

# AMAZONIA



Sky  
Croft

# *Amazonia*

by

**Sky Croft**

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### **Dedication**

For Bracken, a loyal companion and Golden friend.

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## Prologue

HE WIPED A smear of blood across her face—her blood.

As she struggled to remain conscious, Theron's rough, calloused hand squeezed her jaw tightly, and the pain roused her. An instant later, he removed it and took a few steps back, away from her bound form, causing her to stiffen in anticipation. His torture was relentless, and she wondered how much longer she could last.

The tensing of her muscles was an unconscious reflex and she was alarmed at the amount of pain that coursed through her body at that simple action. She'd been badly beaten and doubted she could escape even if the opportunity presented itself. She wouldn't accept defeat though, and would give everything she had.

Theron cracked his whip solidly against her back. To her dismay, on the second strike, she cried out.

Theron laughed cruelly. "See. The fiercest warriors fall before me. Even the mighty Amazons."

## Chapter One

Six Weeks Earlier

THE SOFT MEADOW grass tickled Shale's legs as she ambled slowly through it. A circling hawk let out a shrill cry overhead, and she tipped her head back, lifting a hand to shade her eyes from the glare of the sun. It was midday, and her favorite time of year— spring.

Shale watched the bird of prey for several moments until it finally disappeared, flying beyond the high fir trees and out of sight.

As always, she never heard her blood sister approach. Kale, like herself, was too good a hunter for that. She knew that Kale was nearby though, she could sense her. Going with her gut instinct, Shale looked to her right, and sure enough, Kale stepped out of the forest and into the meadow, giving her a swift nod in greeting.

It was like looking at her own reflection, and Shale understood why people mistook them for each other. They were identical— sharp chiselled features, pale blue eyes, long dark hair, tall. But close up, she and her twin sister 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. They wore similar clothes too—a dark brown mid-thigh length skirt, a matching short lace-up top, and calf-length boots. A sword strapped to each back was the only weapon that either carried.

“Did you find it?” Shale called. They were searching for a rare herb that their healer needed. It only grew in this part of the valley, and it had taken them since dawn to get here.

Kale tapped the pouch on her hip in confirmation. She held up a couple of rabbits as she approached. “Found dinner, too.”

Shale smiled, pointing to where her own rabbits lay. They thought alike.

“How many did you get?”

“Two,” Shale said. They always competed with one another, though only in good fun, and they nearly always came out the same.

As identical twins, they knew each other inside out, and were as close as two people could be. That in itself caused a lot of problems. They did everything together, so all of the women either of them had dated soon grew tired of sharing their time, and were often jealous of the strong connection between them.

Shale often thanked the gods for the rare and unique bond she shared with Kale, but was beginning to suspect that it meant she would never have a serious romantic relationship. At thirty-four, she had all but given up hope.

Neither twin was short of offers, but despite several attempts on both their parts, they hadn't yet managed to find a middle ground where everyone was kept happy. There was an awkward number in any relationship.

Shale knew they were expecting a lot from a partner, not only did she have to see them as individuals, she had to accept that she wouldn't always come first, and that sharing a bed with one of them, ultimately meant she would be sharing a life with the other as well. This was an unusual and difficult task, and so far no woman had even come close to fulfilling it. When they were younger and more naïve, Kale assured her it was just because they hadn't met the right woman, and said if either of them wanted someone enough, they could all find a way to make it work. Of course, that was before Aeron. Shale, though sceptical, had to admit that Kale was probably right. Shale hadn't truly loved any of her previous partners, though she had cared for them.

Kale, however, had fallen head over heels for a woman named Aeron. She was the longest relationship either of them ever had. They were together for six seasons before Aeron demanded that Kale choose between her and Shale. Shale still felt guilty knowing it was her presence that caused their break up. She'd offered to leave, though, to give them some space, but Kale wouldn't hear a word of it. The fact that Aeron asked Kale to choose had proven that she wasn't the woman Kale thought she was, and Kale ended things there and then. That happened several years ago, and Kale hadn't even looked at another woman since.

Kale dropped the lifeless rabbits onto the ground, her eyes twinkling in mischief.

Shale grinned, recognising the shift. Kale ran at her, long legs powerfully closing the remaining distance. She let out a loud battle cry, but Shale stood her ground. Kale connected solidly with Shale, tackling her to the ground. The expulsion of breath was all that was heard as they grappled together.

Shale managed to get free, and flipped herself from her back onto her feet. Kale immediately lashed out with her foot, trying to sweep Shale's legs out from under her. Shale jumped clear, and got into a fighting stance.

As Kale stood, she deflected a combination of punches, then delivered some of her own. Shale's kick caught her squarely in the stomach, but paid for it when Kale's right hook connected with her jaw. They both backed off slightly, warily circling the other.

Shale shook her head, trying to clear her vision from the stars she was seeing. Kale had a solid punch. She could tell her kick had winded Kale, for Kale was greedily pulling air into her lungs.

Both were excellent fighters in their own right, but together they were unstoppable. Each knew the other's strengths and weaknesses, and as such either compensated for, or deferred to, the other when needed.

They had excelled at fighting at a young age, so had been chosen to become warriors to help protect their tribe. As they grew, their skills and techniques advanced, and their senses were honed. Now, they didn't just fight alongside the other Amazon warriors in their clan, they led them.

Having two people in charge certainly wouldn't have worked in most circumstances, but the twins were unique, and could read each other well.

"How's the jaw?" Kale taunted.

Chuckling, Shale tossed the verbal volley back. "How are your ribs?"

"Better than your jaw."

"Is that so?" Shale listened to her opponent's breathing, and grinned. "You're panting like a wolf."

Kale's eyes narrowed. "Lucky strike. Won't happen again."

"I think I'll be the one to decide that."

A short bark of laughter escaped Kale, despite the obvious attempt to try and keep a scowl on her face. "Your head's starting to swell."

Shale ignored the dig. "Yeah? You must've hit me harder than I thought, I barely felt it. You punch like a sacrificial virgin." She snickered, just managing to get her hands up to protect herself as Kale launched another attack.

They became serious, fighting savagely, and enjoying every moment of it. After a while, sweat began to pour off them, but still they didn't stop. Faster and faster they moved, hands and feet becoming blurred as they traded deadly blows and kicks. Complete focus was needed, a distraction at the wrong moment could prove quite dangerous.

Since their alert senses were so in sync, they both smelled the smoke at the same time. Shale turned away and Kale followed her gaze to the dark pillar of smoke winding its way upward on the horizon.

They both broke into a sprint. That was where their village lay.

SILENT TEARS SLID down Shale's cheeks, and she didn't need to look at Kale to know she was crying also. Although they ran nonstop, and at full pelt, they were too late. Much too late. The fire had all but burned itself out, and all that was left of their village was smoking timbers.

The bodies of their fallen sisters lay everywhere, littering the ground like leaves on an autumn day. Shale turned full circle, searching desperately for the slightest movement. There was none. She had seen many awful things, but this was by far the worst. The stench of death tainted the air all around them, mixed with the acrid smell of smoke and charred flesh. It was nauseating, but both kept their stomachs in check.

Whoever had done this was clever, cleaning up any clue as to who they were. Several of the Amazons' blades were coated in blood, and crimson stains dotted the ground where the enemy had been killed, but no bodies remained. They had to have been skilled and seasoned fighters, their sisters wouldn't have fallen easily. They had even taken the horses.

Kale spotted a close friend and crossed swiftly to her, dropping down beside the prone figure. "Senna?"

Senna lay facedown, so Kale rolled her onto her back. Even from several paces away, Shale closed her eyes. Senna, like many others, had been butchered.

A yell of pure fury emerged from Kale's throat, the sound more animal than human.

Shale sank to her knees in the blood drenched soil, quietly grieving the loss of her friends, her sisters, everyone she had ever known.

Their entire tribe was dead.

SHALE WAS CROUCHED behind a large fir tree, concealed from any watching eyes. "Kale, stop. Wait."

"We've got to cross the river," Kale said.

Shale examined the river before them. It was wide and deep, but they were both strong swimmers, and could easily make it to the other side. "We can't, Kale, you know that," she said quietly, not wanting to give away their position.



Kale gave her an odd look. “Why not? The tracks stop here. It’s clear they crossed the river.”

“I’m not doubting that. But that’s Kedross’s land. We’d be breaking our treaty.”

“Our tribe is dead!” Though Kale’s anger was clear, she kept her voice low.

Shale sighed. As if she could ever forget. Gathering the bodies together for the funeral pyre had been a horrific task that would stay forever etched in her memory. They hadn’t even had time to mourn, for they didn’t want the trail to grow cold.

“We have no treaty! Kedross needs to be punished.”

“You don’t know it was him.”

“Which is why we need to find out for sure. We can pick up the trail on the other side.” Kale started to crawl forward, using the foliage and the falling night sky as cover.

Shale grabbed her top and pulled her back behind the tree. “Wait. We can’t, Kale.” She kept hold of her.

“Someone has to pay for this!”

“You don’t think I want to find out who did this?” Shale snapped back. “That I don’t want to kill every single one of the bastards who murdered our sisters?” She took a breath to try and calm herself. “But you need to think.” Kale never thought things through, she led with her heart. Shale, however, led with her head. “There’s another tribe farther north. If we enter Kedross’s land we’ll be endangering them also. They share our treaty.” She paused to let that sink in. After a moment, Kale nodded, so Shale released her grip.

“Their queen could provide us with reinforcements,” Kale said.

“We should warn them. They could be the next target.”

BLAKE STROLLED OVER to her mother, Zayla, who was surrounded by four Amazons, all clamouring for her attention. As queen, Zayla was always in demand. Blake watched as Zayla listened patiently to each in turn, waiting until they finished before expressing her own opinions.

Zayla tilted her head thoughtfully, the gray strands all but invisible in her fair hair. Despite her many years, she was a distinguished looking woman, her aura exuding a quiet confidence that Blake herself had inherited.

Blake's calf-length boots stirred the dusty dry soil as she moved, and she wondered how long it would be until it rained.

Zayla was tying up the conversation as she greeted her. "Blakaea."

"Princess," the four women said respectfully before departing.

Blake nodded and smiled to them in response. A sturdy woman named Alke passed by, and Blake watched enviously as she joined the rest of the hunters. She focussed on her mother hopefully. "I could do with a walk myself," she said, pointing across the unlit fire pit in the center of the village to where the hunters were now departing.

Zayla laughed. "I take it you've forgotten about the counsel meeting this morning?"

Blake hadn't forgotten. "I'm not needed there. Surely we don't both need to be present?" She looked up at the clear blue sky. "And it's such a nice day to be stuck indoors."

Zayla nodded. "You're right. The two of us aren't needed there."

Blake grinned. "Great, I'll go and catch up with the hunters." She kissed Zayla's cheek. "I'll put in a request for deer." That was Zayla's favorite. As Blake started to leave, she was stopped with a touch to her arm.

"You can lead the meeting," Zayla said. She smiled at Blake's crestfallen expression. "I intend to make the most of this lovely weather."

Blake frowned. "I walked right into that, didn't I?"

"It's for the best. You need to be ready for the role of queen."

Her frown deepened. "I wish you wouldn't talk like that, Mother, you're still young."

"Many have passed who were younger than I. It would be unwise if we didn't prepare. I shall be giving you more responsibilities, Blakaea. I feel you're ready for them. You're a great Amazon princess, but you'll be an even greater queen."

Blake heard the pride in her mother's voice and her heart swelled. "I had an excellent teacher."

Zayla's eyes twinkled. "Did your teacher also train you to be punctual?"

"Of course." Blake glanced to the rising sun and her mouth quirked. The counsel would have already assembled. "I'll make my way there now."

SHALE AND KALE travelled for three long, hard days, each pushing herself relentlessly. Both were physically and emotionally exhausted. They ate and drank on route, only stopping to sleep. And they got little of that, reliving the death of their tribe over and over in their minds.

Once they left the safety of their own territory, the journey became more difficult, having to either barter their way through other people's land, or in some cases skirt around it entirely.

They re-entered Amazon territory early that morning, knowing it to be so by the markings on the trees. That was the first sign they'd had of another tribe.

It was nearly midday when Kale, who was slightly ahead, suddenly whipped up her hand, giving Shale the signal to halt.

Shale stopped instantly, trusting her completely. The light breeze carried voices to her sensitive ears, and she recognised them to be female. Shale silently moved forward until she was side by side with Kale.

The voices were drawing closer, heading straight for them. It would likely be a hunting party, but until they were certain that the voices were indeed from Amazons, they slipped behind the trees, the forest providing them with cover. It was unlikely to be anyone else, but the twins erred on the side of caution, staying perfectly still until the group passed by them. It was a hunting party, consisting of five Amazons.

Shale watched them closely. The group was alert, but the twins gave away nothing, their shallow breathing going unheard. A few more steps, then Shale and Kale moved in sync, emerging fully into the open. Kale let out a shrill whistle to get their attention.

The hunting party whirled around, swords instantly drawn or bows raised. The twins were careful to keep their own hands away from their weapons.

"Easy," Shale said. "We're Amazons, too," she pointed out needlessly, they could tell that from her clothes.

"We request to be taken to your queen," Kale said.

"What tribe are you from?" a small and sturdy woman demanded.

"We have no tribe," Kale said. "They're all dead."

The hunters exchanged distressed looks at the news.

“We really need to speak to your queen. It’s very important,” Shale said diplomatically, noting that now the shock of their sudden presence had worn off, the women were curiously glancing back and forth between her and Kale.

“Well?” Kale said. “Are you going to take us? Or are you just going to stand and look at us all day?”

The blunt statement was uncalled for, though Shale understood exactly why Kale had made it. She also didn’t like to be stared at, but unfortunately everyone responded to their likeness in the same way. It was tiring. Normally Kale wouldn’t have reacted like that, and it was clear to Shale that her sister was in distress, but she could do nothing to ease her torment.

The hunters stiffened, and the woman they had been talking to narrowed her eyes.

Shale tried to keep things friendly, it wouldn’t help matters to get off on the wrong foot. “We’re twins,” again said unnecessarily. “I’m Shale.” When Kale wasn’t forthcoming with her own name, she added, “This is Kale.”

“Alke,” the woman replied, much to Shale’s relief. “We will take you to our queen.”

“Thank you.” Shale smiled at the rest of the women, but no one else introduced themselves. She really didn’t need this. She rubbed her temple, which was beginning to throb.

“This way,” Alke said, then hesitated midstep. “Unless you need to rest first?”

Shale took that to mean that she looked like she felt— exhausted. One glimpse of Kale confirmed that she did. Still, Shale was pleased that Alke had at least asked. “We’re fine, thanks.”

“I’m sure we can keep up,” Kale said dryly. “If your pace is anything like your hunting skills, I’m sure we’ll leave you far behind.”

“Kale!” Shale said in disbelief.

“How dare you!” Alke retorted angrily, as the hunters around her bristled at the insult.

“She didn’t mean that, she’s tired.” Shale tried to smooth things over once more, but it was too late, the damage had been done.

“We’ll take you.” Alke’s tone was hard. “But I warn you our queen does not accept insolence. We have manners in this tribe.”

Kale snorted, stepping forward. “Taught those instead of hunting, were you? We heard you long before you got here. You really made it quite easy for us.”

All but Alke raised their weapons at the twins.

Shale held her hands out pacifyingly. “We don’t want to fight.” She turned on Kale, lowering her voice. “Stop trying to pick a fight. Your anger isn’t for them.” Seeing that her words had little effect, she decided to take another approach. “You’re delaying us.”

Kale stared at her for a long moment, then relented and took a step back.

Shale faced the still simmering hunters, focussing directly on Alke, who seemed to be in charge. “Please, can we go?”

Alke tipped her head, and the weapons were lowered. She took the lead, and the group followed. Alke set a fast pace, and Shale rolled her eyes, her fatigued body protesting every movement.

Well, Shale thought, this is a great start.

NO ONE SPOKE for the entire journey, and Shale was relieved when they finally reached the village. Her body was near collapse, and her willpower alone kept her upright. She knew Kale was in the same state, and hoped that the harsh trek had taught Kale to keep her comments to herself. They had no tribe, and if they wanted to join this one, things would go a lot smoother if they fitted in.

Shale noticed several wood cabins dotted amongst the trees to her left. On the right, an area of land had been cleared of trees, and the ground had been cultivated for growing crops. At the heart of the village lay a large circular clearing, and in the center of it was a substantial fire. Cabins lined either side, perfectly laid out in a row. Farther on and to the left, was what Shale recognised to be the warriors’ training ground, and beyond that was a large hut with bars on the door—the jail. Ahead and to the right were a few more cabins, then the trees grew thick again, the surrounding forest protecting the village well against attack.

Their presence was noticed instantly, and the commotion brought more and more Amazons to them. Someone must have informed the queen, for she was being escorted over by several guards. The gathering crowd made way for her.

Though Shale had never met the queen, she was in no doubt that this was her—a regal air encircled her like a second skin. Shale stood transfixed, the woman was beautiful. Long golden hair framed her face, and her features were delicate, soft. She wore a rust colored bodice, and a dark brown skirt. She looked to be around her age, maybe slightly younger.

The twins dropped to their knees, bowing their heads respectfully.

“Rise,” she told them.

Shale, for a horrifying instant, didn't think she could, her weary legs not cooperating. She thought about how embarrassing it would be to collapse in front of the queen. It certainly wouldn't do her reputation as a warrior any good. She managed to stand though, and was rewarded with a stunning smile. A smile that, like the woman's green eyes, was filled with kindness and warmth. It affected her deeply, though she suspected it was because she hadn't known much of either emotion lately.

"Welcome, sisters. I am Princess Blakaea, but you may call me Blake."

"Princess," Kale started, ignoring Blake's words. "We must speak with the queen."

Blake's fair eyebrows rose at Kale.

"Please," Shale added quickly, making it a plea rather than a demand. "It's urgent."

Blake now focussed on Shale and nodded. "Very well. I will take you to her myself."

BLAKE ENTERED THE main lodge, knowing her mother was there. "My Queen," she said, intentionally using her rank to let Zayla know she wasn't here on personal business. She crossed to the table where her mother and two others were gathered. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I have some guests who wish to see you immediately."

"Guests?" Zayla looked up from the map she was studying.

"Fellow Amazons," Blake said.

"Bring them in."

Blake retraced her steps, opened the door, and gestured for them to come inside. She thought they might need to pause for a moment, to allow their eyes to adjust to the dimmer light, but neither woman faltered, following closely behind her.

Blake stopped beside her mother, and both twins knelt as they had outside. Blake watched humorously as Melaina blinked upon seeing them, presumably thinking for an instant that she was seeing double.

"I am Queen Zayla. You may stand."

They got to their feet. "I'm Shale. This is my sister, Kale."

Zayla smiled. "Twins. How extraordinary. Your mother has been doubly blessed."

“My Queen,” Shale said. “Our tribe was attacked five days ago, we have come to warn you of the threat.”

“They weren’t just attacked,” Kale said, taking a step forward. “They were slaughtered, no one was spared.”

Blake inhaled sharply. “Your entire tribe is dead?”

“We’re the only ones left,” Shale replied flatly.

Kale’s gaze was fixed on the queen. “We need reinforcements to fight back.”

“You shall have them,” Zayla said.

Blake heard the exhalation as Kale let out a breath, seeming to calm considerably now that help was at hand.

“Which tribe are you from?” a tall, powerfully built blonde inquired.

Zayla placed a hand on her shoulder. “This is Aris, the leader of my warriors.” She tipped her head to a short butch woman with closely cropped brown hair, whose physique looked as solid as a rock. “Melaina is her second in command.”

Shale nodded to them, then pointed to the map on the table. “May I?”

“Please.” Zayla moved aside to make room for her.

Shale tapped a spot on the map. “There. That’s where our tribe used to be.”

Zayla looked impressed. “And it only took you five days to get here?”

“Four, my Queen,” Shale said. “We spent the other trying to track down who did this.”

“And?” Melaina asked.

Shale drew a line with her finger. “We followed the trail to this river.” When Zayla frowned, she added, “We thought it best to consult you before going any farther.”

“And I thank you both for your consideration. I realise it must have been difficult to restrain yourselves under the circumstances, but by not acting rashly you have shown good judgement, and not made the situation any worse.”

“Whoever did this to our sisters knows about our feud with Kedross,” Blake said. “They’re smart. They know we can’t follow there.”

“What do you mean?” Kale’s brow creased. “We have to—”

“If an Amazon was even spotted on that land it would be considered an act of war,” Blake said. “Kedross wouldn’t hesitate to attack us.”

Aris nodded. “Blake’s right. It would be a direct violation of our treaty.”

“How do you know it wasn’t Kedross himself?” Kale asked defiantly, and louder than needed.

“This feud has gone on for many winters,” Zayla said logically. “Why would he suddenly attack now? Nothing has happened to provoke it.”

Blake was of the same mind as her mother. “He knows our tracking skills. He wouldn’t be careless enough to lead us straight back to him.”

Kale’s frown deepened. “Unless he wants you to attack. He wouldn’t want to engage you on Amazon soil, you have the advantage in the forest.”

“Precisely,” Zayla said. “Kedross isn’t stupid, he would lose too many men to such an attack. Was your village in a forest?”

“Yes,” Shale responded, when Kale did not.

“Then it wasn’t Kedross. He wouldn’t risk it,” Zayla said.

“You’re just assuming that!” Kale shouted. “You don’t know what he’s capable of!”

Complete silence met Kale’s outburst.

Zayla merely smiled, though it didn’t reach her eyes. “As I said, Kedross has been an opponent of the Amazon nation for many winters. I have studied both him, and his techniques for quite some time. I assure you I know precisely what he’s capable of.” Her tone hardened. “And I’m telling you, it wasn’t him.”

Kale had the sense to stay quiet.

“Now,” Zayla continued. “It is likely that Kedross knows who did this, but since he’ll never help us, I’m afraid we’ve hit a dead end.”

“You’re giving up?” Kale exploded. “Our sisters are dead!”

“Kale!” Shale scolded.

“I am well aware of that.” Now Zayla’s voice was clipped. She stared directly at Kale. “What would you have me do?”

“Go after him! Hunt him down.”



“And risk my entire tribe?” Zayla shook her head. “I don’t think so. The only option left to us is patience. If this man is motivated enough to wipe out a tribe, he’ll be back, and we will be ready for him.”

Kale turned and walked briskly out of the lodge. Without being dismissed.

Shale received a dagger-like glare from Melaina. “I must apologise for my sister. She is upset and exhausted, though I realise that is no excuse.”

Zayla nodded, graciously letting it go. “It is a difficult time for you both.” She dismissed Shale.

SHALE SILENTLY LEFT the lodge. No doubt everyone in the village would know about that little altercation shortly. Arguing with the queen, that will help us to settle in, she thought sarcastically. They were outsiders here, and Kale wasn’t helping either of them by acting as she was. Kale always had been the more hot-tempered, often not thinking about the consequences of her actions. Shale had lost count of the times she’d had to step in to get Kale out of a tricky situation.

As Shale reached the bottom step, the lodge door opened behind her. She kept going, not wanting to quarrel further, especially since emotions were running so high. She couldn’t blame them for being angry, she would have been herself if Amazons from a different tribe came in and started challenging her queen.

A memory of Marlaya, her own queen, flashed through her mind, and a strong wave of grief hit her.

“Shale?” a soft, calm voice called out to her.

Shale turned, surprised to find the princess moving toward her. “Yes, Princess?”

“Blake, please.”

In her tribe, royalty had always been addressed as such. Since it was Blake’s preference, though, Shale knew she should respect it. “Sorry. Blake.”

Blake came to a halt in front of her. “You’re apologising a lot today.”

Tell me about it. “I know.” Shale’s mouth twitched. “Sorry.”

Blake smiled. “Will you stop? You haven’t done anything wrong.”

“I’m glad someone’s noticed,” Shale muttered, recalling the glare Melaina had given her, as if she herself had insulted the queen, even though it was Kale who had done so. Shale had come to expect that. Around strangers they were treated as one person.

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing, it doesn’t matter.” Shale rubbed her temple, her headache now much worse. All of her tension had settled there, and she seriously considered asking the princess to knock her out. And if Blake wouldn’t, surely one of the women inside the lodge would? Shale suspected they would do it gladly, too.

Blake gave her a concerned look. “Are you all right?”

Shale immediately lowered her hand, her warrior pride rearing its head. She’d never liked to show weakness. “It’s been a long trek,” she said.

“Our healer, Appollonia, is just there.” Blake indicated the very next lodge on her left. “I’m sure she could give you something if you’re in pain.”

“I’m just tired. A good night’s sleep will suffice. Thank you.”

“Where are you making camp?” Blake asked. “I’m afraid we don’t have any spare cabins.”

Shale pointed toward a cluster of trees on the edge of the village. “We’ll be fine there,” she said.

“Kale’s not going to do anything stupid, is she?” Blake asked bluntly.

Shale liked her directness, finding it refreshing. She returned it. “Like go off and take revenge herself?”

“Something like that, yes.”

“Kale won’t go anywhere without me, and I’m not planning on doing any such thing. The queen is right, and her plan is sound. We’re staying put.”

“Good. I’m glad you agree.” She hesitated. “I know it can’t be easy for you to just sit and wait, Shale, but we don’t have much choice.” Her voice softened. “We’ll have a funeral pyre tomorrow for those who were lost. I hope that will help you both.”

Shale nodded sadly. “It will allow Kale and me to say goodbye.”

Blake reached out and squeezed Shale’s arm in comfort. “Get some rest,” she said, then walked back toward the lodge.

## Chapter Two

“YOU HAVE TO apologise to the queen, Kale,” Shale said, around a mouthful of apple.

They had made camp amongst the trees, wanting the privacy it afforded them. They’d found a small area of clear, flat ground with a large boulder at its edge, and had built a campfire in the center, laying their bedrolls on either side.

Shale stretched her legs. She felt a lot better this morning, the solid sleep had refreshed her completely. Except for some stiffness in her joints, her body had all but recovered.

“I know,” Kale mumbled, eating her own apple. “I will, as soon as I see her.”

They were making do with only fruit for breakfast. Neither wanted to go on another trek just yet. They knew the village had plenty of food to share, but after yesterday weren’t sure they’d be made very welcome. Amazons had a tendency to hold grudges.

“No, Kale, you’re going to find her. You need to smooth things over.”

“All right, I will!” Kale tossed the rest of her apple onto their small campfire. “I still can’t believe we’re not going to do anything. Our dead sisters would be ashamed of us.”

“Endangering other Amazons isn’t the way to go. That won’t help anyone,” Shale repeated again. They’d had this conversation numerous times now.

Kale picked up a stone and threw it hard. It bounced loudly off a tree stump. She took a calming breath. “Do you know when they’re lighting the pyre?”

Shale shook her head. “No, I just know it’s today. I’ll go and speak to the princess this morning.”

“No need,” Kale said quickly. “I’ll ask the queen.”

“Fair enough. We’d best get going.” Shale stood and started to put out the fire, smothering the flames with the dirt around her feet. She herself didn’t need to go, but she wouldn’t let Kale face that kind of hostility alone. And she knew Kale would do the same for her.

Sure enough, when they entered the village, the Amazons barely veiled their anger toward them, and some didn’t even try, glaring disapprovingly at them both.

“Well, this is quite a welcome,” Kale muttered under her breath.

“No doubt the hunting party told their little tale about us, too,” Shale said. “I could kill you sometimes.”

Kale grinned. “You could try. We both know you’d never succeed.”

She knew Kale was right, they were too equally matched in skill and mind. “I’d make a damn good go of it,” Shale shot back.

“You’d better get in line, looks like half of the village wants to take me out.”

“Only half?” Shale joked. “And in case you didn’t notice, they’re glaring at me, too.”

“Oh, I noticed. But it’s only because they don’t know which of us insulted the queen,” Kale said dryly.

“It wouldn’t make a difference even if they did.”

“Mm,” Kale agreed. “Where do you think the queen is? Should I try that lodge we were in?”

“She could be in another meeting. The last thing you want is to interrupt and annoy her further.” Shale’s gaze fixed on a small robust woman who was heading toward them. “Where is the queen?”

If the woman was considering not answering, Kale didn’t give her much of a choice, stepping directly into her path and staying there. Kale towered over her, and Shale sighed internally. Intimidating people wouldn’t help either.

“Please, tell us where the queen is?” Shale asked.

