fixing her gaze on the twinkling heavens above. She arched her back as her nipple was sucked into Shale’s mouth, and she felt the responsive desire flood between her legs. Her other breast ached to be touched, and she gasped when Shale’s hand began to knead the soft skin, her mouth still working expertly, not relenting for even a moment.

“Shale, that feels...Oh!”

As Shale sucked, stroked, and fondled, Blake felt her wetness build, the fire in her loins burning to an almost unbearable degree. Her hands disobeyed, and they sank into Shale’s luscious hair, urging her downward to where Blake needed her most. When Shale cooperated, Blake obediently let her hands fall by her sides, so she could do as Shale wished and concentrate on the sensations.

The stars were glorious overhead, and they completely filled Blake’s vision, twinkling down as if they were just for her. She moaned in anticipation as she felt Shale settle between her legs, the warm breath sending shivers up Blake’s spine.

Blake whimpered when Shale’s tongue ran through her hot folds, and her hips surged up for more contact. A loud, delighted cry escaped her as Shale delved harder into her, tongue lapping fervently for one moment, then sucking as if trying to devour her the next.

Blake couldn’t control her hands any longer, and they dug into Shale’s hair, pressing her closer. Gyrating against Shale’s mouth, her need ever rising, Blake felt herself drift away, like she was floating free of her body, soaring up amongst the stars. The only connection she had to this plane was Shale’s wonderful, persistent touch, and the feel of Shale’s love grounded her, kept her safe. Blake’s whole existence was Shale. Shale filled her. Completed her.

When Blake’s climax hit, it was so powerful she could only gasp in its hold, panting as the stars streaked across the sky. She thought for a moment they were shooting stars, but as she came down off the wave of ecstasy, Blake felt moisture on her cheeks, and realized her vision had blurred because she was crying. She had been so moved by the experience she’d been reduced to tears.

Shale came back up Blake’s body, and gently rolled them so she was beneath. Shale wrapped comforting arms around Blake and held her tightly.

“I’m right here, sweetheart. Shh. I’m here.” Shale laid a soft, soothing kiss on Blake’s forehead. As Blake recovered, Shale stroked her hair with a tender hand.

“Shale, that was...”

“Special?” she asked hopefully.

Blake lifted her head out of the hollow of Shale’s neck, and gazed at her in complete adoration. “More than special, love.” She brushed their lips together in a heartfelt kiss. “You convinced me. I’ll sleep outside again.”

“Really?” Shale looked elated by Blake’s words. “What about snakes?”

Blake shrugged. “Like you said, it was a one time thing. Tonight was incredible, Shale, I’m not going to deny us more of this.”

Shale returned Blake’s kiss, then a sultry smile formed. “The night’s far from finished, Blake.”

With a matching smile, Blake worked her hand down Shale’s long torso, and this time, Shale opened her thighs to welcome her. Shale appeared more than ready to accept her, and Blake watched as Shale’s face transformed in pleasure as she entered her, feeling a familiar stirring in her own loins at the arousing sight.

Blake slid her fingers deeper into Shale’s slick wetness, and Shale groaned. Blake suddenly held still, simply enjoying the feel of being inside Shale. Blake could feel every twitch, every jerk of Shale’s body from inside and she felt Shale’s muscles trembling as Shale clearly fought to remain still.

Blake continued her exquisite torture for several moments, building the delicious tension ever higher.

Shale swallowed hard. “Blake...please.”

Blake smiled and passionately kissed her, her tongue sliding against Shale’s in an ardent caress. Her fingers withdrew, though not all the way, then she plunged back into Shale with a firm thrust.

“Oh, Blake!”

As Blake drove in and out of Shale, she built a steady rhythm, Shale’s hips lifting in momentum to match her thrusts. Blake increased her pace when Shale began to pant, her breathing fast and unrestrained. She worked Shale into a frenzy, and as they kissed, Blake swallowed Shale’s cry of delight as she climaxed.

Blake's own need had resurfaced with a vengeance, pleasuring Shale and seeing her respond, never failed to ignite her passion. She didn't stop in her ministrations, and kept her fingers pumping into Shale with swift, sharp strokes.

Shale recovered quickly, moaning as the friction clearly stimulated her once more.

The insistent throbbing between Blake's thighs was now unbearable, and she guided Shale's hand to her hot, pulsating center. As if seeing her desperate need, Shale didn't keep her waiting, and delved up into Blake with a powerful hand.

"Oh! Gods, yes!"

Shale moved quickly, as if setting her pace to match Blake's movement inside her. Blake rocked against Shale enthusiastically, hips pounding onto Shale's hand as she ground against her in rising pleasure.

Blake was panting strongly now. "Kiss me, Shale."

Shale looked all too happy to oblige and their lips met eagerly. As Blake's tongue surged into Shale's mouth, Shale drove up deeper into Blake, catching her gasp as they both began to writhe in need, desperate to peak.

Their hips mashing together caused a delicious friction, and both women began to thrash, their cries of ecstasy muffled somewhat by their impassioned kiss.

Blake collapsed on top of Shale, gasping for breath. Shale's arms wound around Blake in a secure embrace, and Blake smiled as Shale laid gentle kisses on her face.

"You convinced me," Blake said, feeling the chest beneath her reverberate as Shale chuckled. "Though in hindsight, perhaps I should pretend otherwise, then you'll have to keep trying."

The chuckle deepened. "I'm willing if you are."

Chapter Twenty-four

AS THE RETURNING travelers set foot in their native village, Blake quickly glanced around, knowing that as soon as word of the queen's homecoming spread, they'd be swamped by a reception of inquisitive Amazons.

Blake would be more than happy to greet them, to see her tribe, but before they inevitably converged, she wanted to look at the village itself. She was pleased to see that everything was now back to normal after the storm. All the debris had been cleared, everything that had needed repairing when they'd left had now been fixed, and Nephele's cabin had been fully rebuilt, the structure standing proudly at the edge of the village.

"They've done a good job on Nephele's cabin," Amber said as they walked onward.

"They have indeed." Blake hadn't doubted that her mother would take good care of things while she was gone, for Zayla had been running the tribe for a lot longer than Blake had. Transitioning between two queens could sometimes be difficult for a tribe, as each queen tended to have very different styles and methods. However, this definitely wasn't the case here, as Zayla had taught Blake everything she knew. Both women had a very similar style of leadership.

A group of milling Amazons seemed to suddenly notice their approach, for a couple of them loudly announced their arrival, with hollers, whistles, and cries of greeting.

"And so it begins." Kale shook her head, though she wore a smile on her face.

"Don't mention the urn just yet." Blake dropped her voice so no one overheard. "I want to tell my mother first."

Three nods of agreement met the words.

"My Queen, you're back." A middle-aged Amazon dipped her head respectfully to Blake. "I hope you had a good journey?"

"I did, Eleni. Thank you. And how have you all fared, while I've been away?"

"Alaela had her baby—a girl. She has named her Delphinia. They're both doing well."

"That is good news. I'll go and visit them, give Delphinia my blessing."

Blake, as queen, blessed every baby girl born, to welcome her into the tribe, and into their new extended family.

A second woman spoke up. "Kathonia broke her ankle. She took a fall while out hunting. But she's recovering fine."

Blake nodded, making a note to visit Kathonia as well. She didn't get a chance to respond verbally, as Aris suddenly appeared amongst the gathering crowd, her tall, powerful physique making easy headway through the cluster of women.

"My Queen." Aris tipped her head, then held out a hand to Blake. "I'm pleased to see you return safely."

Instead of clasping Aris's hand, Blake stepped forward and embraced her. She felt Aris return the hold, and Blake patted the chief warrior on the back before withdrawing.