“She’s at the main lodge,” the woman responded gruffly, indicating the same building that they’d been in yesterday.

“Thank you. Do you know if she’s busy?”

“The queen is always busy,” she replied awkwardly.

Shale set her jaw, trying to keep her temper. “I mean, is she in a meeting? Can she be disturbed?”

“That would be up to the queen.”

“Now, look—” Kale began moving forward threateningly.

Shale placed a firm hand on her shoulder, pulling her back. “Let’s go.”

Kale didn't resist, and they walked toward the lodge. "Now what?"

"We look for the princess. She'll give us an answer." Shale's eyes scanned the village, but didn't see her.

"If there is a meeting, it's likely she'll be with the queen," Kale said. She sat down on the steps that led up to the main lodge, and Shale joined her. "I'll just sit and wait. It's so friendly here." Her tone dripped with sarcasm.

Despite the situation, Shale laughed. "You can't blame them, Kale. You know perfectly well you'd react the same if you were in their shoes."

Kale grunted in acknowledgement.

"And you know what rumours are like," Shale continued. "What they've heard is likely to be much worse than the actual event. You're likely to be dragging the queen around by her hair at this point."

A voice suddenly came from behind them. "I hope that's not a plan of action, warrior?"

Startled, they both stood and turned around, finding Blake on the lodge steps.

"No, Princess," Shale said, her embarrassment making her miss the gentle teasing in Blake's eyes. "Not at all. I was, uh..." She couldn't think of how to explain.

Mercifully, Kale spoke up. "I was waiting for the queen." She met Blake's eyes squarely. "To apologise for last night."

Blake nodded. "My mother is inside. You can see her now, Kale."

"Thank you, Princess." Kale ascended the steps and knocked on the door. When called in, she entered, leaving Shale and Blake alone.

"I hope you're feeling better today?" Blake asked kindly, as she reached Shale's side.

"Yes, Prin...Blake. Thank you." She still wasn't used to calling Blake by her birth name. Shale wondered if she ever would be.

Blake smiled at her. "Will you walk with me, Shale? I'll show you around our village."

Shale was surprised that not only had Blake remembered their names, but she had used them correctly, not confused as to who they were. "I would be honored."

Blake turned left, leading Shale past the healer's lodge and toward the warriors' training ground. "I heard about what happened between you two and the hunters."

“I’m sorry for that also.” That was all she seemed to say lately.

“Forgive me if I’m mistaken, but I assumed it was Kale who said those things, not you.”

“I take it the hunters didn’t know who said what?” Shale asked.

“No, they didn’t,” Blake replied. “Am I mistaken?”

“No,” Shale said quietly.

“Then please don’t feel as though you should apologise,” Blake said. “Kale’s rudeness aside, she had a point. If you heard them coming, an enemy would have, or the animal they were hunting. I told them they need to be more careful.”

Great. Not only had the hunters been insulted, they had been reprimanded by their princess over it. Shale knew that she and Kale would be blamed for all of it. She tried to ignore the looks of contempt she was getting from the women they passed.

As if noticing herself, Blake said, “I now understand what you meant the last time we talked. You’re being treated as though you disrespected their queen.”

“To them I did.” At Blake’s confused glance, Shale explained, “As twins, Kale and I are treated as one person. Until people get to know us better, anyway.” She tried to keep the bitterness out of her voice, but wasn’t sure she succeeded. “Hence why I feel the need to apologise. Force of habit.”

Blake’s brow creased. “That’s one of the most unfair things I’ve ever heard, two people being treated as one. No wonder Kale has a temper. Though I must say under the circumstances, Shale, you have the most right to be angry. You haven’t done anything wrong, yet you’re sharing the blame.”

“That’s just how it is.”

“Not with me it isn’t,” Blake told her with certainty.

Shale was pleasantly surprised. “Our mother could tell us apart, but when Kale got herself into trouble, I was always told off for not keeping her out of it.” Shale shrugged. “I’m used to it.” She didn’t know why she was telling Blake all of this, and was surprised that she found the princess so easy to talk to.

Blake touched Shale’s forearm lightly. “Well you can just get unused to it with me. I won’t treat you like that.”

Shale smiled at her words, and Blake returned it, moments passing as they regarded each other. Blake was the first to break the gaze. “That’s where the warriors train and spar.” She pointed to a large arena-like space. “That’s where you’ll train.”

Shale nodded. It was quite a bit bigger than her old training ground, but this tribe was larger also. It was nice and flat, and the area had been cleared of trees and other obstacles. A tall stake was positioned at the far end, which was where unruly Amazons were disciplined.

Shale studied several pairs of women sparring with each other, noting amusedly that the ferocity and speed picked up when the fighters realised the princess was watching.

One of the nearest warriors was taken down with a direct blow to her face.

“Ouch,” Blake mumbled sympathetically.

Shale immediately saw the problem. The woman had dropped her guard a fraction too much, allowing the punch to get past her defences. She didn’t intend to say anything though, it wasn’t her place. She wasn’t in charge here.

The warrior was helped to her feet by her opponent, and they began sparring again. When she was felled a second time, Shale couldn’t remain quiet. Her eyes searched for Aris, but she was at the other end with Melaina, showing an adolescent warrior how to do a spinning kick.

Shale walked forward, wondering why she was bothering when she received nothing but cold stares from them.

“You’re dropping your arm too much,” Shale said to the young woman, who was wiping blood from her nose. She expected to hear that her help wasn’t needed, but the princess’s presence kept them both in line. “What’s your name?”

“Anikett.”

“All right, Anikett, get into your stance for me.”

She did as requested, and didn’t resist when Shale adjusted her position.

“Make sure you keep that arm up, it tends to lower and that’s why...” Shale looked to the other warrior expectantly.

“Hesius,” the woman said.

“And that’s why Hesius here keeps knocking you flat.” She gave Hesius an approving look. “Nice punch by the way.”

Hesius smiled, apparently forgetting to be angry with her. “Thanks.”

“Let’s try that,” Shale said, barely stepping out of their way. She wasn’t the slightest bit worried about getting hit herself.

The warriors went through the maneuver again, but this time Anikett blocked the strike.

Shale clapped Anikett on the back. "Well done." She started to walk back to Blake.

"Hey, thanks," Anikett called after her. "Me and my nose appreciate it."

Chuckling, Shale glanced over her shoulder. "No worries."

Blake looked impressed. "You've done that before," she said knowingly.

Shale was still smiling. "Yeah, Kale and I led the warriors in our old tribe."

"Really? The both of you?"

"We know each other inside out, it works well in battle."

"I can see the advantages of that," Blake said. "Having two leaders who think so alike, their strategies and techniques working together." She paused a moment. "You must be an excellent fighter. Though I already knew that, you had to have been to survive the attack."

"Kale and I didn't fight, we weren't at the village when it happened," Shale said quietly. She kept her tone flat, trying to keep the emotion out of her voice. "We were out searching for an herb that our healer wanted. That reminds me, Kale's still got it, maybe your healer could use it?"

"I'm sure Appollonia would be grateful," Blake replied, watching Shale closely.

"We didn't even get a chance to fight. By the time we got back..." Shale faltered and took a breath. "There was nothing left. We should have been there to protect them." She lowered her head.

"Shale," Blake said softly. "You can't blame yourself."

"No?" Her gaze snapped up. "Who else is there?"

"The people who did this." Blake answered firmly. "You couldn't have known, Shale, no one could have." At Shale's disbelieving look, she said, "I'm sure you didn't leave your tribe undefended? Your warriors were there and your second in command?"

Shale nodded. "Everyone but us."

"Then your tribe was simply outnumbered. Do you really think two more would have changed the outcome? You would have died alongside them."

"Maybe that would have been for the best," Shale whispered.



Blake gripped both of Shale's biceps. "Don't ever think that, Shale. If it hadn't been for you, we would be completely unaware of this threat. You've given us time to prepare. That in itself will save many lives." Blake stared beseechingly at Shale, clearly trying to convince her.

Shale studied Blake, whose compassionate green eyes were pulling at her heart. She finally nodded.

"I can't even imagine what you're going through, Shale, but please know that you did nothing wrong. Nothing." Blake spotted Kale coming toward them, and released Shale's arms. "And if you ever need to talk, I'm a good listener."

Shale idly wondered why her skin tingled where Blake had touched her. "Thank you, Blake. That means a lot to me." And it did, she was truly grateful for Blake's kind words.

"Anytime, Shale. I mean that."

"WHAT WAS THAT about?" Kale asked, as soon as the princess left. She hadn't failed to notice Blake's grip on Shale. Or the more worrying fact that Shale hadn't stepped away, as she usually did when others touched her. That in itself spoke volumes to Kale, and she decided to keep a close eye on the situation, not wanting it to get out of hand. She'd seen the way Shale looked at Blake, it was best that Shale stayed away from her.

"We were talking about our tribe," Shale replied.

Kale was surprised, Shale only talked to her about personal matters. Though she didn't hear what either said, she knew it had to have been personal from the way they had been standing. "The pyre's going to be lit at midday."

"How did it go with the queen?"

"Fine. She accepted my apology." Kale indicated the training ground. "I don't suppose we should join in just yet, not while they're still angry at us?"

Shale's eyebrows shot up. "By the gods, what did she say to you?"

Kale pushed her playfully. "Very funny."

Shale grinned. "You're right though, we should go back to camp. By tomorrow things might have calmed down a bit." She'd barely taken a step, when someone called out.

"Hey!"

They turned toward the voice, assuming they were wanted. Melaina, the second in command, strode toward them, and she didn't look pleased.

"I want you to stay away from my warriors. I teach them, not you. Don't think you can just come in here and start giving orders." She directed her hostility to them both.

Kale had no idea what Melaina was referring to.

"It was me," Shale said. "Not Kale."

Melaina's dark eyes fixed onto Shale. "I don't care who it was, I'm telling you both—I'm not as forgiving as the queen. Remember that."

Kale stiffened at the threat.

"I was only showing Anikett the correct way," Shale said. "You were busy at the time."

Melaina came forward, getting into Shale's space. "Showing off for the princess, were you?"

Kale noticed that all of the warriors were watching avidly. She knew what Melaina wanted, but also knew that Shale wouldn't give it to her. A physical fight would end with her being disciplined, and would further harm their tenuous footing within this tribe.

Shale submitted to Melaina. "I'm sorry, second. It won't happen again."

Melaina's surprise and disappointment showed, then she leaned closer still. "Make sure it doesn't." She smiled ruthlessly. "You've got more brains than I thought. But don't worry, I haven't even started with you two yet." With that ominous warning, she stomped back to the training ground.

"You know," Kale stared at Melaina's retreating form, "I get the feeling she doesn't like us."

Shale didn't smile, and Kale sensed that she was berating herself for stepping in earlier, as if Shale could have known it would get the leaders' backs up. Kale did wonder why Aris herself hadn't come over, and hoped it meant that Aris wasn't upset with them. After all, Shale had only been trying to help. Kale would have appreciated someone assisting her own warriors, but clearly things worked differently here.

They would have to tread carefully. As warriors, Aris and Melaina were in charge of them, and could treat them as they saw fit. Unfortunately, it seemed as though Shale had just made a bad situation worse.

SILENCE REIGNED THROUGHOUT the village as the funeral pyre burned strongly. The heat from it, combined with that from the sun, made it unbearably hot, but the twins didn't notice, the faces of their lost kin consuming them completely.

Though neither had known such pain, no tears fell. It would have been different if they were alone, they had shared many tears together. But since they felt, and were, under close scrutiny, the stoic masks stayed fixed in place.

Shale didn't know how long she stood there, asking her tribe to forgive her for not being there when they needed her the most. The guilt only compounded her grief, but she did nothing to stop it, her thoughts spiralling further and further out of control.

Just when Shale was sure she couldn't bear it for another instant, a warm hand rested on her lower back, drawing her out of her dark contemplation. She knew from the feel of the touch that it wasn't Kale. And as Kale was on her right, she looked to her left. Blake gazed back at her, and the sympathy on her face broke Shale's resolve for a moment. A single tear escaped, and Shale quickly brushed it away, embarrassed.

As she glanced around, Shale realised the other Amazons had dispersed, though she had no recollection of them doing so. The pyre had also burnt down, and only a small fire remained.

"It's all right to cry, Shale," Blake said softly.

Another tear fell at her words, but again it was swiped away. Shale cleared her throat self-consciously. "We warriors hate to show emotion."

Blake smiled gently. "I've noticed that."

Shale wondered if Blake needed her for something. But when Blake faced the pyre, Shale recognised that she wasn't here as princess—Blake wanted to be here to support her. She was profoundly touched by Blake's kindness.

Shale took a deep breath, trying to pull herself together. She made a fist with her right hand, pressed it to her chest, over her heart, and extended it toward the pyre, showing all the love and respect she had for her fallen tribe in that simple gesture.

"I LIKE TO know what all my warriors are capable of." Aris looked at Kale first, then Shale. "But I realise you undertook a long and gruelling journey to get here, so I will understand if you don't feel up to sparring yet."

Shale was taken aback by the consideration. She'd expected Aris to treat them as Melaina had, with contempt.

“I’m fine,” Kale responded instantly.

“Be sure,” Aris said. “You won’t get a reprieve out there. You need to be focussed.”

“I am.”

“Very well. You may spar first.” Aris let out a short whistle, getting everyone’s attention. “Tryphosa, you’re up against Kale.”

As the two warriors warmed up, the rest formed a circle around them.

“I believe I owe you my thanks,” Aris said, smiling at Shale’s confused expression. “For helping Anikett.”

So it was only Melaina who had a problem with it. “I was glad to do it.”

“I have heard many things about you and Kale.”

Shale grimaced. “And I bet all were bad?”

Aris chuckled, low in her throat. “All but the one about Anikett.” She paused, and kept Shale waiting for a moment. “I don’t listen to gossip. I make up my own mind about people.”

Shale nodded in relief, her estimation of her new leader rising considerably. Aris seemed fair, and Shale idly wondered how she’d react if she knew about Melaina’s threats. Not that Shale would ever tell her. Aris might be fully aware of Melaina’s actions, though Shale doubted it. If Melaina was as devious as Shale suspected, she would be quite dangerous. They needed to keep their distance.

“Are you all right to spar after Kale?” Aris asked, as the fight was about to begin.

“Yes,” Shale replied.

“Hi,” Anikett said, appearing out of nowhere.

Shale smiled at the young woman. “How’s your nose?”

Anikett giggled. “Much better.”

It went quiet, then Tryphosa threw the first punch, causing the circle of warriors to hoot and holler. Shale knew that if Kale wanted to, she could’ve put Tryphosa down after that first move, but she didn’t, seemingly remembering Shale’s earlier words about trying to fit in. Kale let several more mistakes go by her before nailing Tryphosa with a right hook to her jaw.

“She should’ve kept her arm up,” Anikett mumbled, grinning when a humorous look crossed Shale’s face.

“All right, stop,” Aris ordered, clearly recognising Kale was high above the standard level. “Tryphosa, you’re out.” She searched the crowd for a moment. “Herona, you’re in.”

While Herona made her way forward, Aris focussed on Shale. “Who’s better, you or Kale?”

“We’re equal.”

The fight began, and Shale noted that Herona was a lot closer in skill. Kale took a couple of blows, one to the face, and another to her midsection, before she was able to put Herona down with an elbow to the jaw.

“Nice,” Aris complimented loudly, as Herona was pulled to her feet by Kale. “Well done.” She glanced around. “Amber, you’re in.”

Shale heard the warriors surrounding her murmur excitedly. “Is Amber your best fighter?”

“She’s one of them,” Aris said.

“Who’s the best?” Shale watched as a pretty red-head passed by her, her curly auburn hair bouncing with each step.

“Melaina, why?”

Figures. Shale had to hold back her frown. So much for keeping away from her. Melaina now had the perfect opportunity to show them that she was in charge, and Shale suspected she wouldn’t fight fair.

Aris smirked. “You think you’re that good?”

“I guess we’ll soon find out.” She could tell Kale was holding back, carefully controlled. “Do your warriors fight without restraint?”

“When we spar in the ring, yes. Was it different in your tribe?”

“It had to be stated in ours.”

Aris spoke up quickly, “Kale, no restraint.”

Shale immediately saw the shift as Kale released herself, now able to fully let go.

Kale attacked in a flurry of motion, and Amber, who was a brilliant fighter, had to back up swiftly to avoid getting hit.

Most of the village was now watching, it wasn’t just the warriors anymore. The event had drawn a large crowd, and the circle surrounding the fighters grew, giving them more space.

Shale was impressed by Amber's skill and technique, but she knew Kale had the upper hand. They traded blows, kicks, and blocks for quite some time before Kale found the opening she needed. Snapping her leg out, Kale connected solidly with the side of Amber's head, causing her to fall heavily. Kale waited, then dropped down beside her.

From the sidelines, Shale could hear their conversation. "Are you all right?" Kale asked.

Amber sat up, holding her head on one side. "That's quite a kick you've got there." She opened her jaw and closed it again. "Ow."

"You gave me a good fight," Kale said. She offered her hand and helped Amber to her feet.

"Kale, you're out too," Aris shouted to her.

"Thank the gods," Kale murmured. "I was about to collapse."

Amber sniggered. "Tired you out, did I?"

"You certainly did," Kale said. Amber was hesitant in letting go of Kale's hand, seemingly still off balance. "Do you want some help?"

Amber looked grateful. "Please."

"Do you want me to carry you?"

"No!" She paused. "You can do that?"

Kale shrugged. "Sure." She wound an arm around Amber's waist to help steady her. As Amber was nearly the same height, their eyes locked. "How's this?"

Amber smiled impishly. "Don't go getting any ideas, I'm an injured woman."

Kale laughed. "Don't worry, you're safe with me."

"Says the woman who just kicked me in the head," Amber said, gripping Kale's shoulder as they walked forward.

Kale was still laughing. "Good point." She nodded to Shale as she passed, it was her turn to fight. "Who will Shale be up against?"

"If she's anything like you, the best."

"She is."

"It'll be Melaina then, though Aris will probably start her on Anataeus or Lathana first to make sure she's up to it."

Aris spoke up as they neared. “That was impressive.”

“Next time, Aris, please wait till after my turn before telling her to use no restraint,” Amber joked good-naturedly.

Aris grinned and clapped her on the back. “Noted.” She pointed to another warrior, then gestured to the ring.

“That was quite a show,” Blake said, appearing from beside Aris. “Kale, you are skilled indeed.”

“Thank you, Princess.”

“That was a nasty blow, Amber,” Blake said. “Are you all right?”

Amber still leaned on Kale. “I’m a bit unsteady, but it’ll wear off.”

“I’ll take you to your cabin.” Blake stepped closer and took hold of Amber securely.

“All right, but not just yet, Blake.” Amber looked eagerly back to the ring. “First, I’ve got to see this fight.”

Blake shook her head in disbelief. “Warriors.”

Now that Blake was supporting Amber, Kale dropped her arm and moved away slightly, focussing once again on Shale.

The crowd around them was growing excited, the anticipation building to near breaking point.

“That’s Lathana,” Amber told Kale, as a medium sized, well-muscled brunette entered the ring.

Kale nodded in response, but didn’t take her eyes off Shale.

The fight began, and the crowd stood transfixed. The swift and fierce movements were quite beautiful, though it was a deadly dance.

Shale didn’t hesitate, she couldn’t afford to draw this out, not if Melaina was going to be as difficult as she expected her to be. Shale felt a couple of Lathana’s blows hit home, but they didn’t slow her, she used the pain to drive her on. Finally, a jab followed by a hook threw Lathana off balance, and a well placed push-kick to her side sent her sprawling to the ground.

Shale could have made it a lot worse, but gave Lathana the less painful option. When Lathana bounded to her feet, Shale thought she was going to regret the mercy she had shown, but Lathana merely laughed and held out her arm. “Thanks for not busting my ribs.”

Shale clasped her arm, and the women around them clapped their approval.

Lathana lowered her voice as Melaina entered the circle. “Watch out for dirt,” she said.

Lathana had barely left the ring when Melaina attacked. Shale wasn’t even given a chance to catch her breath.

Shale had to use all of her skills to keep Melaina at bay. Melaina connected first with a savage uppercut that caused Shale’s head to snap back. She shook her head to try and clear her swimming vision, feeling as though she’d just been struck with a rock. Melaina certainly looked as solid as rock, but Shale hadn’t actually expected her to feel like one.

Shale jumped back, narrowly missing another punch. She dodged around Melaina, willing her eyes to regain their focus. When she was able to see properly again, Shale noticed that Melaina’s main strength was also her weakness. Melaina had a lot of power, but her bulkier frame also slowed her speed. If Melaina were to strike her a few times, Shale knew she would fall, but Melaina wasn’t as fast as Shale was, and couldn’t get in the blows she needed.

Shale delivered a roundhouse to Melaina’s skull, and still she kept coming. Two more direct hits made Melaina stumble, though she remained standing. Shale was beginning to tire, but managed to maintain her pace. Her backhand caught Melaina off guard, and Shale put her down with a hook.

All in all, things hadn’t gone too badly. In fact, bar a headache, she wasn’t much worse off than when she’d entered the ring. Shale was quite pleased with herself. Maybe now Melaina would back off, knowing that she wasn’t unbeatable.

Despite her intense dislike of Melaina, Shale still offered her hand, remembering too late about Lathana’s warning. A handful of dirt was tossed into her eyes, blinding her momentarily.

Melaina took full advantage and kicked Shale in the stomach, causing her to double over. She then rammed her knee into Shale’s face, and Shale fell to the ground.

She heard Aris’s voice on the sidelines, who was having to hold Kale back. “Kale, don’t,” Aris said.

“Is she allowed to do that?” Blake asked, stepping forward.

“It’s no restraint,” Aris replied. “She can do what she wants.”

“But what she did doesn’t seem fair.”

“It wasn’t,” Amber muttered.

“Battle isn’t fair,” Aris said. “The enemy won’t show mercy.”



Amber pointed. "She's getting up."

Shale got onto all fours, but another kick to her stomach sent her down again.

"That's it, I'm stopping this." Blake began to move.

"Wait," Kale said. "Just watch this."

The confidence in Kale's voice stopped Blake in midstride.

Shale managed to get to her feet. When Melaina threw a punch, Shale caught it in her fist. She then brought her head forward sharply, and head-butted Melaina square on. Blood erupted from Melaina's nose, and she fell to her knees. Shale raised her arm to strike again, but let it drop, she was above that.

No one clapped this time, no one dared. Melaina was their second in command, and no warrior wanted to get on the wrong side of her. Shale also showed compassion, where Melaina had none.

Blake looked to Kale in awe. "How did you know?"

Kale started toward Shale. "It's a twin thing."

SHALE WAS STILL brushing the dirt out of her eyes when Kale reached her.

"That was a dirty trick," Kale said, wiping some muck off Shale's face.

"Mm," Shale agreed. "Lathana warned me, I should've seen it coming."

"She did, huh? Maybe we're not as disliked as we thought?"

Shale glanced around. They were still being glared at, though now it was with a wariness that wasn't there before. "I wouldn't go that far. Lathana was just thankful I didn't crack her ribs."

"So I noticed. It was a risk not taking her out completely."

"I know, but it worked out. Let's hope it gets us into favor with some of the warriors. We'll need it now, Melaina's going to be a real bitch."

Kale looked thoughtful. "It's a good thing it was you out there then, 'cause I'd have cracked her ribs."

Shale had known that, which was why it had been such a gamble. If she'd been wrong, Kale would have lectured her on it for days. She knew Kale was just watching out for her though, Kale didn't want her to get hurt.

"A little compassion goes a long way, Kale," Blake said, stopping in front of them, Amber still beside her.

"Compassion can get you killed," Kale replied curtly.

"Or it can save a life. Or at the very least pain."

Kale snorted. "I'd rather they be in pain, as to me lying dead."

"Kale—" Shale was cut off.

"No, it's all right, Shale. Kale is entitled to her opinion. I know a lot of warriors think that way, though I'm pleased to see that not all do." Blake smiled pointedly at Shale, who immediately returned it.

"I wonder if you'll think that when she's dead."

Shale glared at her, Kale could be so awkward at times. She didn't know what was wrong with her lately. Kale wasn't only being rude, she was deliberately being argumentative. Shale wasn't surprised when Blake narrowed her eyes, she imagined the princess wasn't used to being spoken to like that.

"I thought you of all people would be grateful for compassion, Kale," Blake said.

"Why's that?"

"Because if our queen hadn't shown you some, you'd be in our jail right now," Blake said firmly.

Kale was breathing hard, but she didn't reply. She grabbed Shale's forearm and pulled her away, leaving a fuming Blake behind them.

Shale didn't resist, wanting to get Kale out of this situation before things got worse. After a few steps, she yanked herself free, shaking her head at Kale as she did so.

"BLAKE?" AMBER TOUCHED her back to get her attention.

Blake was still frowning when she looked at her good friend. "Yes, Amber?"

“What in Gaia’s name did you do to her?”

“I have no idea. I’ve barely spoken to her. I’ve spent more time with Shale than her.” As soon as she said the words, things became clear. “Of course. She’s jealous.” That explained everything. If Kale was used to having Shale solely to herself, Blake’s sudden presence would make Kale feel threatened. Perhaps that was why Kale was being so difficult, and was also insisting on ignoring her request to be addressed informally, by her birth name. It annoyed her, but she was doing her best not to let it show.

“Maybe she feels left out,” Amber said. “They seem pretty close.”

“You’re right.” Blake nodded. “I’ll make more of an effort to include her.” She silently hoped that would solve whatever problem Kale had with her.

“WHAT HAS GOT into you, Kale?” Shale was still shaking her head as they headed back to camp.

“Me?”

“You’re being really rude to Blake.”

Kale rolled her eyes. She’d pulled Shale away from Blake intentionally, as she hadn’t liked how they were looking at each other. She could see their joint attraction clearly. Blake’s rank of princess made things more difficult, but princess or not, Kale wasn’t going to allow her to become involved with Shale. “You’re exaggerating.”

“Well if Blake decides to punish you, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

## Chapter Three

“NOW, KALE—”

“Shale, not again, you’ve already told me five times.”

“And I’m telling you again. To be invited to dinner with the queen and her counsel is a great honor, treat it as such. Hold your tongue.”

“I know how to act, Shale. I am the elder of us, remember?”

“Only because you were as impatient in the womb as you are in life.” They left the sanctuary of the trees and entered the village.

“You’re just sore that I beat you out,” Kale goaded.

“So you keep telling me.” Shale headed for the main lodge, excited at the notion of seeing Blake again. She kept it to herself though.

Surprisingly, Blake opened the door when Kale knocked. Shale had expected anyone but royalty to let them in. Evidently, Blake didn’t think such menial tasks were beneath her, and greeted them both with a smile.

Blake scanned Shale’s bruised face. “That looks painful.”

“That’s the princess’s polite way of saying you look like horse dung,” Kale said.

A slight furrow appeared between Blake’s eyebrows. “That’s not what I was saying at all. Are you all right, Shale? I didn’t get a chance to ask you earlier.”

“I’m fine, Blake. Thank you for your concern.”

Blake nodded, and moved aside so they could enter.

Shale saw that the table was all but full, only three spaces remained. “We’re not late, are we?” she whispered to Blake anxiously.

“No,” Blake assured. “Everyone else was early.” She gestured to the two seats next to each other. “Please.”

They sat as Blake took her own seat, directly opposite Shale.

Queen Zayla, who was at the head of the table, in between Blake and Shale, introduced everyone.

Shale tried to make note of all their names, the only people she knew were Aris and Melaina.

Melaina was eyeing her bruises smugly, but Shale didn’t let it bother her. Not only had she won, but Melaina was sporting a few good bruises of Shale’s own creation.

Once the introductions were complete, the food was passed around. Shale didn’t take much, unlike Kale, who filled her plate.

Shale was glad she hadn’t when she took a careful bite of the bread. It was pleasant enough, but the chewing motion made needles of pain shoot up her jaw. She’d expected that, her face

hurt when she talked, so she knew it would be worse when she ate. Despite her discomfort, Shale kept eating, not wanting her hosts to think she was rude. She stuck mostly to bread, which she found ironic. It wasn't everyday Shale was treated to such a feast, and now that she had been, that simple food was all she could manage.

Shale took the time to examine the inside of the lodge. She had been preoccupied on her first visit here, and hadn't taken much in. The room was sparse, the only furniture being the table and chairs. The walls, however, were full. The wall behind her was lined with weapons, and the one opposite was filled with impressive artefacts, gold trinkets, and rare stones, all spread over several shelves. The other walls were covered in animal skins and large furs.