Aris smiled teasingly. "I hope my warriors took good care of you?"

"They're all injured, I am not. What does that tell you?" Blake told of their injuries as they couldn't be seen—Amber's collarbone was covered by her clothes, Shale's bump on her head was disguised by her hair, as was Kale's. She noted Kale did have some slight bruising by her hairline, but knew the worst of it was under her dark locks. The tell-tale bandage had been removed days ago. The only visible wound was the cut on Shale's arm, but it was minor, so she knew Aris would think little of it.

Aris looked surprised. "Did you run into some trouble?"

"Nothing we couldn't handle. I'll tell you all about it later," Blake said. "I actually have an important task for you and your warriors to undertake, Aris, so don't work your warriors too hard for the next few days. They'll need to be rested."

"Yes, my Queen." Though it was apparent Aris was curious to know more, she seemed to recognize that they'd just returned from a long journey, and needed time to settle themselves. Aris clasped arms with Amber, then Shale, and finally Kale.

"It'll be good to have you back in the ranks," she told them.

The crowd abruptly parted, and Zayla emerged, a warm, welcoming smile on her face. "Blakaea, I'm so happy to see you."

Grinning broadly, Blake moved into Zayla's open arms. "Likewise, Mother. I've missed you."

The embrace was sweet, and a cheer rang through the Amazonian crowd, in celebration of their two beloved queens, reunited.

AFTER TAKING THE time to chat to her fellow sisters, and especially to close friends, Blake was ushered into Zayla's personal cabin. Blake didn't protest, eager for the privacy that the quiet cabin provided. Though she enjoyed being in the company of her tribe again, and learning about what had gone on in their absence, Blake was keen to talk to her mother.

Shale crossed to the dining table in the corner and sat herself down on a chair, as if to give Blake and Zayla a moment.

Blake embraced Zayla again, wanting another, longer hug. No words were exchanged between them, but they weren't needed—the bond was in the touch, mother and daughter equally thrilled to be alongside one another once more.

“Come.” Zayla took Blake's hand and guided her to the table where Shale sat waiting. “Sit. You must be tired after your long journey.” Zayla patted Shale's cheek caringly as she passed. “Did you enjoy the trip to your old village, Shale? I know you were looking forward to it.”

“I did. Kale and I showed Blake all of our favorite places.”

“It was beautiful, Mother. To see where Shale grew up—I can picture it now, rather than just imagining. Though you won't believe what they got up to as adolescents.” She humorously shook her head. “Oh, and the scenery was breathtaking.”

Zayla chuckled at Blake's gushing review. “I can tell you enjoyed it, Blakaea. And I'm glad. I must say I was worried that it would be hard on you, Shale. To revisit.”

“It was at times,” Shale said. “But Blake helped me through it.” Her blue eyes met Blake's green, and they shared a smile. Blake took Shale's hand and brought it to rest in her lap, their fingers intertwining together.

Zayla nodded approvingly. “I see I don't need to ask how married life is going.”

“It's wonderful,” Blake answered anyway. “Thank you for taking care of things here, so Shale and I could spend some time together.”

“You're quite welcome, Blakaea.”

“To say thank you properly, Blake and I have brought you back a present.” Shale tipped her head down to Blake's satchel.

“There was no need for you to...” Zayla gasped when Blake removed the dazzling bejeweled urn from her bag.

“Zephyra's urn,” Zayla whispered reverently. “You found her.”

“We've brought her home.” Blake scooted her chair closer and wound an arm around Zayla as tears of joy ran down her mother's cheeks. As Blake had done before her, Zayla raised the urn to her lips and kissed it.

“Thank Artemis for restoring Zephyra to her rightful place after all these years.” Zayla released a happy laugh. “You have redeemed Sappheire, restored her honor. Our ancestor will be smiling down on you, Blakaea, on all of you who helped to bring Zephyra home.” In obvious elation, Zayla kissed both Blake and Shale on their cheeks.