Shale thought it was somewhat overstated, but recognised the reasoning behind it. As the main lodge, it would house many important meetings, and both guests and enemies would be brought here. In the case of enemies, if negotiating, it was vital to show a strong and capable tribe. An enemy would be much more likely to attack if they thought the tribe was weak and defenceless. This lodge made the Amazons look as though they wanted for nothing, showing both strength and power. It was a clever tactic, and Shale found her respect for the queen growing.

Shale felt eyes on her, and glanced to Blake, who was looking at her oddly, head tilted slightly in thought.

Blake abruptly stood, excused herself, and left the lodge.

Shale frowned, wondering what that was about. She focussed on the others, grateful that Kale was taking care of most of their side of the conversation. Kale was answering the inquisitive questions patiently, and asking a few of her own.

A short while later, Blake re-entered, and placed a bowl full of hot soup in front of Shale.

Shale was surprised. She hadn't thought she was that obvious. From the confusion on the others' faces, she was certain that no one else had noticed. Blake was either very observant, or was giving her extra attention. Shale smiled up at her. "Thank you."

Blake squeezed her shoulder, then returned to her seat.

Shale received an even sharper glare from Melaina, but she didn't know why. Surely it should have pleased Melaina to know that she was in pain as a result of their fight. She dismissed it and dug into her soup, the liquid sliding down her throat effortlessly. She gave Blake another smile.

For the whole evening, Kale was a model Amazon, as Shale knew she could be, and kept everyone entertained with stories of their old tribe.

Shale listened with a wistful expression, prompting Kale whenever she left something out.

When it was time to leave, Shale paused outside, at the bottom of the steps. She dropped her voice to speak to Kale. "I'll see you later at camp."

"Why? Where are you going?"

"I'm going to walk Blake back to her cabin."

"How gallant of you."

Shale chose to ignore the sarcasm, and moved away before Kale had a chance to say anything further. She joined up with Blake, walking with her. It wasn't very far, Blake's cabin was opposite the main lodge, across the center of the village.

Shale was mortified when Melaina entered the cabin directly next door, on the right, but understood that it was tactically sound to have the best warrior close at hand should the princess need her. The queen's cabin was on the other side of Blake's, and Aris's was directly next to the queen's.

"You are certainly well protected here," Shale said.

Blake chuckled. "I am, though I insisted they put those trees in."

Shale spotted the line of trees that were in between each of the four cabins. "I take it you like your privacy?"

Blake nodded. "I do. But that's about as much as I can get around here."

"Always in demand, huh?" Shale teased.

Blake grinned. "Something like that."

"Then I'm honored you're giving this time to me."

Blake's eyes twinkled in the moonlight. "You should be."

"Oh, I am," Shale said in all seriousness, laughing when Blake slapped her arm playfully. "I guess that means I should make it count, since I don't know when you'll find the time for me again."

Blake's eyebrows rose curiously. "What did you have in mind?"

Shale coyly peeked at her from under long lashes. She stuck her arm out. "Walk with me?"

Blake took her arm. "Sure."

It was a clear night, and as the moon was full, it cast enough light for them to see by.

“It is I who must apologise to you tonight,” Blake said, after they had passed by Melaina’s cabin.

“How so?” Shale asked, bewildered. “You didn’t poison my soup, did you? Thinking I was Kale?”

Blake giggled. “No. I can tell you two apart.”

Shale already knew that, but it still pleased her to hear it.

“I’m apologising because it seems that I’m one of the fair few who can.”

Shale grew confused. “You’ve lost me.”

“You spent the entire night with those people, Shale, and at the end of it they still didn’t know who was who.”

Shale now understood. “That’s hardly your fault. Don’t worry about it, I’m used to it.”

“You shouldn’t have had to get used to it. I know you’re identical, but there are differences, you just have to look. Bar my mother, only Aris knew who you were.”

“You think it’s bad now? Wait till my bruises fade.”

“I don’t know how you put up with it, Shale,” Blake said. “It would drive me mad.”

“Don’t have much of a choice. Though I admit it gets tedious at times.”

Blake shook her head. “By the gods, imagine what it would have been like if your mother had given birth to three or four, there’d be utter chaos.”

Shale snickered. “It’s funny you should say that.”

Blake stopped abruptly. “You’re kidding?”

“No, my mother had triplets.”

“Wow.” She continued walking. “What happened to the third?”

“It was a boy.” Shale glanced at her. “In my tribe, boys were drowned at birth.”

It depended on the queen to make that decision: some opted for death, some allowed local villagers to take them in. “In ours, they’re given away,” Blake said. “My mother and I would never allow an innocent child to be killed, even if they are male.”

“But with our brother, an exception was made. Because we were triplets, our mystic believed we all shared the same soul, and killing him would harm all of us. She said, ‘Where one will be, the other will follow. When one is seriously hurt, the other will pay the price.’” Shale paused. “He was given to a farmer.”

“Do you believe that? That your souls are linked?”

“Mine and Kale’s are,” Shale said, without a shadow of a doubt. “I don’t know about Zale.”

“Zale?”

“That’s what Kale and I call him. He wasn’t given a name by our mother, but that’s what we refer to him as. It fits with our names.”

“It does.” Blake observed Shale closely. “I wonder if he looks like you? He must be handsome if he does.”

Shale bumped Blake with her hip. “Are you saying I look like a man?”

“No! Not at all.”

“Then what are you saying?” Shale halted, faced Blake, and put her hands on her hips.

Blake’s mouth curled upward, apparently recognising that she was being teased. “I’m saying that you’re beautiful.”

Shale blushed, though she hoped Blake wouldn’t notice in the dim light. A bashful smile formed on her face. “As you said, there are differences between us, and I always thought Kale was the prettier.”

“Kale is very attractive,” Blake said. “I guess it comes down to personal taste.”

Shale wanted to know more about Blake’s personal tastes. A lot more. “And?” For some reason, it was very important to Shale for Blake to find her more appealing than Kale.

“And what?”

“What’s your opinion? On me and Kale?”

“I’ve already told you.”

“No, you haven’t.”

“I have.” Blake chuckled at Shale’s raised eyebrow, and waited for a moment longer before repeating herself. “Kale’s very attractive.”



Shale's heart dropped.

"But I think you're beautiful."

Shale grinned from ear to ear.

"Please don't tell Kale I said that though, I don't think she likes me very much as it is."

Shale was still grinning. "Give her time, she'll come round."

"I hope so." Blake linked her arm through Shale's, and they walked on. "I'm so sorry about your mother, Shale. I think you're handling it really well."

Shale realised that Blake thought she had lost her mother in the recent battle. "No. She died over ten years ago. I didn't lose any blood family in the attack, Kale and I are all that's left."

"And Zale," Blake added.

Shale tipped her head. "And Zale." After a few more steps and a minor hesitation, she took a breath and changed the subject. "So tell me, Blake, why are you, the most eligible woman in the entire tribe, single?"

Blake gave her a curious look. "How do you know that I am?"

"I asked," Shale replied, point blank.

Blake smothered a pleased smile at Shale's attention. "I don't have the time. And I'm the princess."

Shale smirked. "Oh, I know." When Blake wasn't more forthcoming, she said, "Surely that means you've got half of the tribe falling at your feet?"

"Quite the opposite, actually. Most are too afraid to try, and the only ones who dare tend to be warriors, and they're too—" Blake stopped short, and gave Shale a sheepish look. "Sorry."

Shale merely grinned, not even the least bit insulted. "Stoic? Reserved? Cold-hearted?"

Looking relieved, Blake laughed. "Exactly."

Shale raised a brow. "To which one?"

Still laughing, Blake said, "All three."

Shale chuckled. "Not all are like that, though I admit a lot are. Amber's not like that."

Blake nodded. "I know, that's why we're good friends."

Shale tried to keep her tone neutral. “You’ve never thought about becoming more than that?”

A shake of blonde hair. “No, she’s like a blood sister to me.” Silence fell for a moment, then Blake said, “And then of course, there’s you.”

Shale hastily swallowed. “Oh?”

“You’re not like that either. Not in the slightest.”

“I should probably be offended, most warriors would be.” Despite her words, Shale smiled widely.

Blake returned it. “As I said, you’re not like other warriors.”

“YOU’VE BEEN GONE a long time,” Kale said as soon as Shale was in hearing distance of their camp.

“I was talking with Blake,” Shale said, getting inside the bedroll that Kale had already laid out for her.

Kale grunted. “Took her on a midnight stroll, did you.” It wasn’t a question. “How romantic.”

Shale rolled over, peering across the fire to look at Kale’s face. Kale had her back to her, and she frowned, sensing something was wrong. “Blake’s really nice, Kale. You’d like her if you gave her a chance.”

“If you say so.”

“I do.” Shale settled onto her back. She didn’t expect a response, and she didn’t get one.

Shale had the treasures of the night sky above her, but as they twinkled down at her, all she could think of was Blake.

“ARE YOU LISTENING to me?” Melaina asked testily. “Did you hear what I said?”

“Yes, but I really don’t think that’s the best course of action.” Shale studied the leaning fir tree with a careful eye. “It’s going to fall any moment now.”

“I know that, you idiot. That’s why you need to go and wrap this rope around it, then we can pull it the other way. It could dam the river otherwise.”

“Couldn’t we just wait and see what happens?” Kale said. “Surely we can still pull it free if it dams the river?”

“Then it would be weighted down farther by the water,” Melaina told her icily.

“True, but at least no one would be in danger of being crushed to death,” Kale said.

“That’s why I’m choosing you.” Melaina prodded a finger into Shale’s chest. She then tilted her head to Kale. “There’s a spare one in case things go wrong.”

Shale’s eyes narrowed. “You really are a piece of work, Melaina.”

“I’m your leader and I’m ordering you to do this. Are you refusing to carry it out?” Melaina lowered her voice. “I win either way.”

Shale grabbed Kale’s arm to hold her in place, lashing out wouldn’t help. Melaina was right, if she did as Melaina wanted, her life was at risk, and if she didn’t, she would be punished for not following her command.

Luckily, the decision was taken away from her when the tree finally fell, and it crashed to the earth, making the ground beneath their feet vibrate.

Shale and Kale smirked at Melaina, infuriating her further.

Aris, who had been on the other side of the tree, walked over to them. She took in Melaina’s annoyed posture. “What’s going on?”

“They questioned my orders. Things would’ve been a lot easier if they had followed my lead.” Melaina pointed to the fallen tree. “It was just sheer luck that it didn’t block our water supply.”

Aris gave first Kale, then Shale, a sharp look. “I don’t know how your old tribe worked, but in this one we don’t question our leader’s orders.”

“Even if they’re wrong?” Kale said.

“Melaina didn’t get to this position by being wrong,” Aris said. “She’s been my second in command for many years, and has never given me reason to doubt her.”

She probably bullied her way into it, Shale thought, and knew Kale was thinking the same thing from the slight curling of her lips.

“Now I won’t accept you undermining me, or my second. In a battle, it could get us all killed.”

“I didn’t mean any disrespect,” Shale replied levelly. “And you’re right, warriors can’t hesitate in battle, I’m not ignorant of that.”

“Could have fooled me,” Melaina said. “Just because you can fight doesn’t mean you can lead. You come into our village and try to tell us what to do. What makes you think you have the right?”

“Actually, you’re wrong. We can lead,” Kale said angrily.

Melaina stared dumbly at her.

“You led your old tribe?” Aris looked back and forth between them.

Shale nodded. “We did.”

Melaina folded her arms over her chest. “That doesn’t change anything.”

“I now understand your reluctance. It’s difficult to follow orders when you’re used to making them.” Aris paused. “But my second is right, it doesn’t change anything. These are my warriors and I’m their leader. If you want to be a warrior within this tribe, you must submit to me. You must follow my command.” Another pause. “Is that understood?”

Kale glanced to Shale, a wealth of communication passing silently between them.

“We will follow you,” Shale answered for them both. Aris was speaking the truth. If they wanted to stay here they would have to try and make this work. It would be the same within any tribe.

“I’ll let it go this time,” Aris said. “You’re new, and things are different here. But if there is a next time, you’ll be punished. Have no doubt about that.”

“THEY WEREN’T FOLLOWING orders, and that’s why Melaina’s so mad.”

“I was told they put the whole group of warriors in danger.”

“The whole group?”

“Everyone. Our water supply was nearly cut off, too, because they thought they were above orders.”

“They make me nervous. If half of what I’ve heard is true, Zeus only knows what they’ll do next.”

“Ladies,” Blake said, sitting down at the table with them. “And who are we talking about?” She knew exactly who of course, but wanted to hear it from their own lips. Blake detested gossip, rumours were difficult things to control, and were rarely ever accurate.

“The twins,” one of the less quiet Amazons spoke up.

“Shale and Kale,” Blake said.

“Yes.”

“What about them?”

The woman directly opposite Blake replied this time, “Apparently, they’re not following orders.”

“And who told you this?”

“Melaina,” another informed her.

That didn’t surprise Blake. “And you don’t think Melaina could simply be sore about Shale beating her in a fight? Warriors do have a lot of pride.”

The table went quiet and Blake stood, intending to leave them to it. She had said what she’d needed to make them think. Blake left the dining lodge and headed for the training ground, intent on getting to the bottom of this. Shale and Kale would never settle in if malicious rumours followed them everywhere.

“Aris,” Blake called to the chief warrior, who came over instantly. “What’s this I hear about Shale and Kale not following orders?”

Aris looked startled. “How do you know about that?”

“Word of mouth. Now is it true?”

“Yes, Blake, but they’ve both been dealt with.”

Blake could tell something wasn’t right. Shale wasn’t the type to defy orders, Kale maybe, but not Shale, not without good reason. “What was the order?”

Aris frowned. “Does it matter?”

Normally it wouldn’t have, but Blake had a hunch. “In this case, yes. They both used to lead, Aris, they wouldn’t question without good cause.”

Aris reflected on that, then nodded. "I wasn't there. It was Melaina's order they defied."

Blake sighed internally. Things just kept getting more and more complicated.

"I'll get her for you."

Blake shook her head. "No, it's all right, Aris." She looked to the twins, who were off to one side, sparring with each other. "Why are they separate from the rest?"

"Warriors have a strong code of honor, Blake. Following orders is part of that code. By defying Melaina, they've dishonored that. They haven't done themselves any favors with the other warriors."

Blake's forehead creased in thought. "Surely both of them would've known that? And still they didn't follow Melaina's order." Another shake of her head. "That doesn't make sense, Aris. They're trying to fit in, not cause trouble."

Aris raised a brow.

Blake smiled. "Though I grant you, they've caused their fair share. Or at least Kale has." She walked forward. "I need to know what that order was." Blake held up a hand to stop Aris from following, knowing that she would likely find out more if she were alone.

Shale and Kale were sparring fiercely, and Blake was amazed when they stopped in perfect unison and looked at her.

"Blake," Shale greeted.

"Princess."

"Shale. Kale." Blake gestured toward the rest of the warriors. "I see you've managed to alienate yourselves quite nicely."

Kale scoffed, either missing, or ignoring Blake's teasing tone. "We've already been scolded by Melaina and Aris, we don't need to hear it again."

"Good, because I'm not here for that," Blake replied easily. "But I do want to know what happened."

"Why?" Kale asked.

"She doesn't need a reason, Kale, she's the princess." Shale reminded her point blank of whom she was talking to. Kale needed to give Blake the respect she deserved.

"Well it's not like she can do anything," Kale mumbled.

“Do anything about what?” Blake asked.

Kale stared stubbornly at the ground.

“Shale?” Blake switched the query to her when she realised Kale wasn’t going to answer.

“We just had a difference of opinion.”

“So I gathered. You refused to carry out Melaina’s order. That’s a serious offence.”

“I thought you said you weren’t here to scold us?” Kale said.

Shale sighed. “Be quiet, Kale.”

“You’d be wise to listen, Kale,” Blake said firmly. She searched Shale’s face intently. “I know you had to have a reason. I just want to understand.” Blake’s tone was softer now, and directed solely at Shale. “Talk to me.” A request, not a demand.

Shale held her gaze for a moment, then nodded. “Basically, a tree was going to fall, and Melaina wanted me to attach a rope to it so we could make sure it didn’t dam the river.”

Blake frowned. “What was so wrong with that?”

“She wanted me to go underneath the tree to do it.”

Her frown grew stronger, and Blake asked the obvious question, “Couldn’t you have got to it any other way?”

“Yes, but time was of the essence, and Melaina wasn’t willing to give me any,” Shale said. “The tree fell a few moments later. If I had followed her command...well, I wouldn’t be talking to you now.”

“It was pointless anyway. The tree didn’t block the river. And even if it had, we could’ve pulled it free without risking anyone’s life,” Kale said.

“It was an unnecessary risk,” Shale finished.

“But apparently acceptable as there are two of us,” Kale added sarcastically. “I could easily take Shale’s place.”

Blake wasn’t amused. “I don’t find that funny, Kale.”

“Neither did I.”

Blake’s voice went up a pitch. “Melaina said that?”

“She doesn’t like us,” Shale said simply.

Kale broke into laughter. “That’s putting it nicely.”

Blake turned, intending to go and confront Melaina. Shale lightly gripped her wrist. “No, Blake, don’t do anything.”

“Don’t do anything? I’m not having her put your lives at risk because she doesn’t like you. You can’t ask me to do that.”

“I’m not. I’m asking you to trust me. No one will believe us over Melaina anyway, and I give you my word that we’ll be careful.” Shale’s mouth quirked. “Though we might need your help if we disobey another order.”

“If it’s anything like today’s, you’ll have it.” Blake glanced at Kale. “Both of you.” Though Kale didn’t smile, she did nod. It was a start.

“Except for how she’s treating us, Melaina’s a brilliant second, I can see why Aris chose her,” Shale said.

Blake was surprised by how fair Shale was being. Under the circumstances, it was more than Melaina deserved.

“I agree. Though that’ll make it a lot harder for us,” Kale said. “She’s also careful not to treat us unfairly around others. Melaina knows what she’s doing.”

“All this because you beat her in a fight?” Blake asked in astonishment. “You warriors must have big egos.”

Shale grinned. “We do. But in this case, I think it’s more than that. I’m not sure what it is though.” She faced Kale, her gaze accusing.

“Don’t look at me,” Kale said. “You’re the one she threatened.”

“What? Melaina threatened you?”

Shale tried to play it down. “It was hardly a threat.”

Blake didn’t look pleased at all. “When was this?”

Shale tugged on her ear. “After I showed Anikett that move. Melaina didn’t like me interfering.”

Blake was indignant. “You were only helping.” At Shale’s shrug, she said, “No, I don’t like this, Shale, not one bit. I’m going to have a word with her.”



“No!” the twins exclaimed in unison, startling Blake to a standstill.

“That’ll only make her worse.”

“It comes down to one simple question, Blake.” Shale regarded her seriously. “Do you trust me?”

Blake didn’t hesitate. “I trust you.”

Shale smiled. “Then leave it to us.”

SHALE KNOCKED ON the healer’s door, not wanting to barge in just in case someone was being treated.

“Enter,” a musical voice called from within.

Kale went in first, never one to hang around. Shale followed, her gaze landing on a waif of a woman with pale blonde hair, whose skinny arms looked like they would snap like a twig.

She glanced up from the assortment of jars that she’d been examining, and smiled pleasantly at them. “You must be the twins I’ve heard so much about.”

Shale had to resist the urge to roll her eyes. Amazons sure knew how to gossip. There was no one else in the lodge, so she assumed this was the healer. “Appollonia?”

“That’s me.” She studied first Shale, then Kale. “My, you’re much more attractive than I’ve been led to believe.”

Kale sniggered. “I bet we had horns in some of those stories you heard.”

“And tails, too,” Appollonia said humorously. She pointed to a couple of spare chairs behind them, along the wall. “Please, sit down.”

Kale took the chair closest to the door, and Shale sat beside her, glancing around the room. There were three beds in the lodge, all pressed against the one wall. There was plenty of space to maneuver between them though, and a chair was beside each bed. At the far end, two shelves stretched across the width of the room. The top shelf was cluttered with an assortment of jars and bottles, no doubt filled with medicinal remedies, and the bottom was stocked with rags and bandages, cutting implements, and other tools of the trade. A table and chair were positioned in front of the shelves, and the table was littered with scrolls and parchment.

“Please forgive the mess,” Appollonia said. “You caught me in the middle of cleaning.” She dipped her hands into a bowl of water, and then dried them on a cloth. “Would you like something to drink? I’ve got some lovely herbal tea.”

“No, thank you,” Shale replied, as Kale shook her head.

“I must confess, I’ve been hoping you’d stop by.” Appollonia held up her hand apologetically. “Not that I wished you ill, but I was curious as to what all the fuss was about.” She stepped out from behind the table, walked around it, and perched on its surface.

“As healer, I bet you hear about everything,” Shale said.

“Oh, yes. I’m probably the most knowledgeable person in the village, after the queen and the princess of course. Talking helps to distract people from the pain, you see.” Appollonia smiled again. “Though I find the more gossip surrounding a person, the more interesting that person is.”

Shale’s eyebrows rose, she’d never heard it put quite like that.

Appollonia certainly had a unique way of looking at things.

“And that’s exactly why I wanted you to call in. Now, first things first, are you hurt or ill?” She focussed more on Shale, noticing the fading bruises on her face.

“No, we wanted to give you something.” Shale looked to Kale, who started to detach the small pouch from her waist.

“Me? How delightful. I do love surprises.”

Appollonia loved to talk too, they’d barely got in a word since they had arrived. Shale found herself liking the woman though, and was relieved to know that if either of them did get injured or became sick, Appollonia would treat them like any other member of the tribe.

Kale handed the pouch to the healer.

Appollonia opened it, and her eyes grew wide as she fingered the contents. She raised it to her nose and sniffed it, then looked at them in astonishment. “Where did you get this?”

“Far south of here. We collected it for our own healer, but...” Shale broke off. “We thought you may have use for it.”

“This is a very rare and precious gift you have given me, I thank you both deeply for it.” Appollonia searched for an empty jar, and poured the contents of the pouch into it. She then returned the pouch to Kale, who tied it back in place. “The other upside to being a healer is that I get to talk to a lot of people myself. There will soon be good rumours to contradict the bad. This kindness will not go unnoticed.”

“There’s really no need…” Shale said.

Appollonia leaned forward. “You clearly haven’t heard them.”

Kale laughed loudly. “Well in that case, we’d appreciate any help you can give.”

SHALE COULD ONLY watch as Kale pulled back the bowstring, aimed, and let the arrow fly. The arrowhead sank deeply into the stag’s chest, and the creature stumbled, then crashed to the ground.

Shale emerged from her position behind a nearby tree, annoyed. “I had that, Kale.”

“You were taking too long.”

“You had the better angle,” Shale said.

Kale looked smug. “Then you should’ve got yourself into a better spot.”

Shale shook her head. “I had no cover, it would’ve fled.”

“Whatever you say.” Kale crossed to the deer’s side. “He’s big.”

“Mm.” Shale patted her on the back. “Good shot.” She pulled the arrow out and handed it back to Kale.

Kale wiped the blood off and sheathed it in her quiver. “I don’t envy you carrying him back to camp.”

“Me?” Shale spluttered.

“I shot him, remember?” Kale grinned cockily. “You need to pull your weight.”

Shale scoffed, then chuckled. “All right. Help me get him on my shoulders.” She bent, and with Kale’s assistance, wrestled the hind into place.

Despite Kale’s words, she carried the animal for the second half of the journey.

Shale spotted some delicate yellow flowers, and altered her course. Choosing the best one, she picked it, cradling it carefully as she walked.

“What’s that for?” Kale asked, giving her a look that said she already knew the answer.

“It’s for Blake.”

“You can’t be serious, Shale? Please tell me you’re not serious?”

“I don’t know what your problem is with her, Kale, Blake’s been extremely patient with you.” Shale smelled the flower, the sweet perfume reminding her strongly of Blake. “I swear, you forget she’s the princess.”

“How could I? You’re always reminding me!”

“I shouldn’t have to remind you.”

“Then don’t,” Kale said flatly. “What do you honestly think will come of this?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not blind, Shale. Moonlit walks, flowers, you’re trying to romance her.”

“So? Where’s the harm in that? I like her.”

Kale stared at her, disbelief written clearly on her face. “You liked all of the others, too. It still didn’t work out.”

“Blake’s different.”

“No, she’s not. You just want her to be. I’m telling you, Shale, this won’t work. Don’t get involved like that. It’s not worth it.”

Shale frowned. Her mind told her that Kale was right, romantic relationships never worked for either of them. And she certainly didn’t want to lose Blake as a friend. She would have to be content with that. Shale let the flower slip from her fingers.

Kale’s expression softened. “I know it’s hard, but it’s best this way.”

“You’re right,” Shale said, though her heart started to ache.

KALE ROLLED HER eyes when she saw Blake approaching— didn’t the woman have anything better to do? Shale’s face brightened considerably at Blake’s presence, and Kale groaned internally, Shale had it bad.

Blake smiled at them. “I see you had good hunting today.”

“Sure did,” Shale replied. “For Kale anyway.” She proudly clasped Kale’s shoulder.

Blake admired the stag. “He’s a beauty.”

“He was.” Kale shifted the hind’s weight on purpose, so Blake would think she was struggling to carry it. It worked, Blake instantly stepped aside.

“I won’t keep you,” she said.

Kale wanted to get moving, for she had the feeling Shale was considering asking Blake to join them for dinner.

Shale opened her mouth to speak, but closed it quickly, as if thinking better of her words.

Blake gave Shale a curious look, when she barely met her eyes.

They strolled through the village side by side, not giving Blake, or any other Amazon, a second glance.

## Chapter Four

“SHALE?” BLAKE CALLED out. She intended to ask what was going on. Shale had hardly spoken to her in over a week, and Blake was getting the distinct impression that Shale was trying to avoid her. Shale’s wide smile upon seeing her made her doubt that notion though.

“Blake.”

“Is everything all right, Shale? I haven’t seen much of you lately.” Blake had deliberately waited to catch Shale when she was on her own.

“Everything’s fine.”

Blake indicated Kale, who was busy talking to Amber. “I see you’re making friends.”

“Yeah, Amber’s great.”

Blake smiled. “I’m glad you’re starting to settle.” Glancing around the training ground, she lowered her voice to ensure no one else heard her next question. “How’s Melaina been with you? Any more problems?”

“No, but I don’t think she’ll give up that easily.”

Blake didn’t think so either, but she kept the comment to herself. “I was wondering if you wanted to spend the day with me tomorrow?”

Shale’s face became mischievous. “The whole day? Can the tribe spare you for that long?”

Blake grinned. “The queen will still be here.”

“I’d really like that.”

“Great.” Blake ran a hand down Shale’s arm. “Cause I’ve missed you recently.”

Shale’s blue eyes sparkled happily. “I’ve missed you, too.”

SHALE STUDIED BLAKE longingly as Blake walked away. She probably should have rejected Blake’s offer, given the fact that Kale had made it perfectly clear that she didn’t like her. But the thought of spending that much time alone with Blake was too tempting, and she had answered honestly, despite her better judgement.

Blake’s admission that she’d missed her had sent Shale’s heart fluttering. She felt exactly the same way. Blake was never out of her thoughts, and the self-imposed space she’d given herself hadn’t changed that. She doubted anything would. Shale was falling hard for Blake, and no amount of willpower could stop her—whether it was her own, or Kale’s.

THIS TIME WHEN Shale passed a flower, she scooped it up and presented it to Blake.

Blake smiled brightly. She held her breath as Shale stepped closer, and gently tucked the bloom behind her ear.

“There. Beautiful,” Shale said, though she wasn’t looking at the flower.

Blake slid her hand into Shale’s larger one, and led her forward. “Come on, it’s not much farther to the lake.”

“You said that ages ago,” Shale teased.

Blake chuckled. "I thought you'd be pleased to get me this far away from the village. You have me all to yourself out here."

Shale's heartbeat picked up. As if she needed reminding. "I'm not complaining, just stating an observation."

"Mm-hmm."

"No, truly, I'm glad. There will be no interruptions."

Blake raised an inquisitive brow. "And what exactly will we be doing that you don't want interrupted?"

Shale colored slightly, but joined in with Blake's banter. "You tell me, you're the princess. I'm just here to serve."