Blake savored the sight of seeing her mother so happy. She knew that such a sacred relic would mean a lot to everyone in the tribe, but to herself and her mother, the find was also a personal one, so it meant that much more. “It means that the Amazon we discovered, who died in her attempt to bring the map back home, didn’t die in vain. Her sacrifice did bring Zephyra back to us.”

Another tear fell from Zayla’s eyes. “She’ll be remembered both for her bravery, and for her sacrifice. We must look into choosing a name for her, so we can honor her properly.”

Blake nodded. “I’ll think on it.” Shale withdrew the second item from the satchel. “We also found Sappheire’s royal crest. And the rest of the stolen bounty. That map was all we’d hoped for and more.”

Zayla blinked in shock, clearly not expecting more revelations. “My goodness! You have been busy. This truly is a great day for the Amazon nation.” She handed the urn off to Blake, then took the royal crest from Shale. “It’s lighter than I thought it would be.”

“Not after carrying it around for days, it isn’t,” Blake said dryly.

Looking amused, Zayla reached out and gave Blake’s knee a squeeze. “I appreciate your efforts, Blakaea.”

Blake smiled and pointed to Shale. “I didn’t do all that much, it was mostly Shale and Kale who did all the heavy lifting. Amber was injured, so I wouldn’t let her—” She broke off as Zayla touched her arm.

“Why was Amber injured?”

“Because Tanis tried to kill her. Well, actually, it was Kale she was mainly after, since she killed Theron, but Tanis wanted revenge on Shale as well, so...” Blake felt Zayla press her arm once more, and she stopped mid-sentence.

“Who is this Tanis?”

“Theron’s sister.”

Zayla frowned in confusion. “I thought Theron was Shale’s brother?”

“He was,” Blake said.

Zayla’s eyes widened. “My goodness, Shale, your mother was a fertile woman!”

Shale creased up into laughter, as if finding the situation highly comical. “Tanis was Theron’s adopted sister. No relation to me or Kale.”

Blake suddenly realized that in her haste to fill her mother in on what had happened, she was missing key details, leaving poor Zayla looking quite perplexed. Blake giggled at her oversight. “Sorry, Mother.”

Zayla waved off her apology. “Start from the beginning. I want to hear all about it.”

SHALE FELT A lot lighter as she entered the healer’s lodge, having left the satchels of gold for safekeeping with Zayla. She closed the door behind Blake, then opened it again when she sensed Kale’s approach.

Appollonia glanced up from her desk, a broad smile forming on her face. “Blake. Amber. And my favorite twins. Welcome home.”

Kale snorted in amusement. “Do you even know any other twins?”

“No. But even if I did, you would still be my favorite, for you were kind enough to agree to let me study you.”

Kale scrunched up her nose. “I’d hoped you’d forgotten.”

Appollonia shook her pale blonde hair. “I haven’t.”

Blake chuckled. “They have come for an examination of sorts.”

“Oh? Are you hurt?” Appollonia looked specifically at Shale as she spoke.

“Why do you assume it’s me?”

“Because it usually is,” Appollonia said directly.

Shale couldn’t hold back her smile. “Not this time. It’s Amber and Kale who need checking.”

“Actually, Shale.” Blake placed a hand on Shale’s back and lightly pushed her forward. “Let Appollonia check you too. That was a bad knock you took to the head.”

“There’s no need. I’m fine.”

“Head wounds can be tricky, Shale, let me take a look.”

As Shale moved to the nearest bed, Kale sat down on the middle bed, and Amber took the last.

Appollonia shook her head, though it appeared good-natured. “You’ve only just come back, and already you fill my beds. Now you see why I tease you?”

Shale tapped the travel bag that she carried. “I brought back those herbs you wanted. Call it payment for treating us.”

Appollonia laughed. “Did you manage to find many?”

“All that were on the list.”