Blake ran her thumb over the back of Shale's hand. "I like the sound of that."

Shale cleared her throat self-consciously, her mind so focussed on Blake's soft stroking that she nearly walked headlong into a low branch.

"Careful there," Blake said, her amusement clear.

Shale's body was getting overheated, and it wasn't from the noon sun. She wondered about diving into the lake, she really needed to cool off.

Blake pointed. "There it is." The lake was calm, and the surrounding trees reflected perfectly off its still surface.

"Race you." Shale let go of Blake's hand and dashed toward the lake.

"That's cheating!" Blake yelled, as she sprinted after her.

They jumped into the lake fully clothed, but only Blake resurfaced.

"Very funny, Shale." Blake looked around to try and spot her. The water was still rippling from their entrance, and there was no sign of Shale.

After several moments, Blake said, "Shale, come on now." She treaded water for another instant, then swam toward where Shale had dived in. "Shale?" Blake called, her voice growing frantic. "Shale!"

A hand suddenly tugged on her ankle, and Blake submerged briefly. She came up spluttering, scowling at Shale, who was looking far too pleased with herself.

"I'm going to get you for that."

“You’ve got to catch me first.” Shale took off, swimming through the water like a fish.

Blake chased her relentlessly, their laughter mingling as they splashed each other.

SHALE LAY ON a large slab of rock, stretched out on her back, the sun drying both her and her clothes. “Blake?”

“Yes, Shale?”

“I know this sounds awful, but I’m really glad I met you.”

“Why’s that awful?”

“Because I wouldn’t have met you if my tribe hadn’t been killed. We’d have never crossed paths, and I’m pleased that we did.”

“I am, too.” Blake turned over on her front to let her back dry, smiling when Shale pushed a lock of blonde hair off her face. “Shale?”

“Hmm?”

“Can we stay here a bit longer?” Blake looked skyward, trying to see the position of the sun.

“We can stay as long as you want.” Shale didn’t want this day to end.

Blake squeezed Shale’s hand, which was entwined with her own.

THEY REACHED THE village earlier than Blake expected, the sun, though low, was still present. They’d made good time. They didn’t leave the lake till late afternoon, and only did so because it would be difficult to navigate the terrain in the dark.

Both women had wanted to stay the night, but knew it wasn’t possible. If Blake didn’t return, half of the tribe would be out searching for her, and if Shale didn’t, Kale would come looking for her also.

They had barely entered the village when a red-faced woman came storming over, her furious gaze directed firmly on Shale.



“How dare you say those things to Payleus!” she said loudly, drawing intrigued glances from nearby Amazons.

Blake spoke up quickly, “Mnaesa, what are you talking about?”

“Her.” Mnaesa pointed at Shale. “She insulted Payleus, she’s over there crying as we speak.” She gestured toward the cabins.

“Mnaesa, I assure you, Shale did no such thing. She’s been with me all day.”

“Kale,” Shale muttered. “What did she say?”

Mnaesa glared at her. “As if you don’t know.”

“How could she?” Blake raised her voice a notch. “Shale was with me.”

“Oh.” Mnaesa paused briefly. “Well Kale called Payleus fat, and said she looked like a horse.”

Blake had to admit that it was an apt description of Payleus, but it was one thing to think it, and quite another to say it.

“I’m sorry,” Shale said.

Blake frowned. “Shale, don’t apologise, you haven’t—”

“What kind of Amazon speaks like that to her sisters?” Mnaesa shook her head. “Your twin’s not only unkind, she’s cruel, and I don’t want either of you near me or my cousin. Do I make myself clear?”

Shale nodded. “Yes.” She rubbed her temple as Mnaesa turned and stomped away.

“Shale, why didn’t you defend yourself?”

“What’s the point? Won’t change anything. I’d better go and speak to Kale, see what all that was about.”

“I’ll come with you,” Blake said, falling into step beside a now despondent Shale. She linked her arm through Shale’s, and was both surprised and upset when Shale pulled away.

“You don’t want to do that,” Shale said flatly. “I’m the bad guy, remember?”

“FROM THE LOOK on your face, I’m assuming you’ve already heard.” Kale was droll as Shale and Blake approached. She didn’t bother acknowledging Blake.

“What did you do?” Shale asked.

“Why’s it always my fault?”

“You insulted Payleus,” Blake said. “Why?”

Kale continued to clean her sword for a long moment, as if Blake had never spoken.

“Kale!” Shale yelled.

Kale threw the sword down, causing a puff of dust to emerge from the dry soil. “Payleus wanted me to have sex with her. I refused. She wouldn’t back off, so I told her some of the reasons why I wasn’t interested.”

Blake believed her. “Payleus can be quite pushy.”

Kale thrust her hand out toward Blake in a triumphant gesture, looking to Shale as she did so. “See?”

“You could’ve tried to break it to her gently,” Shale said.

“I did, she wasn’t having it. What did you want me to do? Just stand there and let her have her way with me?” Kale’s voice grew louder on each word.

“No, but—”

“But nothing, Shale! You were off with her.” She scowled at Blake before returning her attention to Shale. “You weren’t even here!”

“You’re right, I wasn’t. But I’ve still got to take the blame afterward, and I’m so sick of doing that, Kale!” Shale was shouting now, her frustration visible. She took a deep breath, and sat down heavily on the nearby boulder. When she spoke again, it came out as a broken whisper, “Just once I want someone to notice me...to notice that I’m not you.”

“Shale,” Blake murmured, her heart breaking for her.

Shale shook her head in resigned acceptance, then stood and strode away, disappearing amongst the trees.

Kale made a move to go after her, but a command stopped her.

“No, Kale. I’m going.” Though Blake’s voice was low, it was firm, and she didn’t wait for a response.

“SHALE?” BLAKE CALLED after her. “Shale, please stop.”

Shale halted, though she didn't turn around. Blake caught up to her, and took hold of Shale's arm from behind, silently requesting for Shale to face her.

Shale slowly turned, but kept her head hung low. “Nobody sees me,” she said in a pained whisper.

Blake gently cupped Shale's cheek, and waited till pale blue eyes raised and met her own. “I see you, Shale. Not Kale, not just twins, you. Only you.”

Shale had longed to hear those words since childhood. Blake noticed her and her alone. For who she was. Tears rolled down her cheeks, but she was too overwhelmed to stop them. Blake brushed them away with soft fingers, her gaze so tender Shale barely managed to hold herself together.

“You're loyal and caring, and incredibly giving. You are truly beautiful, Shale,” Blake said.

Shale raised her hand, and began to stroke Blake's fair hair, the intimate gesture coming naturally to her.

“I see you,” Blake repeated, leaning into Shale's touch.

Shale smiled, and closed the remaining distance between them. Never had she wanted to kiss someone so much.

“I should hope so.” Kale's voice ruined the moment completely. “She's standing right in front of you.”

Blake drew back. She frowned at Kale. “Must you be such an ass?”

“You seem to bring it out in me.”

“No, Kale, I think you choose to bring it out when I'm around.”

“How insightful of you.”

“All right, enough,” Shale said. “If you can't get along, just stay out of each other's way.”

“That's kind of hard when she's around you all the time, Shale.”

“She's my friend,” Shale said. “I like spending time with her.”

“Friend? Is that so? Then what did I just interrupt?”

“What is your problem, Kale?” Blake demanded, her annoyance showing.

“You!” Kale said loudly.

“I can see that, but why? What is it about me that you dislike so much?”

“Shale’s right, it’s best we don’t have anything to do with each other.” Kale spun on her heel and walked off. “Don’t bring her to our camp, Shale,” she called back.

Shale sighed. Maybe it was for the best that she hadn’t kissed Blake. If Kale and Blake couldn’t get on, things would be doomed from the start.

SHALE DUCKED AS Kale swung a powerful left hook toward her face. She came up fast, unleashing an uppercut that knocked Kale onto her back.

Kale went with the momentum, rolled, and jumped back to her feet in one fast, fluid motion. Kale touched her lip, grinning at Shale when her fingers came away red. “Got me good that time.”

Shale smiled back, tapping a small cut above her brow. “I owed you one.”

“That you did.” Kale turned as clapping erupted behind her, and she shook her head humorously when she saw it was Amber. Amber wasn’t the only Amazon present. Despite their unpopularity, their daily sparring sessions attracted quite a crowd. They fought with no restraint, and their fighting prowess guaranteed a good show.

“Don’t these people have anywhere better to be?” Kale said, but only loud enough for Shale to hear.

“Apparently not.”

Shale circled Kale, then moved in, each trading savage blows and kicks at a frightening speed.

Shale’s sharp ears heard Amber laughing, and it was followed by Blake’s voice—she sounded close. Shale’s mind wandered to Blake, and her heart started to beat that much faster. No woman had ever had this effect on her before. She was completely captivated by Blake.

Shale didn’t see Kale’s kick until it was too late. She cursed herself for losing focus, knowing that at this pace Kale had no chance of stopping it.

Kale's foot connected solidly onto Shale's left knee, forcing it back unnaturally. Shale dropped with a grunt of pain.

"Shale!" Blake cried out.

Kale moved to Shale's side, kneeling beside her worriedly. "Are you all right?"

Shale was clutching her leg, though she kept her hands well clear of her knee, which was already starting to swell.

Blake came dashing over, with Amber close in tow. Blake knelt on Shale's other side, opposite Kale, and Amber squatted next to her.

"I owe you big time for this," Shale said between clenched teeth.

"You're lucky I pulled it, Shale. You should've been concentrating." Kale scowled accusingly at Blake.

"I know. I lost focus. I'm lucky my knee's not broken."

"All right, Shale, let's get you to the healer." Blake placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Do you think you can stand?" At Shale's nod, she added, "Lean on us."

"I've got her," Kale said, in no uncertain terms. She wrapped one arm under Shale's legs, the other around her back, and lifted her almost effortlessly.

Shale's jaw clamped tightly at the move, but knew Kale was being as careful as possible.

"You can get the door," Kale told Blake condescendingly, as she strode toward Appollonia's lodge.

Blake's eyes narrowed, but she kept her mouth shut.

Kale moved quickly, despite the fact she was carrying her own body weight in her arms. When they reached the lodge, Blake did indeed open the door, and pointedly ignored the cocky smirk Kale directed at her.

"Put her down there." Appollonia indicated one of the beds, even though they were all empty.

Shale was set down where the healer wished, on the middle bed.

"What happened?" Appollonia asked, but the question wasn't directed at anyone in particular.

"Sparring accident," Blake said.

Kale gave more detailed information. "I connected with the front here." She pointed close to the joint but didn't touch it. "Much more pressure and it would've broken."

Shale, though sitting upright, was leaning back on her arms. She hadn't moved her injured leg at all, so it was still bent at the knee, while the other was stretched out flat.

Appollonia leaned over her patient, feeling the joint carefully. "I'll have to straighten it."

Shale tensed in anticipation, and Kale placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Amber," Kale said, looking pleased when the red-head immediately knew what she was referring to and moved into position, taking firm hold of Shale's uninjured leg to keep it still.

Blake perched alongside Shale, reaching behind and gripping her hand.

"Ready?" Appollonia asked calmly. When Shale nodded, Appollonia slowly repositioned her leg.

Shale didn't make a sound, but she squeezed Blake's hand to an almost painful degree. Blake kept her hold, even after Appollonia had finished.

"You need to keep off it. You're right in that it's not broken, but it will still take a while to heal. Resting it will help."

"Looks like you'll have to spar with Amber for a while," Shale said to Kale.

"My jaw's only just recovered from last time," Amber moaned good-naturedly.

"I'll go easy on you," Kale taunted.

Chestnut eyebrows rose indignantly. "You most certainly will not!"

"Yes, please go easy on her, Kale, it makes my job so much easier," Appollonia said. She selected some herbs, filled a mug using her waterskin, and began to mix them together.

Amber looked questioningly at Kale. "If I'm not needed anymore, I'd better get back."

"Okay. Thanks for your help."

Shale smiled at her. "Yeah, thanks, Amber. You're a good friend."

"No problem." She stopped at the door when Kale called to her.

"Hey. You'd best get in some sparring practice."

Amber laughed, and shook her head before leaving the lodge.

As Shale took the mug from Appollonia, an offensive smell wafted into her senses, and her nose scrunched up in distaste. “I hope this is to put on my leg?”

Appollonia smiled. “Afraid not. It will help with the pain.”

Shale eyed the substance warily. “I think I’d rather be in pain.”

Kale chuckled, and tapped the mug. “Bottom’s up.”

Shale scowled for a moment longer before drinking the entire contents in one go. She thrust the mug back to Appollonia, keen to get rid of it. “That was disgusting.”

“I’ve got worse,” Appollonia said. “I can’t do much else for you, Shale, these things take time. If you need any more pain relief—”

“I’ll come and get it,” Kale said.

“Good. I know a lot of my patients would rather sleep in their own bed, but since you don’t yet have a cabin, you’re welcome to stay here.”

“Thank you, but I’ll be fine.” Though Shale turned her down, she appreciated the offer.

Appollonia nodded. “A cold compress will help keep down the swelling.”

“Noted,” Kale said. “And new rule, Shale, no sparring at all until you’ve regained your focus. What you did today was really stupid.”

Shale straightened, resenting Kale’s statement, but having no defence for it. Kale was right. She unlinked her hand from Blake’s.

“Everyone gets distracted now and again, Kale,” Blake said. “You should—”

“Not us,” Kale said sternly. “And I wasn’t talking to you.”

Appollonia discreetly left them to it, crossing to the shelves at the far end of the room. She started to sort through the numerous jars there.

“Well I’m talking to you. And yes, Kale, even you two can get distracted. You’re not above the rest of us, though clearly you think you are.”

“I don’t think that!”

“No? You act like you do.” Blake’s voice rose to match Kale’s. “So Shale made a mistake, it doesn’t mean you’ve got to rub her nose in it. The gods know she’s let plenty of your mistakes slide!” Blake got to her feet, confronting Kale across the bed.

“I don’t know how you dare!” Kale shouted. “Especially since this is all your fault!”

“My fault? Oh, that’s right, shift the blame onto me. It could never be your fault, could it? It’s always someone else’s. You need to take responsibility, Kale.”

“It was my fault,” Shale said. “Not Kale’s, not Blake’s, mine. Now stop blaming each other.” She could tell both women were furious from the way they were breathing—fast and loud. They ceased to argue though. “One of you needs to leave. I don’t care who,” Shale said, subdued.

Kale and Blake stared at one another.

Kale defiantly crossed her arms. “I’m not leaving.”

When Blake hesitated, Shale wondered whether she was going to order Kale to leave. A moment passed, but Blake didn’t resort to that.

“All right. I’ll leave.” Blake fixed her gaze on Shale, who was looking extremely unhappy. “You know where I am if you want me.” She kissed Shale softly on the cheek, then left.

Shale missed her presence almost instantly, and wished she had never spoken.

“Shale, you need to stop this before things get too far,” Kale said. “I can see how you feel every time you look at her.”

Shale couldn’t lie to her. “So? I know nothing can come of it, but I still want to be friends with her.”

“I don’t see why,” Kale muttered.

“Well you wouldn’t, would you? You’re always so rude to her.”

“And she’s not rude to me?”

“Only in response to you. I know you don’t like her, but she’s my friend. Can’t you try to get along with her? Please?”

“I have tried,” Kale said.

“Barely! Blake hasn’t heard one civil word from you.”

“And she’s not likely to either.”

Shale shook her head. “You’re being ridiculous.”

“I’m being ridiculous?” Kale gave a short laugh, though it was humorless. “You’re the one chasing someone you can never have. It will never work. We both know this.”



“I’ll be happy to have her as a friend.”

“You may try to fool yourself, Shale, but you’ll never fool me.”

“It’s my life!”

“Yes. But it affects both of us.” Kale stormed out of the lodge. “Don’t forget that.” She slammed the door shut.

“How could I?” Shale asked quietly.

SHALE LOWERED HERSELF cautiously onto her sleeping roll. It had been a difficult and painful walk to get back to camp. Since Kale had stormed off, and Blake had been sent away, she’d had no one to assist her. Appollonia had of course offered, but Shale declined. Though she liked her, Shale was very particular as to whom she willingly allowed into her personal space.

At first, Shale had intended to head straight for Blake’s cabin, but Kale’s voice rang in her ears, warning her to stay away. The fact that she automatically thought of Blake proved Kale’s words to be true. She was too attached to Blake, too involved emotionally. So Shale had changed her mind, and ended up back at camp.

Her leg was throbbing, but she was able to block it out, her thoughts distracting her easily.

Shale wondered how long it would be before Blake came to visit, and a sick realisation dawned on her. Blake might not. Kale had told her not to come near their camp.

She hoped Blake wasn’t upset. Shale hadn’t wanted her to leave, or Kale either for that matter, but knew it was the only way to stop them arguing. Shale needed to tell that to Blake, the last thing she wanted was to hurt her.

Shale struggled to her feet, and headed toward the village. Her warrior’s pride was still in full effect, and she intended to go behind the cabins—she didn’t want half of the tribe to see her limping.

“WHERE ARE THE twins?” Melaina asked.

Blake looked up from the parchment she was reading. “Which one do you want?”

“Does it matter? They’re both the same.”

Blake bristled. “No, they’re not. They’re very different. You’d see that if you only took the time to get to know them.”

Melaina didn’t look at all convinced. “I know enough. Now, where are they?”

“As I said, which one? Shale’s over at the healer’s, Kale went off in that direction.” Blake pointed south.

“You mean they’re not together?” Melaina asked sarcastically. “That’s a first.”

Blake frowned, pushed off her cabin steps, and got to her feet. “Shale and Kale are finding it difficult enough settling into a new tribe as it is, without comments like that.”

“Why don’t you just refer to them as ‘the twins?’ It’s easier than saying their names all the time.”

“Because they’re more than just twins, Melaina. A lot more.”

“Well their names don’t help matters, it confuses things further.”

“I’m sure they didn’t get to pick their own names. Besides, I think it’s sweet.”

Melaina snorted. “I think you’re sweet on her.”

“Who?”

“The twin. Don’t ask me which one, ‘cause I can’t tell.”

Blake’s eyes widened in sudden understanding. So that’s what all this is about. She sighed. “Melaina, I’ve told you, several times, I’m not interested in you like that. Sorry, but that’s just the way it is.”

“I could certainly give you a lot more attention than she’s going to give you. You’re always going to be second to her twin.”

“That’s just it, Melaina, I don’t want your attention.” She paused for effect. “And I don’t want to hear about this again. Ever. Now, please, move on.” Before Melaina could reply, Blake descended the wooden steps and marched off.

As Blake rounded the cabin, she practically collided with Shale, who was leaning heavily on her right leg, using the cabin for support.

“Shale?” Blake was still mad from her confrontation with Melaina, and it came out through her tone.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to eavesdrop. Normally I would’ve just left, but…” She tapped her leg. “It took me forever to get here.” Shale gave a small, embarrassed smile.

Blake’s anger dissolved instantly. “It’s all right. I’m just sorry you had to hear that.” She took a breath. “How come I didn’t see you coming from Appollonia’s?” The healer’s lodge was practically opposite hers, and even though it was across the village, Blake was sure she would’ve noticed Shale heading her way.

“I went to my camp first.”

Blake shook her head in disbelief. “Shale, you’re supposed to be resting that leg.”

“I wanted to make sure you were all right. I didn’t want you to leave, I just wanted to tell you that.”

Blake smiled. “I know.” Shale really was wonderful. Here she was with a serious leg injury, and she was checking to make sure Blake’s feelings weren’t hurt.

A warm expression appeared, and Shale rested a gentle hand on Blake’s shoulder. “Thank you for defending Kale and I. It means a lot to me.”

Blake reached upward and squeezed her hand. “You’re welcome.” Her smile faded when Shale shifted her weight, and a flicker of pain, though brief, crossed her face. “Here.” Blake stepped closer and wrapped an arm around Shale’s waist. “Lean on me.” She was pleased when Shale didn’t offer any argument, simply complying by draping an arm over her shoulder. Blake helped her forward. “Let’s get you off that leg.”

THEY HADN’T GONE very far when Shale stumbled, lost in her thoughts rather than concentrating on where they were going. Her focus was purely on Blake, her touch distracting. The feeling of another woman holding her was different, but pleasant, and that surprised Shale. She was only used to Kale’s contact, so when others touched her, including previous partners, she often found herself uncomfortable. Shale thought she would find this experience similar, but she didn’t. Blake’s smaller frame fit into hers nicely, and she was amazed at how good it felt to have Blake’s arm around her.

“Shale?”

Shale snapped out of her musings, and peered down into concerned green eyes, realising bashfully that not only had Blake been talking to her, but they had actually come to a complete standstill. Shale wondered what was happening to her, she was usually so alert and focussed. It only happened when Blake was around—the woman was too much of a distraction. It’s a good thing she’s not a warrior, Shale thought, or I’d likely get my fool head chopped off!

“Shale?” Blake repeated, louder this time.

Shale blinked, she'd done it again. “Sorry,” she mumbled, literally giving her head a shake.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes. I was just thinking.”

“You were completely out of it.” Blake felt her forehead, as if checking for a fever. “That’s the second time that’s happened. First, with your knee, and now this. I’m taking you back to the healer.”

“No, there’s no need,” Shale said. She knew the reason she was distracted was standing right next to her, but she could hardly tell Blake that.

“I really think you should be checked over.”

“I just was. Except for my knee, I’m perfectly fine.” Shale started to walk on, but Blake’s hand on her chest stopped her. That really isn’t helping matters, she thought. To her annoyance, Shale felt herself blush.

“If you’re ill, you need to let Appollonia treat you.” Blake’s voice was firm. “I insist.”

Shale tried another tack. “I have a lot on my mind at the moment. I got distracted by it, that’s all.” She hadn’t lied, it was all true. She’d just failed to mention that the distraction was Blake herself.

Blake’s face softened. “Of course you do, what with your tribe...” She closed her eyes briefly. “All right. Not much farther now.”

They set off again. It was then that Shale noticed the direction in which they were heading. “Where are we going? My camp’s that way.”

“My cabin,” Blake replied.

“There’s really no need, I can make it back to camp.”

“Maybe so, but you’re coming with me.”

From her tone, Shale knew not to argue, not that she wanted to anyway.

It was slow going, but Shale was finally settled on Blake’s double bed, long legs stretched out in front of her.

She glanced around curiously. On one side of the bed was a wooden chest, and above that, halfway up the wall, were several shelves. They were long, reaching from the bed and extending

to the end of the wall, then continuing on the other, filling the corner completely. Blake, it seemed, liked to keep most of her things there, as the shelves were stocked with everything: from various trinkets and knickknacks, to more practical things like her hairbrush. Though the shelves were full, it was far from messy, and Shale smiled at that, she had expected Blake to be well-organised. In the corner opposite was a table and chair, and Shale suspected Blake would do most of her work there. Directly above the table was a lovely picture of a field filled with flowers, and she wondered if Blake had drawn it herself. The only other thing on the walls was a grey and white wolfskin, which was hung near the doorway. At the end of the bed lay a large brown rug, and she recognised the fur to have come from a bear. Shale liked the cabin immensely, it felt like a home.

Her eyes landed on Blake, and her mind drifted. Shale felt awful. Not because of her knee, but because Blake's innocent comment had unsettled her. It should be the loss of her sisters that was distracting her, not Blake. Or Blake's eyes. Or her lips. Or her... Shale shook her head again. It was terrible what happened, she still had nightmares over it, but there was nothing she could do to change things. She and Kale were fortunate to have not been killed themselves, and though they would have happily died with their tribe, as the warriors that they were, Shale wasn't about to waste the life that the gods had graciously given her. If being around Blake made her happy, then she would spend time with Blake. Even if she knew nothing more than friendship could ever come of it. And whether Kale approved or not.

Blake placed a cloth in a bowl of water, soaking it through. After wringing it out, she laid the cool compress carefully on top of Shale's knee. "I'm here if you want to talk, Shale," Blake offered. She indicated the cloth. "How's that?"

"It's good. Thanks." Shale always talked to Kale about her problems, but she certainly couldn't tell her she was in love with Blake. That said, she couldn't exactly talk to Blake about her feelings either, since it regarded her directly. She would just have to work through this herself. The problem was, she had never been in love before, and was completely overwhelmed by the feelings she had for Blake.

When she didn't take Blake up on her offer to talk, Shale saw a flash of hurt in those beautiful green eyes, and instantly wanted to take it away. "I'm worried about Kale," she said. It was true, though that wasn't what was distracting her. "We had a fight."

Blake sat on the bed, alongside Shale, but facing her. "Is that why she came rushing out of the healer's lodge?"

"Yes. You probably won't believe me, but we hardly ever fight, or at least, we never did in our old tribe. It's upsetting me."

Blake rested her hand on Shale's thigh. "Was your argument about me?" At Shale's nod, she added, "I'm sorry."

"And I'm sorry she's being such a bitch to you. She's not normally like this."

“She’s been through a lot recently, perhaps she’s having trouble accepting what happened to your tribe?”

Shale was surprised to hear Blake defending Kale. “Maybe, but that’s no excuse to be rude to you.”

“And you’re both trying to fit in with a new tribe, some of whom, I’m sorry to say, aren’t exactly making it easy for you. Those are serious changes. I’m sure they would take their toll on most people.”

“I admit we’re both on edge,” Shale allowed. “But she’s being more difficult with you than anyone else.”

“Is it because I’m the princess?”

“No. She’s very respectful of hierarchy.” Shale glanced at her meekly. “Usually anyway.”

Blake shook her head. “I mean, if she feels like you did—that she’s to blame for your tribe, maybe she thinks she deserves to be punished?”

Shale’s eyes widened. “So she’s mistreating the person who can punish her, hoping that you’ll do so and it will lessen her guilt.”

“It’s the only thing I can think of that makes sense,” Blake said.

“It’s certainly how Kale would think.”

“Shale,” Blake locked eyes with her. “Do you still feel that way?”

“You helped me see that it wasn’t my fault, but I still carry the guilt.”

Blake nodded, then she reached up and ran her fingers through dark hair. She repeated the motion, smiling when Shale’s eyes began to close in response. Blake kept on stroking Shale’s hair, and it wasn’t long before Shale felt herself dozing off. She submitted to it, and let sleep claim her.

When Shale awoke, it was to the smell of rabbit stew, it had wafted inside the cabin. She was surprised by how much time had passed. It was early evening.

She noticed Blake heading for the door, and spoke up, “You put me to sleep.”

Blake jumped at her voice, and turned to smile at her. “You needed the rest,” she said. “I’m going to get us something to eat. I’ll be right back.” She again moved toward the door, but turned as Shale began to scoot off the bed. “What are you doing?” Blake swiftly returned to Shale’s side. “I’ll bring it to you.”

“I need to get back to camp anyway, might as well do two things at once.”

Blake kept Shale in place with a hand on her shoulder. “You’re not sleeping outside tonight, you’re staying right here.”

Dark eyebrows shot up, but Shale remained silent.

“The cold won’t help your knee any, nor will the hard ground. You can stay and rest it here.”

“It’s still warm out.”

“Yes, but it’s warmer in here.”

“Kale will get worried.”

“I’ll ask Kale, too. You and she can have the bed and I’ll sleep on the rug,” Blake said. “If Kale accepts, perhaps I can try to relate to her. I don’t like this tension between us, especially since it distresses you.”

“That’s really kind of you, Blake, but really, there’s no need.”

“Your swollen knee suggests otherwise.” Blake smiled. “I wouldn’t offer if I didn’t want you to stay, Shale.”

Shale swallowed, her pulse racing at the thought of sleeping next to Blake. She knew Kale would refuse the offer point blank, and also knew that she should, too. So she was surprised that when the words emerged, she said, “I’d like that.” There was no point in lying, Blake would be able to see straight through her anyway. Shale was a terrible liar, always had been, probably because she’d had no practice. She never lied to Kale, there were no secrets between them.

“Good. I’ll find Kale, then I’ll bring us some food back.” Blake scowled playfully at Shale. “And I don’t want you to move from this bed.”

Shale smiled, besotted. Was Blake the perfect woman?

## Chapter Five

“I TAKE IT Kale said no?” Shale asked, when she saw the annoyed look on Blake’s face.

Blake kicked her cabin door shut, since both her hands were full, then returned to the bed, sat down, and gave one steaming bowl to Shale.

Shale nodded to her gratefully, and took a mouthful using the wooden spoon Blake had provided.