Appollonia’s eyebrow rose in surprise. “That’s more than I expected. They’ll be of great use, Shale. I, and my future patients thank you.” At Shale’s humble nod, she added, “Now tell me what happened.”

Shale raised her hand to the back of her head, showing Appollonia where the bump was. “We were attacked. I was struck with a rock, though I didn’t get the full blow.”

Appollonia walked around the bed, clearly to take a better look. She felt the bump carefully, then peered into Shale’s eyes, as if checking for abnormalities. “Have you experienced any dizziness since? Nausea?”

“No, only at the time. The swelling has gone down some since it happened. It’s still a bit tender, but it doesn’t really bother me.”

“That’s fine, Shale.” Appollonia squeezed Shale’s arm, and briefly inspected the cut there. “You seem all right to me.” She moved on to Kale.

“Same thing happened to me.” Kale indicated the side of her head. “But I took the full force.”

Appollonia probed around the area. “I take it you lost consciousness?”

“She was out for a while,” Shale said.

“I had to rest for a day or so, but no other problems have arisen.” Kale pulled a face. “Except for drinking that vile painkiller, those herbs made me want to be sick.”

Appollonia waved her comment off. “Everyone says that. But no one complains that they’re ineffective.” “No,” Kale said. “They do help with the pain.”

“I can’t see any infection. Who stitched you up?”

“Blake did. Why?” Kale narrowed her eyes at Blake. “Has she scarred me for life?”

“No, not at all.” Appollonia looked impressed. “Blake has done a fine job.”

Blake smirked at Kale. Then she smiled at the healer. “I had a good teacher.”

Appollonia seemed pleased by the comment. “You should really have a bandage on it, Kale, to keep it covered.”

“We tried!” Amber threw up her hands in exasperation. “She wouldn’t keep it on.”

“It looks ridiculous. I’m not wearing one.”

“Well I can’t make you, but I do advise it.” Appollonia lifted Kale’s arm, as if to assess the burn there. “This is healing very nicely.”

Shale began to lay out all the plants they’d gathered on the table in the corner, taking great care not to damage any of the foliage. Blake assisted her for a moment, then turned to regard Appollonia.

“How are the new recruits coming along? Do you still have three willing to learn?”

Appollonia smiled amusedly. “I haven’t scared any more away, if that’s what you’re asking. They’re coming on well, but I still have a lot to teach them. It’ll be a long process.” She paused briefly. “But it’ll be worthwhile in the end, so I can’t complain.”

As Appollonia moved on to the last bed, Amber dropped one shoulder of her top, revealing the wound on her collarbone.

“My, you have all been in the wars. Knife slice?”

Amber nodded. “Good guess. Though I suppose you see enough to recognize the signs.”

“I do, indeed. But I don’t see many people who’ve been bashed in the head with a rock.” Appollonia’s smile was droll. “I imagine most people duck.”

“It wasn’t our fault!” the twins protested in unison.

“And anyway, I tried,” Shale added.

“They just like to keep me busy,” Appollonia said to Amber, as if neither woman were present. She gave a nod, and Amber readjusted her top. “None of you need me. Perhaps I should be training up you four to be healers as well.”

“Oh, no, I’m not getting roped into that.” Kale quickly got to her feet.

“It was a joke, Kale. I don’t think you have the right temperament for such a role.”

Kale frowned as everyone chuckled. After a moment, her frown cleared, as if she’d realized Appollonia was right. “I’d tell the patients to stop complaining and to toughen up.”

“That’s what I figured.” Appollonia patted Kale’s shoulder as she started for the door. “I’ll see you and Shale later.” Her lips quirked. “To study.”

Kale stopped in her tracks. “You know, I never actually agreed to that.”

Appollonia didn’t falter, and the pat to Kale’s arm turned commiserative. “The blow to your head has affected your memory. I will see you soon.”

Shale laughingly pushed Kale toward the door. “You will. Even if I have to drag Kale here.”

Kale’s brow rose in challenge. “I’d like to see you try.”

KALE FLOPPED BONELESSLY onto the bed, pleased to be back in their cabin at last. She chuckled when Amber bounced onto the bed beside her. Kale purposely spread her arms out wide and covered Amber’s face with her arm.

“Oi.” Amber swatted the arm aside.

“I wonder if I can convince someone to polish my weapons? A hero shouldn’t have to do such a menial task.” Kale glanced down to her shoes, which were filthy from the long trip. She kicked them off her feet. “They can clean my boots while they’re at it.”

“If by someone, Kale, you mean me, then no, you can do it yourself.”

Kale snickered. “I didn’t mean you. I was thinking of one of the young warriors, they’re always eager to please.”

“That’s terrible, Kale. You’ll do no such thing.”

Kale sighed heavily. “Fine. I’ll do it myself.” She grinned. “I really am a hero.”

Amber’s tone dripped with sarcasm. “Yes, Kale, you’re a hero for cleaning your own boots. And you weren’t the only one who found Zephyra’s urn, you know.”

“Yes, a beautiful flame-haired warrior was beside me.”

Amber gave her a flattered smile. “Beautiful, huh?”

Kale nodded sincerely, holding brown eyes captive. “The most beautiful in the tribe.” She lovingly played with a curl of red hair. “Which is fortunate, as now that I’m a hero, I’m going to have to fight to keep the women off me.”

Amber squealed, and flipped herself so she was on top of Kale. “You are so egotistical.”

Kale didn’t even try to refute it. She nodded knowingly, completely unrepentant. “You would be too if you were dating the most beautiful woman in the tribe.”

Amber beamed. “Nice recovery.”

Kale raised her head and stole a kiss. “I’m glad to be back in our own private cabin.” Her lips twitched. “And in our own private bed.”

Amber ran a teasing hand up Kale’s leg. “We should really unpack.” Kale nodded, seeing Amber’s surprised look. “All right. I’ll do it. You stay here.”

Kale rolled them both, then got off Amber. She picked up their two travel bags and took them across to the table. Kale hastily tipped out one satchel, then the other. As clothes, hairbrushes, bedrolls, and other supplies tumbled out, they skittered on the table’s surface.

Leaving them in a messy, piled up jumble, Kale tossed the now empty bags beneath the table, and crossed back to the bed. “There,” she said with a flourish of her hand. “We’re unpacked.”

Amber giggled. “May I say what a great job you’ve done.” She pulled Kale on top of her, kissing her in earnest.

Between kisses, Kale gave a scintillating smile. “Just wait until you see my next trick.”

BLAKE RELEASED A happy sigh as she closed the cabin door behind her. She took a long look at her and Shale’s personal chambers, reacquainting herself. Everything was exactly as they’d left it. She felt instantly comfortable, the space was a reflection of them. It was their sanctuary. “It’s good to be home.”

“It is.” Shale removed her travel bag and hung it over the back of the closest chair. Then she did the same with Blake’s. She removed her boots and went to the bed, perching on its edge. “Blake, I’ve been thinking on what you asked, about me joining the council.”

Blake looked up from undoing the fastenings on her boots. “Hold on.” She hurriedly yanked off her footwear. She was interested in what Shale had to say, and wanted to give her full, undivided attention. She crossed the floor and joined Shale on the bed, sitting beside her. “Go on.”

“I accept your offer. I’d like to become a member of the council.”

“That’s marvelous, Shale. I’m so pleased.” Blake rested her hand on Shale’s thigh. “You’ll make a fine addition.”

Shale smiled. “But before you inform the council, I want to catch up on past meetings, learn what I can so I at least know what people are talking about.”

Blake nodded favorably. “I’ll fill you in on what you need to know. I have some documents also, that you could look at.”

“That would be helpful.” Shale wrapped an arm around Blake’s waist and tugged her onto her lap. “I already have a notion that I’d like to put forward.”