“That, and she accused me of keeping you here so I could seduce you,” Blake said.

Shale nearly choked on her stew. “I’m so s—”

“Don’t, Shale, you didn’t say it,” Blake snapped.

It went quiet for a long moment.

“Maybe I’d better go,” Shale said, though she had hardly moved when Blake’s fingers encircled her wrist softly.

“I’m sorry. Please stay, Shale, I don’t want you to go.”

Shale tipped her head. “All right.”

Blake let out a relieved breath.

“Where did you find Kale? Back at camp?”

“No. She was getting stew, too. She was with Amber.”

Shale was pleased. It made her feel better to know Kale wasn’t alone. “She gets on well with her, they’ve become friends.”

“I’ve noticed. Amber’s a good friend to have.”

“Exactly Kale’s type, too,” Shale said.

Blake’s mouth quirked. “And Kale is Amber’s type.” She smiled mischievously. “So, do you two share similar tastes?”

“Not in that area, thank Artemis.” Shale chuckled. “Imagine how awkward that would get. I hear you’re Melaina’s type, lucky you,” she said sarcastically.

Blake laughed. “Actually, I’d forgotten all about it until she brought it up earlier. It seems that it’s my fault she’s been giving you and Kale such a hard time.”

“Because she’s attracted to you? What’s that got to do with us?” Shale suddenly recalled something that Melaina said to Blake. “Ah, I get it. She thinks you’re sweet on one of us.”



“That’s right.”

“First, Amber, now you, Kale sure is popular around here,” Shale teased.

“Who said it was Kale?” Blake smiled suggestively.

Shale unconsciously returned it. “And all this has been about that?” She whistled. “That’s quite a jealous streak. I wonder how she’d have reacted if you had actually been involved with her?”

Blake grimaced. “I’d rather not think about being involved with her.”

“Oh, come on, Melaina’s not all bad.”

Blake looked alarmed and put down her bowl, then reached over and felt Shale’s forehead. “Are you feeling all right?”

Shale playfully slapped her hand away. “She’s got one thing going for her,” she said furtively.

“Which is?”

Shale couldn’t help herself. “She’s got great taste in women.”

THE BODIES OF her sisters were all around her, and the stench of death smothered her. Shale went from corpse to corpse, seeing in vivid detail how each had been brutally slain. Bile rose in her throat, and she heard Kale’s cry of anguish—a horrific sound that was scorched into her memory forever.

Shale turned as her name was called, searching intently for the owner of that voice. She found no one. Thinking she had imagined it, she continued checking the bodies.

The next time she heard her name, it was louder, though incredibly gentle, and she recognised Blake’s tone instantly. What was Blake doing here? Shale became frantic, her eyes darting around for Blake’s form. Was she injured? Was she dying? A whimper escaped her at the thought alone. She had to find her.

The voice grew more insistent, and Shale found herself being pulled toward it.

“Shale, wake up!” Blake said anxiously.

Shale bolted upright, gasping for breath.

“Easy, Shale, you’re all right. You were dreaming,” Blake said, tenderly brushing Shale’s sweat-soaked hair behind her ears.

“Blake?” Shale was beyond confused.

“Yes, Shale, it’s me. I’m here.” Blake was pulled into a fierce hug, Shale clinging to her desperately. “You’re all right, Shale, it was just a dream.” Blake rubbed her back as she held Shale close. “Shh,” she whispered, calming her.

“Thank the gods you’re all right,” Shale said quietly, withdrawing to look at her.

“I’m fine, Shale.”

Shale cupped Blake’s face in shaking hands, needing to confirm Blake’s words with touch. “Thank the gods,” she repeated.

Blake gazed at her in concern. “Shale, was it about your tribe?”

Shale nodded, then suddenly realising where her hands were, she let them drop. “I’m sorry I woke you.”

“I’m glad I was here.” Blake took hold of Shale’s hands in her own. “Does this happen every night?”

“More often than not,” Shale replied. “I just keep seeing it. How we found our sisters, the way they looked, the smell.” She cringed. “Every little detail.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

After a slight hesitation, Shale nodded, and proceeded to tell Blake all that had happened that day. By the time Shale had finished, both were in tears, so Blake simply pressed Shale down onto the bed, laid next to her, and enfolded Shale in her arms.

SHALE SNUGGLED CLOSER into Blake’s warm embrace. After their talk, Shale had slept soundly, giving her body some much needed rest. She felt Blake’s lips brush over her forehead in a soft kiss, and smiled in response.

“You’re awake,” Blake whispered, as though it were a secret. She caressed dark locks repetitively.

“Not if you keep doing that,” Shale said.

Blake stopped, giggling when Shale groaned in protest.

Shale opened her eyes, letting out a happy sigh at the sight of Blake in bed beside her.

“Any more dreams?”

“No.”

“Good.”

Shale was finding it really hard to keep herself from kissing Blake. Blake was tantalisingly close, but Shale couldn't bring herself to move away. Her body was thrumming with desire, and when Blake yawned, her breasts pushed against Shale's, causing her to inhale sharply.

Blake noticed instantly. “Shale?”

Shale silently cursed, Blake was getting far too good at reading her. She thought she saw a glimmer of amusement in those green eyes, but surely she was mistaken. “My knee hurts. I'll have to get some more herbs from Appollonia.” Shale wasn't at all pleased at the concept of drinking more of that awful sludge.

“I'll get it for you.” Blake sat up and pulled back the blankets, giving Shale a sympathetic look when she saw her discolored and very swollen knee. “No wonder it hurts. I'll go now.”

“There's no rush.” Shale didn't want her to leave.

Blake got out of bed, considerately recovering Shale to keep her warm. “I'll be right back.”

Blake was true to her word, returning quickly with mug in hand. “Does this taste as bad as it smells?”

“Worse,” Shale grumbled. It had helped with the pain though, so she downed the drink without further complaint.

“I have to see my mother this morning.” Blake took the empty mug from Shale and placed it on the table. “But I'll come and keep you company later. Please stay here and rest your leg.”

Shale nodded. “Are you sure?” She paused. “People are already going to be talking about me staying overnight in your cabin. I don't want to cause trouble for you.”

“Don't worry about that, Shale, Amazons always gossip.” Blake let out a short chuckle. “It's one of the downsides of having so many women together.”

Shale laughed. “That's true. All right, I'll stay put.”

“MORNING, MOTHER,” BLAKE greeted upon entering the queen's personal cabin.

“Blakaea.”

Blake kissed the top of her mother’s head, then sat across the table from her.

“You’re in a good mood,” Zayla said, her mouth quirking upward.

“It’s a beautiful day.”

“Mm-hmm.” Zayla didn’t sound convinced. “I want you to read through this.” She pushed a scroll over to Blake.

“What is it?” Blake asked as she uncurled it.

“Our new trade agreement with the village of Keltack.” Zayla waited for Blake to finish reading it before speaking again. “Do you have anything to add?”

Blake scanned the parchment once more. “We’re giving too many furs for that amount of grain.” She held her hand out for the quill, which Zayla didn’t hesitate to give her, and altered the document.

“Anything else?”

Blake looked up, knowing from her mother’s tone that she was being tested. “Knowing you, there’ll be some more accidental mistakes.”

Zayla smiled innocently. “You have to be patient with me, Blakaea, I’m an old woman.”

Blake rolled her eyes. “Not this again.” She corrected another error, then another.

“My, I have been clumsy with that. It’s a good thing you’re checking it.”

Blake chuckled, her mother was anything but clumsy. Once certain there were no more mistakes, she passed the scroll back.

Zayla noted the changes, and gave Blake a nod of approval. She clasped her hands together on the table. “Now that is taken care of, tell me, how is my daughter?”

“I’m fine, Mother.”

“I notice that you’re smiling a lot more recently. Does it have anything to do with the woman in your cabin?”

“Mother!” Blake admonished. “It’s not like you to listen to idle gossip.”

“I didn’t listen to anything,” Zayla said. “I saw it with my own eyes. You took Shale into your cabin yesterday, and I believe she’s still there, is she not?”

Blake shook her head. "And you wonder why I had those trees put in," she muttered.

Zayla grinned. "I'm merely commenting on how nice it is to see you happy."

"I wasn't happy before Shale got here?"

"I think you were content, but you weren't really happy, not like you are now." Zayla reached over and patted Blake's hand. "I should spend some more time with Shale, get to know her better if she's going to be such a big part of your life."

"Mother, Shale and I aren't lovers," Blake said, though she wished the statement wasn't true.

"Not yet," Zayla said knowingly. "It's wise to take things slow, Blakaea. Your heart will tell you if she's the one. Though from the twinkle in your eye, I think it has already spoken."

Blake couldn't deny the truth behind her mother's words. "You're right. I am in love with Shale."

Zayla smiled and nodded. "I am glad for you, Blakaea. Truly."

"I wanted to ask your advice on something." Blake had run out of ideas on how to solve the problem with Kale, and wondered if her mother could offer any solution.

"I would be happy to give it."

"Kale doesn't like me, it's making things awkward. Shale spends a lot of time with her, which is exactly what I would expect, but it's difficult when Kale doesn't want me near."

"Have you done something to upset Kale?"

"No, there's nothing I can think of."

"She's jealous of you. You're taking Shale away from her."

"But I'm not. I first assumed it was that myself. I thought that Kale was feeling left out, but when I try to include her, the hostility is still there. It's gotten so bad we can't even be in the same place, which is ridiculous. The three of us should be able to spend time together. It shouldn't be either Kale or me. That's not fair."

"They're very close. Any relationship except their own is bound to cause animosity."

"But that's just it, Kale has become very friendly with Amber, and Shale doesn't treat her like Kale is treating me."

"We both know Shale is the more logical of the two."

“Shale is upset about it herself. She says Kale’s not normally like this, so it has to be me that Kale is averse to.”

Zayla’s brow crinkled. “There has to be a reason, Blakaea. However, if her own twin doesn’t know what it is, it’s unlikely that you’ll be able to find it out.”

“Precisely, which is why I don’t know what to do.”

Zayla thought for a long moment. “You’ll have to be patient. In time, Kale will get used to your presence.”

Blake frowned. “There must be something I can do?”

“Patience,” Zayla repeated. “Either the answer will reveal itself, or Kale will adapt. Even she cannot be angry forever.”

Though Blake agreed with her mother’s words, the problem was still present.

Zayla smiled fondly, and took Blake’s hand. “I should have known you would end up involved with a twin, Blakaea. You never have done anything the easy way.”

Blake couldn’t help but laugh. “Why start now?”

BLAKE SHUT HER cabin door quietly. Shale was under the blankets with her eyes closed, and Blake couldn’t tell if she was asleep. She tiptoed forward, not wanting to chance waking her.

“No need for that, Blake, I’m awake.”

“My mother wishes you well,” Blake said amusedly.

Shale smirked. “Then I take it half of the village knows I’m here?”

Blake chuckled. “Probably. Does that bother you?”

“Sharing the princess’s bed? Hardly. My reputation’s increased considerably,” Shale joked. “And in a good way this time.”

The chuckle changed into laughter. “Glad I could be of assistance.”

Shale sat upright, groaning as she did so, though it was clear to Blake that she’d tried to muffle the sound. She suspected that Shale’s injured knee had stiffened overnight, and that was

the cause. Pain was evident on Shale's face, and Blake went to her, gripping her hand firmly in an offer of support.

"What can I do to help, Shale?"

She swallowed. "Could you..." Shale cleared her throat, but when she spoke again the tension was still in her voice. "Could you put another cold compress on it?"

"Of course." Blake immediately got up. The water in the bowl had warmed from the heat inside the cabin, so she went outside and fetched some fresh from the nearby stream.

Shale's jaw clenched as the compress was placed on top of her knee, but she showed no other sign of distress. "Thank you."

Blake studied her. "You look tired."

"Last night was the first proper sleep I've had in a while," she said. "I bet Kale was glad for a bit of peace."

"Kale doesn't have the nightmares?"

"No. She's got a stronger mind than I have," Shale said self-effacingly.

"She's not stronger, Shale. You just have more compassion," Blake said. "And that's certainly nothing to be ashamed of."

"I've never thought of it like that before." Her lips curled upward. "I prefer your way of thinking."

A small smile. "Now, lie down. You're going to get some more sleep."

"I don't think I can. I tried while you were gone, but my knee keeps me awake."

After removing her boots, Blake clambered in beside Shale. "Please?"

Shale shuffled down the bed, smiling as Blake leaned over her.

"Comfortable?" Blake asked, her voice suddenly husky. She could see the longing in Shale's eyes, and knew the look was reflected in her own. Her heart skipped a beat.

"Very."

Blake lay on her side, propping her head up on one hand, and began to slowly stroke Shale's hair.

Shale made a small contented sound, and soon her eyes drifted closed. “You’re cheating,” she mumbled.

Blake’s mouth turned upward. “A good princess will do whatever is needed to get the job done.”

“Blake?” she whispered.

“Yes, Shale?” Blake leaned closer, straining to hear her words.

“You’re...a good...princess,” Shale murmured, before falling asleep.

Blake’s heart swelled, Shale’s opinion meant everything to her. She lightly kissed Shale’s cheek. “Thank you.”

KALE HOVERED AT the bottom of Blake’s cabin steps. She really wanted to see Shale. She hated that the last time they’d spoken they had fought.

“She won’t bite, you know.”

Kale turned at the sound of Amber’s voice, and smiled as she approached. “What?”

“Blake. She won’t bite.”

“Maybe not, but it’s her cabin. I told her to stay away from our camp, I’m sure she expects the same.”

“Blake’s not like that.”

“Maybe not to you,” Kale muttered.

“To anyone,” Amber said. “Look, Shale can’t come to you, so if you want to see her, this is the only way. Unless you can wait a few days until Shale’s up and about?”

Kale didn’t like that notion. Not one bit. Maybe she should come back later. Blake had to leave sometime. As princess, Blake would have many duties to attend to. Kale started to walk away, ignoring Amber’s frustrated sigh.



SHALE'S EYES SNAPPED open, instantly alert.

"Shale?" a startled Blake asked from beside her. She hadn't moved from her position, and her hand was still entangled in Shale's dark hair. Blake wondered if she'd had another nightmare.

"Kale's just outside. By the steps." Shale immediately sat up.

Blake placed a restraining hand on Shale's shoulder, then got to her feet and walked to the door. "How do you know she's there?"

"I can sense her." Shale shrugged. "It's a twin thing." She paused, her eyes going distant for a moment. "She's walking away."

Blake couldn't stand the unhappy look that crossed Shale's face, and held up a hand to again keep Shale in position. "I'll get her." She opened the door, giving Shale an amazed glance when she spotted Kale, who was indeed walking away from her steps. She called out to her.

Kale faced her, but didn't say anything.

"Shale would really like to see you," Blake said. At Kale's hesitation, she added, "Hey, Amber, you fancy going for a stroll?"

Amber made a show of looking up at the sky. "It's a lovely day for it."

"Great." Blake looked back to a now smiling Shale. "I'll leave you to it."

Shale beckoned Blake to her. When Blake was in reach, she grasped her hand and pulled her down onto the bed, hugging her gratefully. "Thank you."

Blake returned the embrace. "You're welcome."

Neither hurried, both enjoying the simple pleasure of holding each other.

"Take your time," Blake finally said, as she drew back. Her lips curled upward. "I know plenty of long walks."

Shale's smile widened. "You're incredible."

Blake turned somewhat bashful, though she was delighted by

Shale's comment. "I'll see you when I get back." "I'll be waiting."

“THAT WAS AWFULLY nice of you, Blake,” Amber said, as they ambled through the surrounding forest.

“They need some time for just the two of them. I respect that.” Blake hopped over a rock. They had travelled west, and the terrain was growing steadily more mountainous.

“It sounds like you’ve given this some thought.”

Blake didn’t pretend otherwise. “I have.”

“You and Shale seem to be getting pretty close.”

Blake smirked. “I could say the same for you and Kale.”

Amber snickered. “Nicely diverted.”

Blake chuckled. It wasn’t as though she didn’t trust Amber, she did, but she had gotten used to keeping her private life to herself, as her mother had taught her discretion at a very young age.

“You’re not going to give me anything, are you?” There was no resentment in her tone, and Blake knew that Amber understood why she felt the need to keep the small amount of privacy that she had.

Blake shook her head. “No.”

“That’s fine. No doubt I’ll hear about it over breakfast tomorrow,” Amber teased, bumping Blake lightly with her hip.

Blake grinned. “You probably know more about my life than I do.”

Amber lowered her voice secretively. “What do you want to know?”

Blake burst into laughter. “Oh, no, I don’t want to hear anything.”

“Some of it is highly amusing.”

“I’m sure,” Blake said dryly.

“Like for example... Don’t worry, it’s not about you,” Amber said quickly, when Blake opened her mouth to protest. “Or Shale,” she added with a smirk. “This is about me and Kale.”

Blake remained silent, so Amber continued.

“Apparently, Kale and I are lovers, and we’re already discussing who should carry the baby.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Sadly, no. And the decision’s been made for us, too. Because we’re both warriors, neither of us are really suitable.” Amber giggled. “Good thing I never wanted any kids then.”

Blake couldn’t hold in her laughter any longer. “That’s ludicrous!”

“That’s gossip for you. Kale and I aren’t even together.”

Blake had wondered, but didn’t ask. If she wouldn’t share her own personal life, she couldn’t expect Amber to. She was interested, she just didn’t like to pry. Like always, Amber answered her unasked question.

Amber frowned, suddenly serious. “Not from a lack of trying on my part. I’m not sure Kale thinks of me in that way.” She looked to Blake for advice.

“Why don’t you just tell her?” Blake asked, even though she knew it was easier said than done.

“Is that what you did?”

“I…” Blake caught herself, then scowled at her. “Nice try.”

Amber grinned cheekily. “Can’t blame a girl for trying.”

Blake lost track of what she’d been saying. “Where was I?”

“You were just about to tell me about you and Shale.”

Blake shook her head in despair. “Does Kale know how you feel about her?”

“I haven’t told her, but I have been flirting with her.”

“She must know then, I’ve seen you flirt.”

“Hey!” Amber said indignantly. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Blake chortled. “You’re pretty blatant about it.”

Amber pointed at her. “I resent that.”

Blake patted her arm. “Sorry.”

Amber shrugged. “I said I resented it, I didn’t say it wasn’t true.” She let out a breath. “But that’s my point, if Kale knows, it must mean she’s not interested.”

“Not necessarily.” Blake hated to see her normally upbeat friend unhappy, and searched for something encouraging to say. “Maybe Kale wants to take things slow?”

“Maybe,” Amber allowed. “Let’s hope she doesn’t hear those rumors then.”

“And she’s still settling in, Amber. Don’t forget what she’s been through recently.” Blake remembered what Shale had told her about the day they’d lost their tribe, and her heart ached for them both.

“You’re right. It’s just...I really like her, Blake.”

Blake nodded, she could tell. And even though Kale was being awful toward her, Blake sincerely hoped that things worked out between them.

KALE WAITED UNTIL Blake had descended the cabin steps before making her way inside. She immediately took note of her surroundings, taking in the clean and snug cabin with a keen eye. “I see that you’re being well taken care of.”

“Sure am.”

“Don’t go getting spoiled on me.”

Shale patted the bed, and Kale sat beside her. “I’ll try my best.” She enfolded Kale in a tight hug.

“I’m sorry we fought,” Kale said, her arms squeezing Shale in an effort to convey her regret.

“It’s forgotten.”

“Take a look at this,” Shale said excitedly when they parted. She pushed the blanket away, revealing her grossly swollen knee.

Kale’s eyebrows rose. “I’m impressed.” She examined it from all sides. “Colorful, too. You definitely win on sparring wounds.”

That was another competition of theirs. Shale had now beaten Kale for the worst sparring injury, but Kale held the record for the worst injury received in battle—a short sword into her lower back that had near fatal consequences.

Shale grinned. “Are you managing all right without me?” she asked cockily.

“More food. Now I don’t have to share,” Kale quipped.

“You’ll have to watch your figure.”

Kale snorted in amusement. “You’re the one being pampered.”

Shale chuckled, then grew serious. “Is Melaina giving you any trouble? I don’t like to think of you out there alone with her.”

“She hasn’t had the chance, I’m usually with Amber.”

Shale smiled. “She’s a good friend.”

“She is,” Kale said. “That reminds me, Anikett and Lathana were asking after you.”

Shale looked surprised. “Really? Well maybe we have made some friends after all.”

Kale sniggered. “Who knew?” She suddenly slapped Shale’s arm.

“What was that for?”

“No one will spar with me at all now, they all want to spar with you.”

“How come?”

“You’re the twin who stops ribs from being broken, and I’m the twin who cracks knees,” Kale said. “They can’t remember our names, but they can remember that.”

Shale laughed heartily.

“It’s not funny,” Kale moaned, though her eyes sparkled in merriment.

“Technically, you didn’t crack my knee.”

Kale gestured to outside. “Tell that to them. They don’t believe me.”

“I will when I’m up and about.”

“So are you staying here for a few more nights?”

A slight pause. “I’m not sure yet. I’ll have to check with Blake.”

Kale’s mouth clicked shut, biting off the retort before it emerged. Once her temper was in check, she spoke up, “Let me know if it changes, I’ll come and get you.”

Shale smiled at Kale’s effort to keep the peace. “I will.”

## Chapter Six

SHALE SLOWLY FLEXED her knee, it felt a lot better. Blake was right, the extra comfort of the cabin was helping the injury to heal faster, though Shale suspected a lot of it had to do with Blake's near constant care.

It had been four days since her injury, and she'd hardly moved from Blake's bed. Blake popped in and out during the day, whenever she could, bringing Shale story scrolls to keep her occupied.

Shale was astounded by Blake's never-ending kindness. She had even told Kale she was welcome to visit anytime, though Kale only did so when Blake wasn't present.

Shale could tell Kale didn't approve of her staying with Blake, but mercifully she hadn't yet raised the topic.

She got out of bed and walked around the cabin. Her leg hurt, but it was bearable. Decision made, she put on her boots and ventured outside, heading straight for the training ground. Shale certainly wasn't up to sparring, but she intended to watch.

A pleased smile formed as she spotted Kale sparring with Amber. She wondered whether Kale was even conscious of her attraction toward the woman. She knew Kale restrained herself against such feelings. Since Aeron, Kale wasn't interested in another relationship.

Kale suddenly looked up, her sharp eyes immediately finding Shale. She jogged over, a grin on her face. "I see you've escaped."

"I wanted to make sure you're not losing your fighting edge without me around to kick your ass."

Kale chuckled. "As if." She embraced Shale warmly. When they pulled apart, Kale glanced down to Shale's knee. "How's it feel?"

"Still hurts, but it's not too bad."

Kale nodded. "You don't want to stand on it too long. Come over here and I'll find you a seat." A smirk appeared. "Do you want me to carry you again?"

Shale punched her arm playfully. "No, I can manage."

"Good, 'cause I nearly collapsed last time. What have you been eating?" Kale laughed when she received another punch, this one much harder. Despite her teasing banter, Kale still wrapped a supporting arm around Shale's waist to help her.

“Hi, Shale,” Amber greeted as they approached. “How’s your knee?”

“Better, thanks.” Shale noticed that Kale was scanning the area, presumably for something for her to sit on. “It’s been cleared,” she said. “Just set me down on the ground.”

“I can fetch you a chair if you want?” Amber offered.

Shale shook her head, not wanting to be a bother. “I’ll be fine on the ground.”

Kale chose a good spot for her to watch from. It was close enough to get a good view, while being far enough to not be in anyone’s way.

Once Kale and Amber began their sparring, it didn’t take long for Melaina to come over. She planted her bulkier form down next to Shale’s.

“I heard about your leg.” Melaina examined it with a cold eye. “Used it to full effect though, didn’t you?”

Shale looked at her in puzzlement. “What are you talking about, Melaina?”

“You and the princess. It didn’t take you long to work your way into her bedroom, did it?”

Bloody Amazons and their gossip. “I did no such thing,” Shale said.

“Now if I’d known all I had to do was play on Blake’s sympathy, I’d have done it years ago.”

“That’s not what happened.”

Melaina leaned closer. “So come on, Amazon to Amazon, what was Blake like? Is she as good as she looks?”

Shale’s temper snapped, and she grabbed Melaina roughly by her arm. “Now you listen to me, you need to get over this, Melaina, I’m warning you. And if I ever hear of you referring to Blake like that again, you’ll be sorry. Do I make myself clear?”

“You’re threatening me? In your condition?” Melaina laughed, but it was devoid of humor. “Defending your lover’s honor, how noble.”

“What’s going on?” Kale said, suddenly beside them.

Melaina yanked her arm free of Shale’s grip and stood, facing off directly against Kale.

Unfortunately, Shale noted, Amber had stayed where she was, so Melaina was free to say whatever she liked.

“I just don’t see it myself.” Melaina appraised one twin, and then the other. “Blake must be attracted to leadership, that’s all I can say. Then again, I’d have thought she would’ve chosen someone more competent.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Kale’s voice rose in anger, attracting several Amazons’, including Aris’s, attention.

Shale started to get to her feet, intending to get between them before things got out of control.

“Your entire tribe is dead,” Melaina goaded. “Clearly you weren’t very good at leading.”

Kale struck Melaina hard, flattening her with one punch.

Shale, who had finally managed to stand, kept Kale from pouncing on Melaina and continuing her attack.

Melaina smiled arrogantly at them from her position on the ground.

Shale swallowed. Kale had just played right into her hands. This was bad. She saw Aris striding over, with many warriors in tow. This was really bad.

“WHAT IN HADES is going on?” Aris demanded.

Melaina was all too eager to point out what happened. “She struck me!”

Kale glowered at her. “Melaina insulted us.”

Shale’s eyes narrowed as Melaina made a show of getting up, so much so that Aris actually helped her. Shale had to applaud Melaina for her cunning, as a stoic warrior who didn’t usually show weakness, Aris was taken in completely by her act.

Melaina’s nose was gushing blood, and Shale bit her lip to hold back a smirk. Kale had a wicked punch.

Aris glared disapprovingly at Kale. “So you hit her? That’s unacceptable, Kale. I can’t have my warriors beating each other. I don’t know what your problem is with Melaina, but I won’t have it. I warned you the first time, now you’ll have to be punished.” She pointed to the stake at the far end of the training ground. “Take her,” Aris ordered. “Don’t resist, Kale. It will only make things worse.”



Two warriors took firm hold of Kale. She went with them reluctantly, but didn't put up a fight.

Shale tried to stop Kale from being taken, and had to be held back. "Aris, don't do this," she begged. "Please."

Aris showed genuine regret. "I'm sorry, Shale, but Kale's behaviour cannot go unchecked."

Shale watched desperately as Kale was tied to the stake. Her blood boiled at the injustice of the situation, and Melaina's smug face sent her over the edge. "I won't let you touch her!" Shale shoved the nearest warriors away from her. She got into her fighting stance.

"Shale, don't!" Kale yelled.

"Keep her back," Aris said, then turned to Melaina and lowered her voice. "Shale did nothing wrong, use restraint only." She headed for Kale, leaving Melaina in charge.

Shale knew Aris would be the one to deliver the lashes, and didn't wait a moment longer. She attacked, taking several Amazons down with quick jabs and punches. She pulled her blows though, not wanting to really hurt them. After all, they were just following orders. She also knew that her kindness wouldn't be repaid, they wouldn't be as gentle with her.

"Get her!" Melaina shouted, failing to mention that they were only meant to restrain Shale.

AS SOON AS Amber realised Kale was going to be flogged, she set off to find Blake, using the commotion for cover. She knew Kale was hot-tempered. She didn't hear the exchange between Kale and Melaina, but she suspected more was going on. She wasn't about to stand by and let Kale be whipped.

Unfortunately, Blake wasn't in her cabin. Amber sprinted toward the main lodge, praying that she was inside. She burst in, her state of urgency overruling common protocols.

"Amber? What's wrong?"

"Blake, come quickly. Kale's in trouble."

Blake didn't hesitate. "Excuse me," she said to the counsel members before hurriedly leaving the lodge.

The princess running through the village caused quite a commotion, and the look on Blake's face told the Amazons it was something serious.

If Blake were to glance over her shoulder, she would find most of the village following in her wake.

SHALE DEALT WITH the less capable warriors quickly, even with her bad knee, and was soon only surrounded by the five women left standing.