“Somebody’s keen. What is it?”

“I’d like to request that the queen gets one day a week off.”

Blake chuckled. “An entire day?” At Shale’s nod, she said, “And what exactly would the purpose be, for this day off?”

Blue eyes twinkled. “So she can spend it in bed with her wife.”

“Hmm. I think the queen might be on board with such an idea, but I can’t vouch for the rest of the council.”

“You think the queen might be on board?” Shale pouted, as if knowing Blake couldn’t resist that look. “I’d hoped for a bit more than that.”

Blake draped her arms around Shale’s neck. “I’m definitely on board. But I don’t see it happening anytime soon.”

“Me neither.” Shale shrugged. “Shame though.”

“Of course,” Blake cupped Shale’s cheek in her palm, “I’m off the rest of today...”

They shared a smile, their lips drawing closer to meet. The kiss was a perfect reflection of their relationship—half passion, half tenderness, and all love.

Chapter Epilogue

BLAKE ROSE FROM her chair, waiting patiently for the Amazons' numerous conversations to cease. One table fell quiet, then another, causing a wave effect as all turned to respectfully regard the queen.

A great feast was awaiting their consumption, but Blake wanted to say a few words beforehand. When silence reigned, and she had everyone's attention, Blake spoke up. "By now you'll have all heard the rumors, and I would just like to clarify that they are indeed correct."

She held up a forestalling hand when excited murmurs arose. "When myself, Shale, Kale, and Amber were recently away, we did discover Zephyra's long lost urn." More gasps from the crowd came forth. "We brought our honored Mother back with us, back home, to her beloved nation." She looked to her right. "Kale."

Knowing of Kale's fondness for applause, Blake had decided to give her the task of revealing the urn in all its glory. Kale looked surprised for an instant, but then a wide grin crossed her face, and she nodded to Blake, as if in appreciation of the gesture.

Blake had positioned the satchel so it was ready and waiting on the table in front of Kale, and as Kale stood and began to open it, many Amazons got to their feet, clearly eager to get a glimpse of the sacred relic.

The urn was revealed to gasps of awe and wonder, and murmurs of acclaim. The urn was placed down on the table, and as the entire tribe of women gathered closer for a better look, cheers and applause rang out, growing louder in intensity as the excitement grew. Several of the warriors gave salutes of commendation. It was true that all of the Amazons appeared amazed by the urn standing before them, but Blake recognized that the praise was equally for them—the four women who'd found and brought back the urn.

Kale clapped a hand on Shale's back, and the other on Amber's, drawing them up out of their seats. "I told you we'd be heroes."

Shale draped an arm across Blake's shoulders. "You do realize we're never going to hear the end of this now?"

Blake wound an arm around Shale's waist, giving her an affectionate squeeze. "Savor the praise, Shale. You've earned it."

"I didn't mean from them. From Kale."

Blake chuckled and looked across to Kale, who was obviously happy to be basking in the exuberant admiration. "You could be right."

"Oh, she is," Kale said with a grin. She took hold of Shale's and Amber's hands and raised them overhead, pumping them skyward.

The cheering Amazons applauded harder, and Blake laughed. Shale gripped Blake's hand and did the same, connecting all four of them together.

They stood united, as the ovation grew louder still, and merry laughter filled the air.

From the heavens above, Zephyra smiled down on her many daughters, her spirit warmed by the bonds of sisterhood.

Her legacy lived on.

About the Author

Sky was born and raised in England. From a young age writing has been her greatest joy, and she likes nothing more than to immerse herself in whatever story she is working on. She also has a passion for the outdoors, and enjoys long walks at the beach or in the countryside. Ideas for several more stories are rattling around inside her head, all of which are just waiting to be written.

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What happens when you finally find the woman of your dreams, but your twin sister despises her?

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The story of Halie Walker and Samantha Takoda Tyler continues a year after they first met in *Love Another Day*. Halie's efforts to reestablish a career while still recovering from previous injuries consume her time and focus, leaving Sam far from the center of her attention and their relationship under emotional strain. Adding to their troubles, someone unknown begins a campaign of attacks. Sam's horse Coco winds up missing, their home is vandalized, and worse. As anxiety builds, Halie's childhood friend, Ronni Summers, provides welcome support, but no one can figure out who is involved in the attacks.

Ronni's brief encounter with Cali Brooks taunts her dreams, but finding her potential soul mate again proves most difficult. As Thanksgiving approaches, a series of events bring Cali into Sam and Halie's life, and almost into Ronni's. New and old friends join together on Thanksgiving Day, but snowfall cuts the gathering short. What follows brings not only the White Dragon, but also revelation, love, and death; the question is: which is brought to whom?

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by A.L. Duncan

Janie O'Grady is a woman quite adapted to her life and circumstances as they are, living in New York City during the Great Depression. A hint of cynicism clouds the cold winter streets and keeps the rum runners strange bedfellows to the Irish mob's bounty in and out of speakeasys, daring to brush shoulders with the neighboring Italian mobs. At a moment where Janie fears for her life she is presented with circumstances which seem like a harsh nudge from the heavens to decide her own destiny.

Feeling there is no other choice, Janie makes the fateful decision to change her identity and move to the Devon countryside on the coastal shores of England, as a Head Gardener to a 17th century manor, where déjà vu and the intrigues of a past life and murder mystery over shadow her life in the big city.

This tale invites you to peek into the pages of one woman's life and follow her incredible story of self-discovery of a very different kind; where looking back at one's past includes connecting the threads of passions and desires of a life lived before. A life lived where one's odyssey must wait to complete the circle in the next life.

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Jess

by Pauline George

Jess is a modern day lesbian Lothario who was so hurt from an emotionally damaging relationship that now she doesn't let anyone get close. She protects herself by keeping her relationships short and sweet. When Jess's sister Josie challenges her to get to know a woman before she jumps into bed with her, Jess is intrigued. How hard can that be?

Although she's a serial monogamist, Jess has deep-seated morals that will be tested to the limit by her carefree acceptance of Josie's challenge. When she falls for her sister's best friend Katie, she suddenly finds her life upended, and she's left wondering if she actually has what it takes to have a lasting and fulfilling relationship. Is she destined to spend her life bed-hopping? Will her ever-growing attraction to Katie be the catalyst for romance, or will Katie's indecision about her life prove to be Jess's downfall?

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The Game of Denial

by Brenda Adcock

Joan Carmichael, a successful New York businesswoman, lost the love of her life ten years earlier. Alone, she raised their four children, always cherishing her deep love for her wife. Her memories of their life together come back even stronger as one of their daughters prepares to marry. Joan and her four adult kids fly to Virginia to meet the groom's family and attend the ceremony at the small horse farm owned by the mother of the fiancé?.

Evelyn"Evey" Chase, also a widow, has secrets in her past, and her memories of her dead husband aren't pleasant. She's concerned about meeting her future daughter-in-law's family, certain that she and her three kids will have little in common with the wealthy New Yorkers. Besides, the thought of two women in a relationship bringing up a family together makes her uncomfortable, even though her daughter-in-law assures her that lesbianism is not hereditary or catching.

When the two women meet they are drawn to one another in a way neither anticipated, and the game of denial begins. Evey fights her attraction and doesn't realize the effect she has on Joan. Joan tries to shake off her feelings, seeing them as a betrayal to the memory of her wife. Besides, isn't Evey Chase straight? After Evey and Joan share an intimate moment at the wedding reception, they are both emotionally terrified and Joan flees. Will Joan overcome the feeling of betraying her former mate and stop denying her desire to be happy again? Can Evey finally face her past in order to accept the love of another woman and the desire to live the life she had once dreamed of?

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