Unfortunately, these were the best fighters, and Shale doubted that she could beat them all at once if she was healthy, let alone with her leg in such a state.

Melaina grinned at her, she was loving every moment of this.

Anataeus lunged at Shale, who dodged and threw her into Lathana, sending them both toppling to the ground.

A foot grazed Shale's shoulder as she tried to twist her body out of the way of a kick, then she delivered a back fist that connected solidly with the side of the culprit's head.

Melaina waited for her ideal opportunity, then struck, lashing out with a side kick to Shale's weak spot—her injured knee.

Shale cried out in agony at the blow, a bolt of fire coursing through her entire leg. She heard Kale yelling her name as she fell, and wondered if Kale's punishment had already begun.

Melaina gave Shale a swift kick to her ribs, the force flipping Shale onto her back. Melaina pressed her knee into Shale's chest to hold her in position, and repeatedly struck her in the face.

"She's down," Lathana protested, sharing disturbed looks with the others. When the second in command didn't desist, Lathana forcibly pushed her off Shale. "Melaina!"

Shale greedily gulped in air. Melaina's weight on her chest had made it difficult to breathe.

Melaina glowered at Lathana. "And now she'll stay down."

Lathana didn't reply, knowing better than to argue with Melaina.

"On her front," Melaina ordered the warriors. "I want her to see her precious twin as she's flogged."

Shale spat out a mouthful of blood in Melaina's direction. She struggled as much as she could, but was soon face down in the dirt.

Melaina grabbed Shale's hair, pulled her head back, and forced her to watch as Aris raised the leather whip overhead.

"I order you to stop this right now!" Blake's authoritative command rang through the air. Everyone halted, even the wind had a sudden lull.

Shale closed her eyes in relief. She knew Blake would sort this out. Shale trusted her implicitly.

Amber, who had arrived with Blake, went to stand beside Kale at the stake.

Blake walked purposefully over to Aris, looking at her expectantly for answers. "What's happening here?"

"With all due respect, Princess, the situation's being taken care of," Aris said. "These are my warriors, and I will deal with them."

"I'm overruling you," Blake said firmly, and all so simply, she took control. "Now tell me why Kale is about to be flogged."

"She struck Melaina. I can't let that go unpunished."

Blake's green eyes landed on Melaina unflinchingly. "Why did Kale strike her?"

"I believe Melaina insulted them," Aris said

"And I'm assuming Shale tried to stop you, and that's why she's restrained?"

"Yes, Princess."

Blake moved toward Shale, with Aris keeping pace beside her.

"Get her up," Blake instructed.

Melaina and Anataeus hauled Shale up roughly, and Shale tried to take the weight off her left leg, which was throbbing painfully. Melaina was having none of it, pulling Shale onto her bad leg and keeping her there with a firm grip.

Shale knew what Melaina expected, what she wanted to happen, but Shale would be damned if she'd give in that easily. If she lashed out as Melaina intended, Blake would be put into a position where she had no choice but to punish her, or she would appear weak. Melaina was clever, using her own warrior's pride against her, knowing Shale would never willingly ask for mercy.

Blake's face hardened when she got a good look at Shale, her head snapping to the side to regard Aris. "Did you order her beaten?" she asked in a clipped tone.

“I did not.” Aris glared at Melaina. “You were only supposed to restrain her!”

The warriors gave Melaina mixed looks at that knowledge— surprise, anger, and betrayal. Lathana in particular seemed distressed, honest remorse evident on her features.

Aris’s jaw clenched. “You didn’t tell them, did you?”

“She put up a fight,” Melaina said. “You’ve seen how dangerous she is. We had to stop her.”

“You’re right. Shale is lethal.” Blake looked each of the warriors over. “So how come you’re all virtually unscathed, and she can barely stand?” Blake paused, her fury evident. “If she wanted you dead, you would be!” Her voice rose on each word. Blake stepped forward, getting into Melaina’s personal space, taking in her heavily bleeding nose with little sympathy. “Don’t lie to me, Melaina, or you’ll be joining Kale on the stake.”

Shale was impressed. From this close distance, she could see the fierce glint in Blake’s usually warm eyes, and Shale was glad she wasn’t on the receiving end of her glare. But in spite of that, she still found herself thinking about how beautiful Blake was.

She also realised how patient Blake had been toward Kale, Blake didn’t allow anyone else to talk to her with such disrespect. Shale was incredibly grateful to Blake for that, and wondered idly why she had done it.

The pain in her knee was starting to get to her, and if things took much longer, Shale might have to give Melaina her wish. As if hearing her thoughts, Blake’s steel gaze locked onto hers, and it softened almost instantly.

“Shale?”

“Yes, Princess?” Shale responded dutifully, giving Blake the respect she deserved. Though Blake was her friend, and requested she call her by her birth name, Blake was also her leader, and that’s who Shale was talking to now.

To a simple observer, Shale’s demeanour indicated she was unharmed. If it wasn’t for the blood, or the bruising that was starting to appear, most wouldn’t have even known she’d been in a fight. Shale was composed and dignified, standing tall. Only the slight furrowing of her eyebrows betrayed that she was in pain.

Blake examined her closely for a moment. “Release her,” she told the warriors who were holding Shale in place.

Anataeus stepped well back, looking relieved to be out of the firing line. Melaina let go, but barely moved.

Now free, Shale shifted her weight off her bad leg, though she was careful to do it slowly, not wanting to startle any of the nearby warriors into action.

Blake noted it with a concerned frown. "Do you want to sit down?"

Shale straightened. "I'm fine standing."

Blake rolled her eyes. "Warriors and their damn pride. I shouldn't have asked, I should've just ordered you to sit."

Shale's lips quirked upward at Blake's frustration.

Blake's eyes narrowed playfully for an instant, then grew serious. "What did Melaina say?"

There was no way Shale was going to repeat what Melaina had said about Blake, and definitely not in front of everyone. So she simply summed up the end of the conversation. "Melaina was questioning our competence as leaders."

Blake's forehead creased. "Oh? And why's that?"

Shale looked around. Most of the tribe were here, and they were all listening intently. She hesitated. What if they all felt the same way as Melaina?

"Shale?" Blake lowered her voice to a whisper, giving them as much privacy as she could. "I can't help you if you won't let me." Gentle green eyes pleaded with her. "Please let me?"

Shale drew strength from those eyes. From Blake. She cleared her throat, and spoke loudly so everyone could hear. "Since our tribe is dead, she felt we weren't best suited to that position."

Gasps were heard throughout the crowd, followed by mumblings of discussion. Numerous Amazons shook their heads disapprovingly at Melaina.

"That's putting it nicely," Kale said from the stake.

Blake whirled on Melaina. "You said that?" Shale knew that Blake believed her, she simply wanted the rest of the tribe to believe it too. "You blame them for the death of their tribe?"

"Why not?" Melaina said. "It's true."

"That was uncalled for, Melaina," Aris said sternly. "I expect better of you."

"They're warriors," Melaina continued, determined to get her point across. She strode into the center of the circle so all eyes were on her. "They were meant to take care of their sisters, they didn't. They didn't have a scratch on them when they arrived. I bet they ran like cowards. I don't care what tribe they're from, all warriors are taught to stay and fight, to protect their sisters, even if it means their own death. And as leaders, they should've died with their warriors, yet here they are. Cowards, the both of them!"

Shame flooded Shale's cheeks, and she dropped her head. Many times she had wished to change what had happened, but she could not. The nightmares alone were testament enough to the guilt that she felt. And there wasn't a word out of Melaina's lips that she hadn't already thought herself.

Blake opened her mouth to defend them, but Shale placed a hand on her shoulder, quieting her.

"Melaina's right," Shale began, drawing more gasps from the crowd. "We should have died with our tribe...the gods know I prayed that we had. But we're not cowards. We would've happily given our lives in battle, in defence of our home, our kin." Shale took a few steps forward, trying her best not to limp. "But we weren't there, neither of us. We were a good distance away, searching for an herb that our healer wanted. By the time we got back..." The burned and mutilated bodies of her tribe flashed through her mind, and she swallowed, hard.

"There was nothing left but corpses, and charred remains." Kale carried on for her. "We were too far away. By the time we saw the smoke... We ran as fast as we could, but it was no use..."

"We were too late," they finished perfectly in unison.

Shale was exhausted. The combination of the physical and emotional pain nearly overwhelming her. She had no choice but to sit, it was either that or fall, so Shale chose the most graceful of the two options, immensely thankful when Blake was suddenly there, guiding her carefully to the ground.

Blake knelt in front of her, placing a hand under Shale's lowered chin to get Shale to look at her. When weary blue eyes met hers, Blake still didn't remove her hand. "Shale? Talk to me, Shale."

"Just tired. I'll be all right."

"Glad to hear it, but Appollonia is still going to check you over." As Shale went to protest, Blake added, "Don't make me order you to."

A small smile appeared, and some of the twinkle returned to Shale's eyes.

Blake's hand shifted, briefly caressing Shale's cheek before withdrawing. "Give me a few moments to finish this, then I'll take you myself."

"No rush," Shale said wryly. She hated going to the healers, though the thought of Blake being with her made the concept a lot more agreeable.

Blake gave her an amused look, and then stood, once again addressing her tribe. She didn't move from her position though, standing protectively over Shale. "Don't you think they both feel guilty enough over what's happened? I know they do, and they blame themselves even though

they weren't at fault. They don't need to be judged further. Especially by people who weren't even there.

"This ends here and now. No more fighting. No more malicious rumours," Blake said with a pointed look to Melaina. "Though they're from a different tribe, we are all sisters here. It's time we started acting like it." Murmurs of agreement met her words.

She faced Kale. "This is your new home," Blake told her. She then looked down to Shale, who was watching her avidly. "You belong to this tribe now."

Addressing the crowd once more, Blake spoke strongly, "I expect you to treat both Shale, and Kale, as you would any other." Blake turned full circle, taking the time to lock eyes with several of her tribe. Nods of acceptance and smiles greeted her, and the murmurs grew louder. "Tonight, let us celebrate our two new sisters. We shall have a feast in their honor."

Hollers of excitement came forth, and when Blake dipped her head to dismiss them, the crowd started to break up, the Amazons talking eagerly about the night ahead.

"Aris," Blake called. "Cut Kale loose."

"Yes, Princess." Aris was soon at the stake, and Amber assisted in setting Kale free.

Shale was helped to her feet by several women. She smiled as Blake slotted herself under her shoulder, relishing the feel of Blake in her arms. She wondered how Blake's simple touch could make her feel so much better. Though Shale never wanted to get injured, the physical closeness it allowed between them was a definite upside to the situation. And she intended to make the most of it.

The queen suddenly appeared in front of them, causing Shale to straighten instantly.

"I see you two are keeping my warriors on their toes," Zayla said to Shale.

"I'm sorry for the disturbance, my Queen." Shale noticed the queen's eyes were hazel, unlike her daughter's, and they appraised her for a long moment. "I apologise for my sister also."

Zayla's lips twitched. "That's the second time you've apologised for Kale."

If you only knew. Shale had lost count of the times she'd had to apologise on Kale's behalf.

"You are both forgiven. But don't let it happen again." Zayla's voice grew firm, and Shale dipped her head respectfully. Zayla's attention switched to Blake. "I'll speak to Melaina myself. You handled that well, daughter."

"Thank you, Mother." Blake accepted the comment gracefully.

"I didn't realise you were here."

Zayla nodded as she walked away. "That was my intention."

Blake shook her head at her mother's retreating form. "She's always testing me." Blake started forward, leading Shale toward the healer's lodge.

"I was hoping you'd forgotten," Shale said.

"Afraid not." Blake smiled at her. "Anyway, what are you doing out of bed?"

"I was feeling better. I'd be happy to return there now though."

Blake looked worriedly at Shale, then she said, "I'm sure I can arrange something."

Shale gave her an affectionate look. "I would be deeply grateful."

"Then it's settled. Get Kale to bring you across after you've been treated."

Shale frowned. "You're not staying?"

"I'm sick of arguing, Shale." Blake indicated Kale, who was making her way over to them. "Kale obviously intends to be there, and I've had my fill of confrontations for the day."

"I understand," Shale replied quietly. And she did understand, all too well. Blake was already fed up with Kale, not that Shale could blame her, Kale was quite awful to her. She had never encountered this problem before, Kale had always supported her other relationships.

It saddened her to know that the one person she really wanted, she could never have. Shale couldn't become involved with Blake, not when there was such animosity between her and Kale. And Kale was right, she was fooling herself, she could never be happy with just Blake's friendship, she wanted so much more than that. Shale had never felt this way about anyone, and the gods in all their cruelty had decided to pit the two people she loved most against each other. It wasn't fair.

She closed her eyes briefly, trying to memorise Blake's comforting touch. She didn't linger though, it was painful enough without delaying it.

Shale pulled apart from Blake and strode quickly away, the pain in her knee nothing compared to the pain in her heart.

"Shale?" Blake chased after her. "Shale, for pity's sake, your knee!"

"It's fine." Shale said through clenched teeth.

Kale reached them, glaring at Blake when she saw Shale's expression. "What's wrong?" she asked, sliding an arm around Shale to help steady her.



Shale pushed her away, surprising both Kale and Blake. “Just leave me be.”

“What in Artemis’s name did you say to her?” Kale asked hotly, completely ignoring the fact that she was speaking to the princess. Though that had never stopped her before.

“Me?” Blake said in disbelief as they walked toward the healer’s lodge, Shale in between them. “Why do you assume it’s my fault?”

“Is it?”

“Stop it,” Shale told them.

“Did it ever occur to you that she might be mad at you?” Blake shot back.

“Me?” Kale scoffed. “For what?”

“For losing your temper and nearly getting yourself flogged. And you’re welcome by the way.”

“Stop it,” Shale repeated.

“Don’t think you did me any favors. You only stepped in because of Shale.”

“I didn’t even know Shale was there. I thought she was still in bed resting.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

“Shale wasn’t the one about to be flogged. A simple thank you would suffice,” Blake said sarcastically.

“Stop it!” Shale yelled. Then, when she realised they had actually listened, added a much quieter, “Please.” She rubbed her temple, which was pounding from the blows it had taken, and from the tension.

Both Kale and Blake had the grace to look embarrassed.

“I’m sorry, Shale, you don’t need this right now,” Blake said softly, all the anger gone from her voice. “Let’s get you inside.”

“I don’t need this anytime,” Shale said.

Kale opened the healer’s door, and moved to go inside.

“No,” Shale said. “I’ll be fine from here.”

Kale looked upset. “You’re choosing her to go in with you?”

Blake frowned. “You shouldn’t have to choose, that’s not fair on anyone.”

“I’m not choosing either of you.” Shale stepped inside the lodge, not meeting either woman’s gaze. “Leave me be. I want to be by myself.” She shut the door on them. It was too much. She needed some time to get her emotions under control.

## Chapter Seven

AS PRINCESS, BLAKE wanted to go into Appollonia’s lodge and start demanding answers. She was completely in the dark as to what had transpired. One moment they were arm in arm, the next Shale was leaving, and all Blake had said was that she was sick of arguing. What was so wrong with that? It was simply the truth.

The forlorn look on Shale’s face as she’d closed the door on them was replaying over and over in her mind, and Blake didn’t know whether she could bear it for much longer, let alone until this evening. It was barely after midday now, and it was driving her mad.

She was astounded by how much it hurt her to see Shale like that. She wanted nothing more than to go to Shale, embrace her, and tell her that everything would be all right, and whatever it was that was bothering her, they could sort out between them.

Blake got to her feet, her cabin’s wooden floor creaking as she paced across it. Yes, she would do just that. She was nearly out the door when Shale’s quiet words rang through her head. I want to be by myself.

Blake sighed, rested her head against the door’s surface, then returned and sat on the bed. She had to respect Shale’s wishes, whether she liked them or not.

She suddenly wondered whether Shale would even show up to this evening’s festivities, her injuries would certainly give her a good excuse not to.

Blake became alarmed at that prospect, but soon dismissed it, knowing Shale would never do that. After all, the celebration was in both her and Kale’s honor.

At the thought of Kale, her temper rose. She still couldn’t believe it, she’d saved Kale from a lashing, and the woman still wouldn’t be civil to her. How she was related to Shale, Blake would never know. Where Shale was kind and gentle, Kale was rude and abrasive. They were nothing alike.

She made herself get up again, though this time she did leave her cabin. Blake glanced across the village, looking toward the healer's lodge longingly. She didn't head toward it like she badly wanted to, she went in the other direction.

Blake didn't need to make sure things were organised for tonight, her sisters knew what they were doing, and would all have their own roles to fulfill. But it would give her something to do, and she desperately wanted to take her mind off Shale. Or at least until Shale would allow her to help.

“AMBER? ARE YOU here?”

“Come in, Kale,” came the muffled response.

Kale entered, closing the cabin door behind her. She didn't even know why she'd come here, but she had, almost straightaway in fact. Kale didn't stop to dwell on the reason why, though she did stop moving when she spotted Amber across the room from her, in the middle of getting changed.

“Oh,” Kale said dumbly, immediately turning her back, though not before noticing the milky white skin of Amber's stomach. “I'm sorry, I didn't realise...” She swallowed, her throat suddenly dry.

“It's fine, Kale. I invited you in, remember?” A teasing note entered Amber's voice. “You can turn around now.”

Kale slowly did so, making sure Amber was fully dressed first. She studied the cabin's layout, trying to take her mind off Amber's bare skin. A double bed was in the center, pressed against the wall. A carved wooden chest was on the left side of the bed, a table and chair were to the right. A rug covered most of the floor in front of Kale, and beyond that, in the corner of the room, sat numerous weapons, ranging from bows and arrows, to swords and staffs. Several more weapons were fixed onto that wall, creating a striking display.

Kale stared at it for a moment, then Amber cleared her throat, and she glanced back to her.

Amber gestured to herself with her hands. “What do you think?”

Kale's eyes raked over Amber's body, really seeing her for the first time. She'd always thought of Amber as attractive, but had never ventured beyond that. After Aeron, Kale had ceased to think that way about women, knowing it would only bring her pain. But looking at Amber now, she felt those feelings re-emerge, even after being buried for so long. Amber was beautiful, her curly red hair bouncing around her shoulders as she bobbed on the balls of her feet.

“Well?” she asked impatiently. “How do I look? It’s for tonight. It’s either this or...” She held up another top, this one being green and a lot shorter. “Or this one?”

The memory of Amber’s pale stomach flashed to the front of Kale’s mind, and she found it odd that she’d never noticed before. Amazons often wore tops like that. As she thought, Kale realised that Amber never had, she was always well-covered, favoring the trousers over the traditional skirt.

“I’m sure either will look fine,” Kale finally said, trying to keep her face neutral.

“I don’t want to look fine, Kale,” Amber said, in an exasperated tone. “I want to look nice.”

“You always look nice.” It slipped out before Kale could stop it, but was pleased she’d said it when Amber rewarded her with an impish smile.

“Thanks.” Her brown eyes locked onto Kale’s. “So do you.”

Kale felt a flutter in her chest at the words, and she cleared her throat self-consciously. She nodded to the green top. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in something like that.”

“No, you wouldn’t have. I can’t wear clothes like that during the day, the sun burns me really easily,” Amber said. “So, what can I do for you anyway?” At Kale’s confused look, she added, “What did you want me for?”

Kale hesitated. “I wanted to see if you were free for a sparring session?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. Not now anyway. I think you’ve been in enough scuffles for one day.”

A small smile, then Kale nodded. “You’re right.” Blake had smoothed things over with the tribe, it was best she lay low for a while. “Shale and I had a fight,” Kale suddenly said. “Or rather, Blake and I argued, and Shale got upset. Now she won’t see either of us.” Kale exhaled heavily, sitting on the bed. “And it’s all my fault.”

Amber’s brow creased and she sat on the bed also. “How’s that?”

“I’ve been...am still being, a complete bitch to Blake. She’s Shale’s friend and I just can’t bring myself to get on with her. It’s causing friction.” Kale wouldn’t tell Amber about Shale’s feeling for Blake, she wouldn’t betray her confidence like that.

“I hate to break this to you, Kale, but you’re going to have to get used to her, because soon they’re going to be a lot more than just friends. If they aren’t already.”

“What?” Her voice rose in pitch. “What makes you say that?”

“I can’t say I know Shale as well as you do, but I do know Blake, and let me tell you, she’s fallen hard for your sister.”

“She told you that?”

“No, of course not. Blake keeps her own company. She is the princess after all. But despite that, I do know her, and I’m telling you that unless Shale doesn’t feel the same way, this will happen. And I’m pretty sure Shale does feel the same, I’ve seen how they look at each other.”

“Does anyone else know about this?”

“I haven’t told anyone. And I’m only telling you because as Blake’s friend, and yours, you need to accept this. Whether you like

Blake or not is irrelevant.”

“I don’t dislike Blake,” Kale said simply.

Chestnut eyebrows rose. “You could’ve fooled me.”

“I don’t,” Kale insisted. “It’s not her I’m averse to. She seems nice enough. She’s certainly a good leader.”

“Then what is it?”

Kale sighed. “The relationship. I would be like this to whoever Shale fell for, it just so happens that it’s Blake.” She winced, realising she had just confirmed Amber’s suspicions.

“I give you my word I won’t tell anyone,” Amber said. “So you don’t want Shale to have any sort of romantic relationship?” Amber’s face cleared, as if she knew the answer. “You’re jealous of the time that Blake would take up in Shale’s life, the time she would take away from you.”

Kale shook her head. “I wish it was that simple. I could get past that.”

Amber moved closer to Kale, stopping only when they were side by side on the bed.

“I don’t want either Shale or myself to have that kind of relationship.”

Amber looked perplexed. “I don’t understand, Kale. Why not?”

“Because it never works,” Kale said. “No matter how hard Shale and I try, we’re inevitably put into a situation where we have to choose. Them, or each other. And I could never leave Shale, just as she could never leave me. I won’t have Shale put into that situation. I won’t have her heart broken like mine was. I won’t allow it.”

“You’re trying to protect her.”

Kale nodded. "Exactly. I won't stand by and see her hurt."

"Kale." Amber's smile was gentle. "I think that's the sweetest, and most messed up thing I've ever heard."

The corner of Kale's mouth curled upward. "Tell me about it. I come off as the bad guy, and I'm only watching out for her."

"Blake won't do that to Shale, she's not like that," Amber said. "Trust me when I say that, Kale."

Kale remembered what Blake had said when choice was mentioned. She clearly hadn't been keen on the idea herself. "Maybe not intentionally, but that's what it'll come down to in the end."

"You can't know that, Kale," Amber said, though her tone held nothing but patience.

"That's what always happens. Shale's never been in love before. She's had relationships, but she's never truly fallen for someone. Not like this, not like Blake. Shale loves her, and it will tear her apart when things don't work out. And everyone's expecting me to just allow it, and I can't. I can't do that to Shale. I'd rather have her mad at me than have her endure that kind of pain."

"Is that what happened to you?" Amber asked quietly.

Kale nodded ever so slightly. "I won't have Shale go through that. I couldn't live with myself, knowing that I could've stopped it."

Amber placed a comforting hand on top of Kale's. "You can't stop this, Kale. If Blake and Shale truly want to be together, they'll find a way. You need to step back. Accept this."

They sat like that for several moments, then Kale abruptly stood and went to the door. Her hand tingled from Amber's touch, and she tried to focus, her emotions all over the place.

Kale knew that Amber spoke the truth, but her heart was still pulling her in one direction, while her mind took the other. She glanced back over her shoulder to Amber. "Thanks for the talk."

"No problem."

Kale's eyes shifted to the clothes on the bed. "The green one."

Amber smiled. "Green it is."

SHALE KNEW THAT tonight was going to be hard, and she was seriously considering not making an appearance. But the event was in her and Kale's honor, and it would be extremely rude of her not to show.

Shale had no idea how to act around Blake, though. The four blissful days she'd woken up in Blake's arms were both a blessing and a curse. It was one of the happiest times of her life, but now it was a constant reminder of what she could never have.

She didn't want to lose Blake's friendship, that in itself meant a lot to her, but she also realised how difficult it was going to be to spend time with Blake, her presence would bring both pleasure and pain.

Even after Appollonia had patched her up, and bandaged her knee to give it some extra support, Shale still stayed in the healer's lodge. She didn't want to risk running into either Kale or Blake until she was ready, and Shale was grateful that Appollonia never tried to get rid of her, and left her alone with her thoughts.

Shale was also pleased that Kale and Blake had done as she'd requested, and given her the space that she had asked for.

The evening came all too quickly for Shale, and when the drums started to play, she knew the festivities had begun.

Appollonia had left a while ago, Shale insisting that she could make her own way there.

Shale hobbled to the door, took a deep breath, then exited the lodge, her eyes scanning the mass of Amazons that had converged into the village center and gathered around the large fire.

Descending the steps and moving into the crowd, Shale felt the loss of Kale's usual presence even more, acutely aware that she was on her own. She didn't like the feeling, not one bit.

Shale wanted nothing more than to return to the lodge, but she gamely kept going, heading for one of the tables that was filled with food and drink. The least this night could provide her with was good food. And ale too. She hoped the beverage might help ease some of the pain that was ever present in her knee.

Once her plate and mug were filled, she looked around for a quiet place to sit. Her tall height allowed her to see over the crowd, and she finally spotted a less populated area.

Making her way to it was more difficult. Negotiating through a group of bustling women wasn't an easy task, especially while trying to balance what she carried. And with one bad leg.

The women were friendly to her though, most smiling and greeting her as she passed. Shale returned their kindness, having to stop numerous times as she was questioned about her leg.

“It’s fine, thank you,” Shale repeated. She had lost count long ago of how many times she’d said that, and she still hadn’t made it to her destination. It most certainly wasn’t fine, her knee was killing her. Shale suspected that by the time she made it to her seat, she would be quite adept at lying.

People suddenly shifted around her, and Shale felt a hand on her elbow. She followed the hand to its face and found Blake’s twinkling green eyes looking back at her.

Shale unconsciously smiled upon seeing her, and it widened at Blake’s return grin.

They remained that way for a long moment, each only seeing the other. Their surroundings finally crept back in, and Blake noted Shale’s newfound bandage.

“How’s your knee?”

“It’s fi—” Shale stopped herself from saying the now nearly automatic response. She didn’t want to lie to Blake. “It hurts,” she said quietly.

Blake winced sympathetically. “All right, let’s get you off it. Where are you headed?”

Shale pointed. “Over to that tree.”

Blake followed her finger. “Good choice, it’s quieter there.”

Shale nodded. It seemed Kale wasn’t the only one who thought like her.

“Let me help you.”

“I can manage,” Shale said, stepping away. She couldn’t handle Blake’s arms around her, though she wished for it at the same time.

With Blake leading the way, they soon reached the tree, and Shale was relieved to get off her leg.

Blake sat next to her, but not too close, giving Shale some space. “I was amazed by you today.”

Great, now she thinks I’m a complete ass for acting the way I did. Shale couldn’t blame her, Blake wouldn’t have the first clue as to why she had suddenly left. Blake probably didn’t want anything further to do with her. Shale drank a mouthful of ale.

“It took a lot of guts to stand up in front of everyone and explain what happened to your tribe, Shale.” Blake smiled at her. “Especially since I know you warriors don’t like to show your emotions. Thank you for doing that. It’s gone a long way to helping this tribe relate to both of you. Hopefully things will be easier from now on.”



Shale wasn't expecting the praise, and from the way she had acted, she certainly didn't deserve any. Blake should have been mad at her. She had every right to be, and here she was giving Shale praise. The woman was remarkable. The most remarkable woman that Shale had ever met, and she didn't want Blake to think badly of her. That was the last thing she wanted. Shale would rather risk her friendship and keep Blake's respect, than lose both, and that was precisely what would happen if she kept acting this way. The thought of that alone made Shale come to her decision quickly. She would tell Blake. She would tell her everything. Then they could get on with their lives.

"And you amaze me." Shale whispered. "Every single day."

Blake inhaled sharply. "Shale—"

"I'm so sorry about earlier," Shale said quickly. "I'll explain if you'll give me the chance."

Blake nodded. She stood up, offering her hand to Shale.

Shale was helped to her feet, and she allowed Blake to keep hold of her hand.

It felt like an eternity before Blake closed her cabin door behind them, but in truth it was only a few moments. Being a princess had its advantages, for people had simply moved aside to let Blake through.

Shale sat on the bed, nervously chafing the fingers of her right hand together. She wished she had brought her drink. Then Blake gave her one of those soft smiles, and her nerves disappeared. "I'm not sure where to start," she said.

Blake sat beside her. "It's all right. Take your time."

"What happened today, it's been building for weeks, my emotions just got the better of me. I'm sorry you were on the end of it, you shouldn't have been. I was never angry with you."

"I thought I must have said something to upset you?"

"You did, but you couldn't have known."

Blake looked troubled, and she rested her hand on Shale's thigh. "It wasn't my intention to hurt you."

"I know that."

"What did I say?"

"You won't understand. I need to explain a few things first." She paused, raising her eyebrows at Blake to see if she should continue.

“I’m listening,” Blake said.

“Kale and I are close, as I’m sure you’ve noticed. There have been times in our past, a few actually, where one of us has been seeing a woman, and she’s become jealous of our relationship.”

Blake nodded her head in encouragement.

“We’ve learned over the years not to get involved with women, not in the romantic sense anyway.” Shale took a breath. “But despite knowing that, I’ve fallen in love with someone, and this afternoon I was faced with the reality that it could never work. That’s why I was upset.”

“Someone?”

“I’m in love with you, Blake. I have been for some time now.”

“Wow.”

“I know it’s a lot to take in, but I wanted you to know that’s how I...mpfh.” Shale was cut off as Blake leaned over and soundly kissed her. “What... What was that for?” she asked in astonishment when Blake drew back.

Blake placed a tender hand on Shale’s cheek, gazing into her clear blue eyes. “I love you too, Shale.”

“You do?”

“With all my heart.”

Shale smiled fully, lighting up her face and making her even more beautiful. “Wow,” she repeated Blake’s earlier sentiment, causing Blake to chuckle.

A moment later Blake’s amusement abruptly vanished, and a frown appeared. “Wait. You were upset because you realised it couldn’t work?”

“Kale and I don’t get involved anymore, because it never works. Why would this time be any different?”

Blake’s brow creased further. “It won’t be if you keep thinking like that. And I don’t think it’s very fair of you to compare me to those other women. What makes you think I’m anything like them?” Hurt showed on Blake’s face. “Don’t you trust me?”

“Of course I do,” Shale replied. “But I also know what happened before, and it’s hard to get past that.”

“Do you want this to work, Shale?”

Shale didn't hesitate. "More than anything." She took hold of Blake's hand to back up her statement.

Blake smiled, entwining her fingers with Shale's. "Then I need you to tell me what's happened," she said gently. "Help me to understand."

"All right. I can do that." This time Shale knew exactly where to start. "The worst time was when Kale was involved with a woman named Aeron. Kale was deeply in love with her, and was fully committed to spend the rest of her life with Aeron. It was serious, they even talked about having a joining ceremony. I'd never seen Kale that happy, nor have I since." Shale shook her head sadly. "But cracks began to show, as always, Aeron demanding Kale spend more and more time with her, and less with me. Aeron didn't like me around, so at one point Kale and I hardly saw each other, which was hard, but I tried to give them the space that Aeron wanted. Kale and I couldn't be apart for very long though. For us, separation can be quite painful." Shale needed Blake to fully comprehend what she was saying. "Most people can't understand it, since they don't have a twin themselves, but the best way to describe it is to imagine yourself cut in two, and each twin represents one half. We're only whole when we're together."

"I take it Aeron didn't get that?"

"Not in the least. In the end, Aeron demanded that Kale choose, either her or me."

"That's awful, Shale," Blake said. "I can't imagine how hard it must have been for you both."

"For Kale much more than me. I felt more guilt than anything."

"Why? You did nothing wrong."

"It was my presence that did it. I honestly think they'd still be together if it hadn't been for me." Shale lowered her head. "Kale still hasn't recovered from it. And it's unbearable to know that I caused that. It was my fault her heart was broken."

"Oh, Shale, you mustn't blame yourself. I bet Kale certainly doesn't." Blake tipped Shale's face up. "How long ago was this?"

"Five summers ago. Aeron was the last. Neither of us have gotten involved since then."

"It wasn't your fault, Shale. Please believe me," Blake said. "I can see why you're reluctant, but I promise I'll never put you in the same situation as Aeron did. I would never do that to you, or Kale." She gently stroked her hair.

Shale was surprised to find she was no longer self-conscious of her tears in front of Blake.

Blake brushed them away affectionately. "Better?"

Shale felt like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. “Much.”

A thoughtful expression crossed Blake’s face. “So when I said I was sick of arguing, you thought that I’d had enough? You took it to mean I was giving up?” At Shale’s nod, Blake cupped her cheek. “It would take a lot more than Kale’s bad temper to make me give up on you, Shale.”

Shale was charmed. “Really?”

“Really. I love you.”

Shale smiled. “I love you, too.” She leaned in for another kiss. As their lips met, all of Shale’s doubts melted. It felt right. The kiss deepened, and their tongues caressed each other. When they pulled apart for air, Shale shifted, trying to get closer still. She wasn’t as careful as she should have been, and caught her left knee against the bed. Her emotions were still raw, and Shale couldn’t help the grunt of pain that escaped her.

“All right, enough of the tough act. Lie back and put that leg up,” Blake said, though her touch remained light.

Shale didn’t protest, and was soon stretched flat out on the bed, with Blake lying on her side next to her. Shale entwined their hands together once more, smiling as Blake brought her hand up and kissed it. This more than made up for her miserable afternoon. Shale didn’t think she had ever been this happy. Now if she could just convince Kale to get along with Blake, things would be perfect.

Blake’s eyes suddenly grew wide. “Now it all makes sense,” she said. “Why Kale doesn’t like me.”

“It does?”

Blake nodded emphatically. “Her heart was broken, and she doesn’t want you to experience that. She’s just trying to protect you.”

Shale was surprised she hadn’t seen that herself. “She doesn’t want me to go through what she did.” It was so obvious now that Blake had pointed it out, and Shale knew in her heart it was true.

“Exactly,” Blake said. “I’ll just have to prove to her that I’m not like the others. I can be patient.”

Those words meant everything to Shale. “Thank you,” she whispered. It didn’t express her feelings adequately though, so she pulled Blake on top of her and kissed her thoroughly, trying to convey the depth of her gratitude through touch.

Their passion rose quickly, and soon hands were on bare flesh, craving more contact. A knock on the door interrupted them.

Blake let out a frustrated breath. “Ah, the joys of being a princess. Duty calls.” She gave Shale a short, but sweet kiss. “Sorry.”

Shale smoothed mussed blonde hair back into order. “It’s all right.”

Smiling at the tender gesture, Blake rolled off Shale, mindful of her injured knee.

Shale sat up and perched on the edge of the bed. Even though half of the village had to have seen them come in here together, and the other half would have heard about it by now, it was still only speculation as to what they were doing. Gossip spread fast in an Amazon village, and she wouldn’t give them any more kindling to put on the fire. Shale knew Blake liked her privacy, what little she had of it anyway, and Shale respected that.

Blake opened the door, her unflappable regal persona firmly in place. “Yes, Ardaxa?”

“Forgive my intrusion, Princess,” Ardaxa said politely. “We didn’t want to start the welcoming dance without you, or one of our new sisters.”

“Very well, we will join you shortly.” Blake didn’t close the door as Ardaxa descended the cabin steps. “I have to go, but you don’t. If your leg’s too painful you can stay here, everyone will understand.”

“No, I’ll come. It would be rude if I didn’t.” Shale stood, lifting her arm as Blake moved to fit underneath. “I’d rather be with you anyway.”

Blake squeezed her waist. “Sweet-talker.”

“Only with you, but don’t tell anyone. I’ll never fit in with the rest of the warriors otherwise.”

Blake chuckled as she led Shale outside. “I won’t. It’ll be our little secret.”

THEY RAN INTO Kale, who was with Amber, underneath the tree where Shale had previously chosen to sit.

Blake couldn’t help but smile—the twins certainly thought alike.

Kale immediately sprang to her feet, but before she could say anything, Shale threw her arms around her in a fierce hug. Kale looked taken aback, not knowing what it was for, but she returned it anyway.

When they stepped apart, Kale nodded to the princess. “Blake,” she greeted.

Blake’s eyes widened in surprise. That was the first time Kale had ever acknowledged her using her preferred name. Amber looked smug, and Blake knew instinctively that she had something to do with Kale’s sudden politeness toward her. “Kale.”

Blake smiled at Amber, who was wearing a lovely green top. “You look wonderful.”

“Thank you. So do you.” Amber leaned closer and lowered her voice. “You’re glowing.”

Blake colored slightly. “With good reason,” she said quietly.

Amber raised her eyebrow, and laughed jovially. “I bet.”

The twins turned in sync, wondering what was so funny.

Amber smoothly changed the conversation. “So, ladies, shall we get something to eat?”

“I left a plate around here earlier.” Shale scanned the area for the item, but it was nowhere to be found.

“I’ll bring you something back, Shale. Why don’t you stay here and make sure no one takes our seats?” Kale said.

Shale nodded, taking her up on the offer and sitting underneath the tree. “Make sure you—”

“Bring back plenty of meat, I know,” Kale finished for her, drawing humorous glances from Amber and Blake.

“And also—”

“A chicken leg if there’s one left,” Kale said, a touch impatiently. “I know.”

“How do you two do that?” Amber asked in disbelief.

“It’s a twin thing,” they answered in unison, causing Blake and Amber to burst into hysterics.

Shale winked at Blake as the trio headed for the food tables, and Blake gave her a dazzling smile.

“So, Blake,” Kale said, drawing her attention. “Is Shale following Appollonia’s instructions? She can be quite reluctant to give her body the proper time it needs to heal. I’m surprised you managed to keep her in your cabin for as long as you did.”

“She’s been fine.”

Kale looked pleased, and she dropped her voice. “Thank you for taking care of her.”

Pale eyebrows shot up in astonishment, Kale wasn’t only being polite to her, she was actually being nice. Blake wondered what Amber had said to her. “You don’t have to thank me for doing that, Kale, it was my pleasure.”

Kale reached the table and started to fill two plates. When Blake dropped a couple of chicken legs onto one, Kale smirked at her. “I don’t know how Shale eats that, I prefer the lighter part of the meat myself.”

“I bet that’s handy at meal times,” Blake said.

Kale nodded. “Yeah, no arguing over who gets what.”

Amber filled four mugs of ale, a small satisfied smile on her face. The welcoming dance began, and all focussed on the women dancing around the fire.

Since everyone’s attention was elsewhere, no one noticed Shale being dragged off into the forest.

## Chapter Eight

JUST AS SHALE’S senses alerted her to danger, a strong hand clamped over her mouth and another wrapped around her body, pulling her roughly backward.

She struggled, but to no avail, whoever held her had a fierce grip. Shale scanned the crowd, willing someone to glance her way, to raise the alarm, but everyone was watching the dancers.

The ground grew uneven as they entered the forest and disappeared out of sight, and her legs bounced over the rocks and tree roots, jarring her knee painfully.

Shale was dragged for a while, and she realised they were headed for the stream. The stream that connected directly onto the river that bordered on Kedross’s land. She wondered whether

this was one of the same group who had attacked her village, but she didn't get a chance to speculate further.

She was suddenly dropped, and landed with a thud. A dagger was pressed to her throat.

KALE HAD JUST finished filling their plates when she felt the urgent pull of her connection with Shale. The plates clattered onto the table, and Amber touched her arm in concern.

"Are you all right, Kale?" Blake asked quickly.

"Shale," Kale said fearfully. "She's in trouble."

Blake's eyes frantically searched around the tree, but Shale was nowhere to be found. She had no time to alert Aris of the situation, for Kale took off without another word, moving swiftly toward the forest.

"MELAINA?" SHALE EXCLAIMED in disbelief. "What in Hera's name are you doing?"

"I thought it was pretty obvious," Melaina said. "Here, maybe this will help clear things up." She withdrew the blade from Shale's throat and whipped it across her forearm in a rush of motion.

Shale didn't give her the satisfaction of crying out, but blood flowed freely from the slice. Without hesitation, Shale lashed out, her boot connecting hard against Melaina's face, snapping her head back.

Shale struggled to her feet, knowing she needed to buy herself some time. She was unarmed and injured, facing off against the best warrior in the tribe, who was apparently intent on killing her.

Shale didn't have to shout for help—not that she would've anyway—as she knew Kale would find her soon enough. She just had to distract Melaina.

"So what's your plan? Surely you've got one, everyone will automatically assume it was you. You'll be killed or exiled for this." Shale shrugged. "If Kale doesn't get to you first." She smiled darkly. "And you'd better pray she doesn't."

"I'm not scared of her."



“You never struck me as dumb, Melaina. Kale will hunt you down.”

“You’ve taken everything from me!” she yelled. “My title, my tribe’s respect, even Blake.”

“Blake was never yours to begin with!” Shale paused in puzzlement. “I haven’t taken your title.”

Melaina sneered. “My Queen deemed it necessary to strip me of my command. I wonder who she’ll give it to?”

“I didn’t ask for that,” Shale said. “But it wasn’t anything you didn’t bring on yourself.” She decided to try and talk Melaina out of this. “You’re only making things worse. You can still turn it around, make things right.” Shale wanted to convince her. “You’re a great second, Melaina, and a great warrior. I’m sorry about Blake. You must care deeply for her. But this isn’t the way forward. True warriors don’t kill this way, we only kill to defend, to protect. This is cold-blooded murder. There’s no honor here. Please don’t do this.” Shale could tell Melaina wasn’t convinced, so she tried another tack. “You’ll have no sisters, Melaina, no tribe, nothing. And that’s if Kale doesn’t kill you, which she will.”

“They won’t know it was me.” She looked smug. “Why do you think I brought you here? Your body will float down this stream and into the river. Everyone will assume it was me, but when your bloated corpse shows up near Kedross’s territory...” Melaina left the sentence hanging.

“They’ll think it was the same group who wiped out my tribe,” Shale completed. She had to admit, it was quite ingenious. Especially if the Amazons saw Melaina at the festivities, she would have numerous alibis. It could work.

As Shale examined the stream, a cocky smile crossed her face. “You’ve forgotten one thing, Melaina.”

“What’s that?”

“We haven’t had rain for weeks, there’s not enough water to carry me downstream.”

In a sudden fury, Melaina growled and threw herself at Shale.

Shale missed being stabbed by a hairsbreadth, jumping sideways out of her path. “Don’t do this, Melaina. Come with me now, and we’ll forget this ever happened.” She held out a hand and Melaina nearly took her fingers off with another swipe of her dagger.

“In a few days this will have all blown over,” Shale said. “Once they realise I’ve forgiven you, and that we can get along, everything will go back to normal.”

Melaina shook her head. “I’m not taking orders from you or your twin.”

“You won’t have to. Aris wouldn’t offer it to either of us, we’re still new here. And even if she did, Kale and I aren’t ready for that responsibility again. We’d turn it down. It’s likely to be Lathana.”

Melaina hesitated, then laughed. “You honestly think I’d fall for that? How gullible do you think I am?”

“I’m telling you the truth,” Shale said. “I’m giving you another chance.”

Melaina lunged and drove Shale back into a tree. As they wrestled with the knife, Melaina kicked at Shale’s injured leg, grinning when Shale grunted and dropped onto her good knee.

Melaina now had the upper hand, and used her considerable strength to press the blade down toward Shale’s chest.

Melaina was suddenly tackled off Shale and taken to the floor. Kale rolled with her, reversed the blade, and stuck it deep into Melaina’s heart.

Shale pulled herself along the ground, coming to a halt beside the fallen warrior. She could tell Melaina was dying, the woman’s labored breathing told her that, but she glanced at Kale to confirm it anyway.

Kale shook her head, conveying that Melaina was beyond healers’ hands now.

“Damn it, Melaina,” Shale whispered sadly. “It didn’t have to be like this.”

“It had to be exactly like this,” she rasped.

Shale clasped Melaina’s hand, and didn’t let go until Melaina had taken her last breath.

Hurried footsteps were heard approaching, then Blake and Amber emerged, finally catching up with Kale.

“Shale!” Blake cried out upon seeing her, sprinting to her side. “Are you all right?” Her hands were all over Shale, checking for damage. She winced at the deep gash along Shale’s arm. “You’re bleeding.”

Amber tore off some of her trouser leg and handed it to a grateful Blake. Amber was panting, and she stared at the perfectly composed Kale in awe. “By the gods, you’re fast,” she said. She then noticed Melaina, and bowed her head in respect.

Blake tied the cloth tightly around Shale’s wound, glancing apologetically at her as she did so. Shale didn’t move or make a sound. She followed Shale’s fixed gaze, finding Melaina’s lifeless form on the end of it. “What happened?”

Shale met Blake's troubled green eyes. "Melaina wanted me dead. Kale saved me." She brushed her knuckles reassuringly against Blake's cheek. "I'm all right. But I'll need a hand to get up."

With Blake's assistance, she was able to stand, though Shale was dismayed when she tried to put weight on her knee. It gave out instantly, and she hissed in agony. The pain worked its way throughout her leg, so intense she actually felt light-headed.

"Don't use that leg, Shale," Amber said, helping Blake to brace her. "We can support you."

Kale immediately moved toward them, but Blake spoke up, "We've got her, Kale. Can you bring Melaina back? We'll give her an Amazon funeral." Blake clearly intended to honor that tradition, even though Melaina had lost her way toward the end.

Kale nodded. "Of course. You go on, I'll be right behind you."

"YOU KNOW, I'VE been a lot busier since you two arrived," Appollonia said good-naturedly, as they entered the lodge.

Shale smiled slightly, though it was tense. The journey here had taken its toll, and the pain was really starting to get to her. Even though she had been unable to use her injured leg, every movement forward still jolted it. Much to her chagrin, Blake and Amber had practically carried her into the healer's lodge.

"She's very pale," Blake said unnecessarily to Appollonia. She felt Shale's damp brow. "Clammy, too."

"Lay her down," Appollonia instructed.

Shale didn't protest as both women went into motion, Amber carefully lifting Shale's legs onto the bed, while Blake guided her gently down into a reclining position, taking the time to make sure Shale was comfortable.

Appollonia frowned when she removed the bandage and examined Shale's knee. "Can you put any weight on it?"

Shale shook her head.

"It could be broken. It's too swollen to tell." Appollonia hit a particularly sore spot, and Shale's entire body tensed. Her vision blurred, and black spots appeared before her eyes. She blinked rapidly, trying to regain her focus, but all she could feel was the searing pain in her leg.

The bed moved as Blake sat down and gripped her hand, and Shale concentrated on that instead, the touch grounding her.

“Shale?” Appollonia watched her closely. “How do you feel, Shale?”

When Shale didn't answer, Blake instinctively knew the reason why—a fellow warrior was present. Warriors had a strong sense of pride, and saw emotion as a weakness. Though Amber was Shale's friend, Shale wasn't yet comfortable enough to consciously show that weakness in front of her.

“Amber, will you make sure Kale's managing all right?”

Amber nodded. “No problem.” The door clicked shut behind her as she left.

Shale squeezed Blake's hand gratefully, then answered the patiently waiting Appollonia. “The pain's making me dizzy.”

“Do you feel nauseous?”

“A little.”

“Does it hurt much worse than before?”

“Let me put it this way, I'm actually looking forward to that awful herbal drink you give me.”

Appollonia chuckled. “Well I'm sorry to disappoint, but I'll have to give you something stronger this time.”

Shale frowned. “Something worse?” she asked, though she wasn't sure she wanted an answer.

“Stronger always tastes worse,” Appollonia said. She started to unwrap the cloth around Shale's forearm.

“I'm not sure I can keep it down,” Shale said meekly.

“Don't worry. I've got plenty,” Appollonia said. “If at first we don't succeed...”

Shale's nose scrunched up at the thought of drinking some disgusting substance repeatedly. She didn't find Appollonia's words to be comforting in the least. Luckily for Shale, Blake's touch was as much comfort as she needed, and she relaxed against Blake's gentle ministrations, the feather-light stroking of her forehead almost blissful in comparison to the pain elsewhere.

“I'll have to stitch this,” Appollonia said, as she studied the wound.

“Feel free,” Shale said quietly. “It’ll match my others.”

“How many scars have you got?” Blake wondered aloud.

“My fair share. Though you’ve probably seen most of them.”

Appollonia’s eyebrows shot up, and a humorous look crossed her face, causing Blake to blush. Appollonia made no comment as she moved about the room, collecting the various implements that she needed.

“I meant most of them aren’t covered by my clothes.” Shale tapped the one at the base of her throat to prove her point, then another on her ribcage. “This one,” she nodded to her bicep, where a jagged line worked its way around to her back, “is the worst. You can’t see because of my top, but it stretches horizontally, right across my shoulder blades.”

Appollonia sprinkled the wound with herbs, and then started to stitch Shale’s forearm. “How’d it happen?”

“Some Roman pig. He sliced me pretty good, even though I had my back to him at the time.”

“Coward,” Blake muttered.

“Mm,” Shale said. “Worked out all right though. Kale’s still jealous about that one.”

Blake made a face, looking half amused and half mortified. “You compete over who’s got the best scar?”

“Sure,” Shale replied, as though it was the most natural thing in the world. She regarded her injured forearm. “This isn’t too bad I suppose.”

Blake covered her face with a hand. “I just don’t understand warriors sometimes.”

Appollonia chortled. “Want me to add a couple of extra stitches?” She winked at Shale to let her know she was joking. “Maybe that will make it look more impressive.”

Blake’s head snapped up, clearly appalled at the notion.

Shale pretended to consider it.

“Shale, come on now, that’s ridiculous. Your body’s been through enough for one day, without you intentionally making it worse.” Blake crossed her arms over her chest. “I won’t allow it.”

Shale pouted, trying to keep the smile off her face.

“And I’m shocked that you would even suggest such a thing,” Blake said to Appollonia.

Appollonia burst out laughing, which triggered Shale off also.

“This isn’t fun—” Blake broke off, apparently realising she was being teased. “Ha ha.” She scowled at them, and lightly swatted Shale on her stomach.

“There, all done,” Appollonia said.

“Thanks.” Shale flexed her fingers, pleased when the movement didn’t cause too much discomfort.

Appollonia gathered a concoction of herbs together.

Shale sat up in anticipation of the drink, knowing she would never keep it down if she remained flat on her back.

“Blake, there’s a pail under the bed. Can you get it?” Appollonia asked, while mixing the drink with a wooden spoon.

Shale steadied her stomach as Blake searched for the bucket. She wouldn’t let herself throw up. Not only would it be humiliating, Blake might not kiss her for the rest of the evening. That single thought gave her the motivation she needed.

Shale took the mug, drawing in a deep breath before the stench of it hit her. She swallowed a few mouthfuls, but had to stop. “Gods.” Shale breathed unevenly for a few moments, making Blake ready the pail. “You weren’t kidding when you said you had worse.”

“I’ve had some Amazons accuse me of trying to kill them,” Appollonia said.

A ghost of a smile appeared. “That was going to be my next statement,” Shale said. She scanned the contents of the mug, dismayed to find it only half empty. She made herself finish the rest, and sheer willpower kept it down.

“Now I feel worse.” Shale wasn’t exaggerating, her nausea had increased substantially.

“I know,” Appollonia said. “But it will help if you can keep it down.”

“Oh, it’s staying down,” Shale said, as much to convince herself as anyone. “I’m not drinking that again.”

“Can I borrow this?” Blake asked Appollonia, gesturing to the pail. “Just in case,” she told Shale.

Shale nodded. Precaution was never a bad thing, especially when her stomach felt as though it was doing back flips.

“Please, keep it. I have plenty.”

“Thanks.” Blake rubbed her thumb over Shale’s arm. “Do you want to stay here for a bit to let your stomach settle?”

“No, we can go.” Shale wanted some privacy, and the comfort of Blake’s cabin. She’d had enough of being at the healer’s. Twice in one day was enough for anyone. “Thanks for patching me up.”

Appollonia smiled. “You’re welcome.”

“I’ll go and fetch Kale. She can carry you over.” Blake moved to stand.

“There’s no need,” Shale said.

Seeing that Blake was about to argue with her, presumably to say that there certainly was a need, and there was no way Shale was going to hop across the village with only Blake supporting her, Shale pointed at the door.

A few moments passed, then the lodge door opened and Kale came in.

Blake smiled and shook her head in amazement. “I’ll never get used to that.”

“How in the...” Appollonia uttered.

“It’s a twin thing,” Blake answered for Shale, causing her to snicker.

Kale frowned at the surprised expressions that were being directed at her. “What?”

Shale held out her newly stitched forearm. “What do you think?”

Kale observed it approvingly. “Nice.”

Blake shook her head in disbelief. “Clearly this is something only warriors understand.”

Shale smirked up at Kale. “You’re just in time.”

“This is getting to be a habit,” Kale noted, bending down and lifting Shale without another word passing between them.

Appollonia’s jaw dropped, and Blake stifled a grin. Shale could have been referring to anything, but Kale instinctively knew what she wanted. It really was quite extraordinary, the connection that they shared.

Blake followed Kale out of the lodge, and Kale headed for Blake’s cabin.

“You know the offer is always open, Kale. You’re welcome to stay, too,” Blake said.

“On the floor,” Shale put in swiftly.

Kale chuckled. “I kind of figured you two would have the bed,” she replied, letting them know that she knew about their relationship. “Thanks, Blake, but you both deserve your privacy.” Her tone became mischievous. “Besides, if the rumors about you two are true, I won’t get any sleep.”

“Kale!” Shale smacked her hard on the head.

“I’ll drop you if you do that again,” Kale threatened.

Blake laughed, surprising Shale. “Well, I’ve certainly heard worse rumours.”

Shale’s eyebrows rose, and her eyes twinkled at Blake.

“I’ll come by often though, if that’s all right?” Kale asked.

“Sure. Anytime you like,” Blake said.

Shale smiled at Kale, relieved beyond words that Kale was making an effort with Blake. She kissed Kale’s cheek in thanks.

“Shale! We’re in public. Don’t make me drop you.”

KALE’S STOMACH RUMBLED loudly, reminding her and everyone else in the cabin that they still hadn’t eaten. “I’ll go and scavenge some food, assuming there’s any left.”

Shale’s head was in Blake’s lap, and Blake was lightly tickling the nape hairs on the back of her neck.

“You’re spoiled rotten, Shale,” Kale said.

Shale smiled up at Blake. “I know.”

Their eyes locked, and they gazed lovingly at each other.

Kale rolled her eyes. “You know, I think that sickness of yours might be catching. I’m starting to feel nauseous myself.”

Shale stuck her tongue out at Kale. “Go fetch Blake some food.”

“You don’t want any?” Kale asked, heading for the door.



“No. I’m not hungry.”

“You should try to eat something, Shale,” Blake said. “You need to keep your strength up.”

Shale firmly shook her head.

“Do you still feel sick?” Blake’s brow creased when Shale nodded. “It’s been a while since you’ve had it. Is it helping at least?”

“Yes. My knee’s not as bad.”

“Good.”

“I’ll eat something tomorrow, but I’m really not up to anything now.” She looked beseechingly at Blake.

“All right,” Blake said softly.

“I’ll just get two plates then,” Kale said. “Do you want something in particular, Blake?”

“No, a mixture’s fine. Thanks, Kale.” When they were alone, Blake added, “I think Kale’s been drugged or something.”

Shale chuckled. “I bet you didn’t think she had a nice side?”

“I was starting to wonder,” Blake said. “I owe Amber big time. Whatever she said clearly worked.”

“Amber? What makes you say that?”

“She gave me this self-satisfied look. I know she played a part in it. And considering Kale’s behavior toward me before, I’d say it was a pretty big part.”

“Hmm.” Shale mulled that over. Despite wanting to believe that Kale was being nice to Blake for her benefit, Shale knew that Kale didn’t just change her mind, she needed to be convinced. “I wonder what she said.”

When Kale came back, Amber, Aris, and the queen were with her.

Shale instantly bolted upright, which did nothing to help her queasiness.

“As you were.”

Despite the queen’s kind offer, Shale remained sitting. She wouldn’t allow herself to be vulnerable in front of them.

Kale placed the plates of food on a table in the corner of the cabin.

Zayla moved to Blake's side. "Did you get hurt?"

"No, Mother, I'm fine." Blake patted the hand Zayla rested on her shoulder. "Did Kale tell you what happened with Melaina?"

"Yes. Though I must say I'm shocked. I didn't realise she was that unstable."

"Neither did I," Aris said. "Something must have pushed her over the edge." She looked at the twins expectantly.

"Melaina was in love with me," Blake said. "Neither Shale or Kale did anything to her. She was simply jealous of my and Shale's relationship."

Aris apparently didn't know what to say to that, and Amber wore a smug look that said she knew all along.

"Actually," Shale cleared her throat. "Though that was the main cause, I think it was today's events that did it. Losing her

command was the final blow, so to speak."

Everyone except Aris glanced at the queen in surprise.

"I stand by my decision," Zayla said. "And given her reaction to the news, it was the right choice to make. Authority is a dangerous weapon to a woman like that."

"Clearly my judgement isn't as good as I'd thought," Aris said. "Would you like me to step down, my Queen?"

"Certainly not."

"She had us all fooled, Aris," Blake said. "You weren't the only one. None of us could have known what was going on inside Melaina's head."

Aris stared at Blake for a moment, then nodded. Her gaze shifted to Shale. "How long had this been going on?"

"Remember the falling tree?"

Aris went quiet for an instant. "And that's why you disobeyed her order?"

Shale tipped her head slightly.

Aris seemed annoyed by the deception. "You should have told me, I—"

“Would you have believed us?” Kale said abruptly. She didn’t give her time to answer. “We both know you wouldn’t have.”

“Melaina was smart about it, Aris,” Shale said. “I myself wouldn’t have believed two newcomers over my second. We were in a difficult situation. I’m sorry if you feel you were deceived, but that was not our intention. We simply did what we thought was best.”

“Did you know about this, Amber?” Aris asked.

“I did not.”

Aris gave her a pleased nod, then she turned back to the twins. “I need to be able to trust my warriors. I don’t expect to be lied to again.”

Technically, Shale thought, they hadn’t lied, but Aris hadn’t been given all of the information.

“Technically,” Kale started.

Shale glared at her, shook her head, and overrode what she was about to say. “It will not happen again.”

Aris nodded to Shale, letting it go. She then regarded Kale.

“What she said,” Kale stated off-handedly. Aris raised her brow, and seeing she wanted more, Kale added, “No more lies.”

“Good.”

“Well, now that’s settled.” Zayla sat and studied Shale’s injuries, causing Shale to straighten further under her scrutiny. Zayla smiled at her.

Shale wasn’t tense because Zayla was the queen, she was tense because Zayla was Blake’s mother, and she wanted to make a good impression. She hadn’t met a prospective in-law before, and wasn’t quite sure how to act.

Shale had talked to the queen on several occasions, but things were different then, she and Blake had only been friends. Though they hadn’t yet been intimate, they were certainly a lot more than just friends. She wanted Zayla to like her, to feel she was good enough for her daughter. For the princess.

She felt Blake’s hand on her back, and it calmed her, melting her worries away.

“I do hope you’re not in too much pain, Shale,” Zayla said, a kind expression on her face.

“It’s not too bad,” Shale said, giving her standard warrior response. She knew Blake would roll her eyes at that, and her suspicions were confirmed when Zayla chuckled. Shale glanced over her shoulder. “It’s rude to pull faces,” she told Blake knowingly, gratified when Zayla laughed harder.

Blake’s eyes widened in startlement. “How did you know?”

Shale grinned. “Just did.”

Zayla watched the interaction with a smile on her face. “We’ll leave you to your meal. Make sure you get some rest, Shale.”

“Yes, my Queen.”

Zayla stood, and Aris escorted her out.

Kale handed Blake a plate of food, and offered the other to Amber. “Stay and have dinner with us?”

“That’s yours,” Amber said.

“I can easily get another.” Kale lifted Amber’s hand and placed the plate into it. “Yes?”

Amber’s mouth twitched. “All right. Thanks.”

“ALL RIGHT, I’M coming,” Amber muttered sleepily. She untangled herself from the blankets, got out of bed, and padded to the door. At the last moment, she realised she was naked, and quickly slipped on some clothes.

She yawned widely, and the knocking came again.

“All right!” Amber yelled.

She never had been much of a morning person. It didn’t help that she hadn’t got much sleep. She’d spent most of the night talking with Kale.

Amber opened the door, squinting against the light that poured into the cabin. Kale stood there, looking perfectly rested.

“This had better be good,” Amber said.

Kale smirked. “Good morning to you, too.”

Amber noticed Kale was standing strangely, her hands hiding something behind her back. “What’ve you got there?”

Kale smiled mischievously. “May I come in?”

Amber stepped back, sweeping her arm in a gesture for Kale to enter.

Kale moved inside, careful to keep the bundle behind her hidden from Amber’s view. She waited until Amber closed the door before speaking. “I just wanted to thank you again for that talk. You really made me think about things.”

“I’m glad it helped.”

“It did. A lot.” Kale brought out a deerskin from behind her back. “This is for you. I shot a large stag a couple of weeks ago.” She unrolled the finished hide, and held it up so Amber could see it.

“You didn’t have to do that.” Amber smiled brightly, running her hand down the soft fur. “It’s beautiful.” Amber brushed her lips over Kale’s cheek. “Thank you.” She got lost in Kale’s gaze for a long moment. But when she moved to kiss her, Kale leaned back.

“You’re a good friend, Amber,” Kale said quietly.

Amber took the rejection hard, but managed to put a brave face on. “Fair enough.” Taking the deerskin from Kale, she crossed the wooden floor and held it against the wall. “I believe this is the best place for it. What do you think?”

“Looks good. I’ll help you put it up.”

SHALE WAS STUDYING her knee unhappily. “This will take forever to heal,” she grumbled. “I should have just stayed in bed yesterday, none of this would’ve happened. I’d be able to walk, Melaina would still be alive, and...”

Blake placed a finger on Shale’s lips, quieting her. “And Kale would still hate me, and you’d still be an outsider here. Shale, you can’t blame yourself.” Blake shook her head. “I swear, you and Kale are so different, sometimes I’m surprised you’re even related. Kale takes no responsibility whatsoever, whereas you take far too much. I won’t have you blaming yourself over this. It wasn’t your fault.”

“But—”

Blake planted her lips on Shale's, cutting off her protest. "But nothing. You didn't do anything wrong."

"But—"

Blake kissed her once more, this time longer. "I can do this all day."

"I'm a slow learner," Shale replied, an impish expression appearing. She liked that idea. Very much.

Blake smirked, though it was brief. "I'm serious, Shale. I need you to believe me. Do you trust me?"

"With my life," Shale said, without a shadow of a doubt.

"Then trust what I'm saying now. You can't take everything on your shoulders, no matter how strong they might be." Blake rested her hand on the muscles there. "No one can take that kind of strain, so please trust me when I tell you that it wasn't your fault."

Shale could tell Blake was sincere, and truly believed what she was saying, but Shale was so used to taking the blame for things, she'd been doing it for Kale all her life. It had become an unconscious response for her.

Maybe Blake was right? Perhaps she was taking too much on her shoulders? She trusted Blake's judgement completely, and after several more moments of quiet reflection, Shale nodded to her. "I believe you."

Blake smiled, seeming content with that.

"Though I must say I was quite tempted to pretend otherwise," Shale said. "Getting kissed by you all day sounds wonderful."

Green eyes sparkled. "It does, huh?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Well, you know," Blake pushed her down so Shale was lying flat on the bed. "I'd hate to disappoint you." She lay alongside her, grinning when Shale's arms wrapped around her.

They took their time with sweet and tender kisses, each knowing they were about to make love, but neither wanting to hurry.

Blake licked Shale's lips, seeking access, and Shale took her inside, their tongues meeting and slowly exploring each other.

Weeks of self-restraint caught up to them, and their bodies were soon craving more.

Shale unfastened Blake's top and removed it, revealing her small, but perfect breasts. "You're so beautiful, Blake," she whispered, caressing a breast with one hand.

Blake took in a quick breath, her eyes closing as Shale's touch grew more insistent. Shale's other hand pushed down her skirt, and Blake assisted, shoving the skirt and her undergarments off impatiently, leaving her completely naked.

Blake giggled as she indicated Shale's fully clothed form. "This hardly seems fair."

Shale eyed Blake hungrily, her arousal soaring.

Shale was swiftly undressed, taking care of the top half herself, while Blake stripped her lower.

Blake raked her gaze over Shale, her eyes darkening with passion. "Shale." She swallowed. "You're stunning. You..." Blake shook her head, as if in disbelief. "You take my breath away."

Shale's smile turned slightly bashful.

Their mouths met again, fervently now, and their bodies melded together, bare flesh on bare flesh. Hands roamed freely, delighting in the softness of naked skin.

Shale pulled Blake on top of her, cupped her buttocks, and pressed their mounds together, hard. Blake inhaled sharply, and started to move against Shale, the friction inflaming them further.

Soon it wasn't enough, and Blake worked her way down Shale's long body, stopping to lavish attention on her full breasts. Blake fondled them, and licked her rigid nipples, only relenting when Shale urged her down with her hands.

"Please, Blake."

Blake didn't tease, running her palm over the dark hair and cupping Shale possessively. She brushed over Shale's clitoris, causing her to lurch upward.

"Easy, Shale. Your leg."

"What leg?" Shale asked dazedly.

Blake chuckled, and continued her descent. Placing a hand on Shale's stomach to try and hold her down, Blake lowered her head, kissing Shale sweetly before her tongue darted out to caress her velvety folds.

"Blake," Shale whispered, writhing against her.

Blake lapped at Shale's wetness, then entered her, savouring the taste. Shale's hips lifted, straining to get closer, but Blake gently pushed her back down.

When Shale's writhing increased, Blake suckled on her clitoris, causing Shale to buck against her.

"Yes! Right there. Please, Blake."

Blake pressed harder against her, and Shale gasped, arching her back, literally seeing stars.

Blake waited for the spasms to subside, then drew back, grinning as Shale sank down onto the bed with a satisfied sigh.

Blake climbed up Shale's body, draping her own over Shale's while she waited for her to recover.

After several moments, Shale released a throaty chuckle. "Wow."

Blake laughed and kissed her. Shale's hand encircled her breast, squeezing lightly.

Shale bent her right leg, raising it to press intimately against Blake's hot center. Blake whimpered, and pushed onto Shale's thigh, rubbing herself firmly against it.

"Shale," Blake moaned, her breathing growing more ragged with each roll of her hips.

Shale's desire reawakened with a vengeance, Blake's frantic movements stimulating her in every way possible. She watched Blake for a bit longer, and then lowered her leg, smiling at Blake's sound of protest.

Shale didn't keep her waiting, her hand immediately snaking down Blake's toned stomach and into the curls beyond. She slipped two fingers inside Blake.

"By the gods," Blake uttered, impaling herself further onto Shale's fingers.

Shale nearly withdrew, then thrust back inside. Blake cried out in pleasure, and started to rock against Shale urgently.

Despite the motion, Shale held her gaze. "I love you, Blake."

A smile. "I love you too." Blake kissed her, sliding her tongue into Shale's mouth and dipping her fingers into her warmth at the same time.

Shale groaned loudly, and sucked on Blake's tongue, feeling the pressure building inside her.

They stroked each other in sync, creating a steady rhythm between them.



It wasn't long before Blake's rocking grew frenzied, and Shale was right behind her.

"Shale." Blake panted. "Oh yes, Shale. Oh, yes!" Her muscles tightened. "Oh! Oh, Shale!" Her back arched as a powerful wave of euphoria washed over her.

Blake's breathless moans, along with calling her name, triggered Shale's own ecstasy.

Their earlier words of devotion made their climax so much sweeter, and they collapsed against each other, gasping for breath.

BLAKE WAS LIGHTLY tracing one of Shale's scars—the large straight line across her back. "I could kill the man who did this to you."

"And I thought I was the warrior." She chuckled. "You'll have a hard job."

Blake brushed her lips over the scar, then rolled Shale onto her back so she could look at her. "And what's that supposed to mean?" She creased her eyebrows in mock annoyance. "You don't think I could do it?"

"Actually, no," Shale said, point blank.

Blake frowned, her annoyance becoming real. "I'm perfectly capable of fighting, Shale. I may not be up to your standard, but I can certainly defend myself."

"I'm sure you can."

Blake's frown grew more pronounced. "Then why don't you think I could kill him?"

Blue eyes glimmered amusedly. "Because he's already dead."

Blake let out a bark of laughter. "Ah. I see your point."

"I killed him straight after he sliced me." Shale paused, as if thinking over Blake's reaction. "You're the most capable person I've ever met, Blake. And though it's true I've never seen you fight, I'd be happy to have you alongside me in battle. Because I know that when you set your mind to something, it will get done."

Blake gave her a dazzling smile. "Thank you."

"But it's probably not wise since I'm too easily distracted by you." Shale grimaced, and Blake realised her words had slipped out unintentionally. She clearly hoped Blake wouldn't notice, for she quickly tried to change the subject. "So, what do you—"

“Hang on.” Blake stopped her, recalling how Kale had looked at her after the sparring accident, as if it had been her fault. She suddenly understood. “You were distracted because of me, that’s why you lost focus.” Blake was flattered and horrified at the same time. “I’m so sorry, Shale.”

Shale shook her head adamantly. “Please, don’t be. It’s hardly your fault I find you so irresistible.”

Blake couldn’t help but smile, and she ever so gently touched Shale’s injured knee. Her hand shifted, remembering that another scar was on the inside of Shale’s upper thigh. Blake searched, feeling Shale twitch as she found the mark and tracked along it. “Did that hurt?” she asked innocently, trying her best to keep a straight face.

Shale smiled playfully at Blake. “No.”

“You’re sure?” Blake was grinning now. “I wouldn’t want to cause you any discomfort.”

Shale shivered, though Blake knew it had nothing to do with the temperature.

“Are you cold?” Blake teased, bringing the blankets up to cover their naked bodies.

“You’re causing me discomfort right now, Blake,” Shale told her hoarsely.

She chuckled. “Do you want me to stop?”

“No!”

“Well, I’m no healer, but maybe I can ease this discomfort of yours. Where exactly is it?” Blake’s hand moved a little bit higher. “Here?” At Shale’s headshake, she went higher still. “Here?” Blake tormented her for several more moments, enjoying this game, then Shale gasped, letting her know that she’d reached the spot.

“I only know of two ways to cure pain, Shale. Either rub it till it goes away, or kiss it to make it better. Which do you suggest we start with?”

Shale’s moan was its own answer.

## Chapter Nine

BLAKE HAD BEEN gone for most of the day, and Shale was bored stiff. She'd spent a lot of the time chastising herself. She was a grown woman, surely she could keep herself entertained? But apparently not.

Though the pain in her knee had lessened somewhat over the last few days, it was nowhere near ready to be walked on.

Kale had been over on many occasions, sometimes with Amber, sometimes not, but neither had visited today, when Shale was slowly going out of her mind.

Shale knew she was being unreasonable, there must be something she could do. She turned on her side and closed her eyes, trying to pass the time that way. Even though she felt like she'd got enough sleep to last her the month, she soon felt herself drifting off, thanking Hypnos for his mercy. She was soon cursing his son, Morpheus, however, when she found herself once again dreaming of her fallen tribe.

Shale hadn't dreamt about them for over a week, and had hoped the nightmares had stopped for good.

This time it was different. Not only did Shale realise she was dreaming, she was the one holding the sword. Which didn't make any sense, her guilt wasn't that extreme. As she sliced and hacked her way through her friends, Shale saw that her hands were much larger, stronger.

She knelt over a disarmed Senna, and stabbed her repeatedly in the gut, spilling her entrails onto the ground. Once Senna was dead, Shale let out a howl of triumph, elation coursing through her blood.

Shale jerked awake, sitting up and grabbing the nearby pail just in time. She threw up into it, not stopping until she had emptied her stomach. Tears coursed down her cheeks, and she sobbed despondently, vowing never to sleep again. To her eternal relief, Blake chose that exact moment to enter.

Blake took one look at Shale, and her face dropped. "Shale?" She kicked the door shut and hastily moved to her side. "What's wrong?"

Shale couldn't speak she was crying so hard. She threw her arms around Blake, gripping her fiercely.

"All right, Shale. Shh." Blake enfolded her in a tight embrace. "Easy. Take it easy. Shh. I'm here, I've got you."

Shale's body wracked with sobs and she struggled to breathe.

Blake pulled away slightly, cupping Shale's face. "Easy now, catch your breath. Deep breaths, Shale," Blake said, lengthening her breathing so Shale would copy her.

Shale was so distressed, it took a moment to register, but then she imitated Blake, gradually slowing her breathing.

“That’s it, Shale. Good.”

“I killed them,” Shale finally said, her voice raw with grief.

“Who?” Blake asked, looking confused. She brushed away Shale’s tears, but more kept falling. Shale was visibly shaking, and Blake wrapped a blanket around her.

“My tribe. In my dream, I killed them.” Shale let out another sob.

“Oh, Shale,” Blake whispered, holding her close once more. “That wasn’t your fault. I thought you believed that?”

“I do. It wasn’t like that. It was as if I was there...seeing what happened.” Shale frowned, becoming frustrated. “I know how that sounds...it’s the only way I can explain it.” She leaned back to read Blake’s expression. “You must think I’m crazy.”

Blake pushed dark hair off Shale’s face, holding her gaze. “I don’t think that at all. I just wish there was something I could do to help you through this.”

“You’re doing it right now,” Shale said, drawing a shuddering breath. “I couldn’t get through this without you.”

Blake kissed her damp forehead. “I’m here for you, Shale. I’ll always be here.”

Shale gave her a watery smile, then sank into Blake’s arms again, needing to be held.

“It’s all right, Shale. Everything’s going to be all right.” Blake hugged her securely. “We’ll get through this. Together.” When Shale eventually withdrew, Blake noticed the pail beside her. “Have you been sick?”

Shale nodded. “It was...graphic. I’ve seen plenty of violence before, but...” She swallowed. “My tribe. It was too much.”

“I’ll take care of it.” She gave Shale’s shoulder a squeeze, then lifted the pail and placed it on the floor at the foot of the bed. Blake clambered onto the bed, encircling Shale’s waist from behind. Shale leaned back into her, and Blake rested her head on Shale’s shoulder.

Shale felt Blake’s hand move up between the valley of her breasts, and come to a halt over her heart. It was still beating faster than usual, but it was starting to calm.

Blake kissed her neck, once, twice, then Shale turned her head, her eyes still glistening.

“Thank you,” Shale said.

“You don’t ever need to thank me for this, Shale. I’m honored you allow me to see this side of you.”

Shale’s gaze darted to the door. “Kale.” Given her distressed state, she knew Kale would’ve sensed she needed her.

In spite of Shale’s accurate predictions regarding Kale’s whereabouts, Blake still jumped when Kale came bursting in, panting slightly.

Kale spotted Shale’s tear-stained face, dropped her hunting bow, and went to her, taking Shale into her arms.

Blake shuffled back a little, giving them some room.

When Kale withdrew, she looked at Shale anxiously. “What happened?” Kale lifted a strap over her head, and removed the quiver of arrows from her back, placing them on the bed. “Shale?”

Shale shook her head. She really didn’t want to go through it all again.

Blake laid a comforting hand on Shale’s side, and answered for her, “She had a nightmare. She dreamed that she was there when your tribe was slain. That she herself killed them.”

Kale frowned. “You have to stop this, Shale. I’ve told you there was nothing we could do. You know this.”

“I do know that,” Shale said quietly.

“Obviously you don’t, or you wouldn’t be having these dreams,” Kale said.

“It was like I was there, but it wasn’t me.” Shale lifted her hand, examining it. “My hands were bigger, like a man’s. It was as if I was seeing it through someone else’s eyes.” Now that she’d calmed down, she was able to explain it more clearly.

Kale’s brow furrowed further. “That doesn’t make any sense, Shale.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Shale snapped. She rubbed her temple.

“All right,” Blake stated softly, her fingers making idle patterns on Shale’s skin.

Shale sucked in a deep breath, then let it out, getting herself under control. She grasped Kale’s arm in silent apology. “Can you take me to the stream? I want to wash. I feel dirty.”

Kale shared an uneasy look with Blake. “Of course I will.”

“DOESN'T LOOK LIKE you caught much,” Shale teased, indicating the hunting bow as Kale put her down on the bed. Her hair was still wet from her bath, but she knew it would soon dry inside the cosy cabin.

“That was your fault,” Kale muttered.

“That sounds like an excuse to me,” Shale said. She felt a lot better now, the cool water having chased away the remnants of her dream. “What do you think, Blake?”

Blake's eyes widened as both focussed on her for a deciding response. “Oh, no. Keep me out of this.” She fetched her comb, and began to run it through Shale's long, dark locks, untangling them.

Kale let out a snort. “Just when I think you can't possibly spoil her anymore, you do.”

“I'm not spoiling her,” Blake said. “I'm simply taking care of her.”

“Looks like spoiling to me.”

“Then you haven't been in the right relationship,” Blake said.

Kale stiffened at her words.

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean...” Blake stopped as Kale waved it off.

“No, you're right. I haven't been.” Kale smiled somewhat wistfully, and then changed the subject. “Did Aris finally select who's going to be her new second?”

“Yes,” Blake said. “Lathana was chosen.”

“Good choice,” Shale said, as Kale nodded approvingly.

“I thought so,” Blake agreed. “Don't think your names didn't come up, because they did, but I felt that, especially in Shale's case, you both weren't ready to go back to a commanding role yet.”

Shale nodded, and Kale followed suit a moment later, letting Blake know that she was correct.

“One day,” Kale said.

Shale remained silent.

Blake finished brushing Shale's hair, then stood and put the comb back on the shelf. "That reminds me, have you got any more belongings at your camp?"

Shale tilted her head in thought. "A couple of things. Most of my clothes are already here. Why?"

Kale glanced to Blake. "I'll bring them over the next time I'm passing."

Blake nodded and continued on, "I'll ask Chrysanthe to make another chest, then you can keep your things in there."

"There's no need, they're fine in my pack," Shale said, frowning at Kale when she started to laugh.

Blake gave her an odd look. "They can't stay in your pack forever, Shale," she said. "The chest can go on your side of the bed."

"My side of the bed?" Shale repeated, puzzled. "Don't go to any trouble, Blake."

"It's no trouble. I want you to be comfortable here."

"I am comfortable here," Shale said, glaring at a now hysterical Kale. "What's so funny?"

"Blake?" Kale indicated a very confused Shale. "She's got no idea what you're talking about. You might want to ask her."

Blake's hand flew to her mouth at the oversight.

"Ask me what?" Shale uttered dumbly.

Kale covered her eyes in amusement. "We don't always think along the same lines. I'm the smarter twin."

"Hey!" Shale said, pouting a little. "You're lucky I can't get up."

Blake knelt on the bed and kissed her. "I want us to live together, Shale. I want this to be our cabin. Will you live with me?"

Shale beamed at her. "I would love to." She softly pressed her lips to Blake's.

Kale smirked, but didn't interrupt them. "I can go if you want?" she offered when they drew apart.

Blake gave her a droll look. "No, it's fine."

“That’s not the answer I would’ve given,” Shale mumbled, drawing a chuckle from Kale. Shale grinned at her, but it vanished when she realised the full extent of what this would mean. “What about you?”

“I’ll be all right. We’ve lived apart before. Remember I used to live with Aeron.”

“It’ll be no different than it is now, Shale,” Blake said. “Kale can visit whenever she wants.”

“And this way I get my own cabin.” Kale smiled. “When I get around to making one.”

“Actually, Kale, I wanted to speak to you about that,” Blake said. “Normally, Lathana would move into Melaina’s old cabin—the one next door, but she’s already settled in her own cabin. I’ve already convinced Aris and my mother that you’re a good enough fighter to protect me, and of course, I have my own personal bodyguard in here,” she flashed Shale a grin, “so the place is yours if you want it.”

“You’re kidding?” the twins asked in disbelief.

Blake shook her head, smiling broadly.

“That’s perfect!” Shale said, happily embracing Blake.

“Yeah, thanks, Blake. That’s great,” Kale added, sounding extremely pleased that she would be close by to her sister.

SHALE QUIETLY NIBBLED at the bread. She wasn’t hungry, she was simply eating it to keep herself awake. Night had fallen long ago, and she really didn’t relish the thought of going to sleep. The earlier dream had shaken her considerably, and she didn’t want a repeat performance.

“I know what you’re doing, Shale,” Blake suddenly spoke up from beside her.

“Eating bread?” She smiled down at Blake. “Why are you still awake?”

“That’s just what I was about to ask you, though I know the answer.”

“I won’t bother replying then,” Shale said dryly, taking another bite of the bread. She frowned as Blake sat up. “Is the light disturbing you? I’ll put it out if it is.” Shale leaned out of bed toward the lantern, which was hanging on a nail in the wall, intending to extinguish the flame inside.

Blake touched her arm, stopping her. “No, leave it on.” She got out of bed, and started to search through some parchments on the table in the corner.



“What are you doing?”

“I’m looking for...ah, found it.” Blake came back to bed with the parchment in hand. She pulled the blankets back over her, and began to read.

“Blake?”

She didn’t look up from her reading. “Yes, Shale?”

“What are you doing?”

“I’ve got some work to do. If I’m going to be awake all night I might as well be productive,” Blake said, without a hint of reproach in her tone.

Shale sighed. “Blake, please, go to sleep.”

“Not until you do.”

Shale’s response was sharp. “I’m not tired.”

Blake looked hurt. “That’s the first time you’ve ever lied to me, Shale.” She met Shale’s apologetic gaze. “I hope it will be the last.”

“I’m sorry.” Shale let that sink in, and she gripped Blake’s hand. “Truly. It won’t happen again.”

Blake nodded, forgiving her. Then she returned to her work.

“There’s no reason for us both to be tired tomorrow,” Shale said.

“That’s up to you.”

Shale exhaled loudly. “You’re so stubborn.”

“No more than you.”

Shale conceded that, and silently finished eating her bread. She knew it wasn’t fair of her to keep Blake up too, but she was quite unwilling to go to sleep. “Can you pass me the mug, Blake?”

Blake handed her the mug of water, which was kept on the nearby shelf.

Shale drank thirstily, washing down the bread. She then gave it back to Blake. “I was thinking about putting some shelves up on my side of the bed,” Shale said, smiling at her words. She was so pleased they were living together.

Blake returned her smile. “Good idea.” When Shale stifled a yawn, Blake put the parchment aside and took hold of both her hands. “You can’t stay awake forever, Shale. I know you’re frightened of going to sleep in case you have another nightmare, but—”

“I’d be a pretty pathetic warrior if I was afraid of going to sleep.”

“That’s Kale talking, not you,” Blake said. “And it’s not pathetic to feel, Shale. That’s one of the main things that I love about you. You’re so much more than just a warrior. So much more.”

“I shouldn’t be scared. Not of this.”

“Why not? Because Kale wouldn’t be?”

Shale tipped her head. “I should be strong.”

“You are strong. When I think of what you’ve been through,” Blake paused, her eyes misting. “I’m surprised you’re doing as well as you are. Your strength amazes me.” She squeezed the hands in her own. “Please stop comparing yourself to Kale. You’re not her, and I wouldn’t want you to be.” She hesitated briefly. “You know it doesn’t bother me whether you lead or not.”

Shale was taken aback. “It doesn’t?”

“No. Whatever makes you happy is fine with me.”

“Kale will want to lead again.”

“That’s Kale. What do you want?”

“I want you to be proud of me.”

Blake pressed her lips to Shale’s, kissing her lovingly. “I couldn’t be prouder.”

Shale blushed, but a delighted grin etched its way across her face. After a moment, she sobered. “I’m not sure I want to lead again.”

Blake nodded, then kissed Shale once more, gently pushing her down onto the bed. She began to stroke Shale’s hair. When Shale protested, Blake said, “I’ll be right here. If you do dream, I’ll wake you straight up.”

Shale closed her eyes, surrendering to Blake. She wound her arms around her. “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me, Blake,” she whispered.

Blake gave her a devoted look, then snuggled into Shale. “Likewise.”

“IT’S NOT BROKEN,” Appollonia said. The swelling had now reduced enough for her to examine Shale’s knee properly.

Shale let out the breath she’d been holding. “Great,” she responded, relieved. She would have Kale fetch her a staff. She could use that for support when she walked.

“You still need to rest it,” Appollonia said, as if reading her mind.

Shale’s brow furrowed slightly, until she realised that resting it wasn’t the same as keeping off it. “I’ll rest it.”

“Do you want me to wrap it?”

Shale was about to decline, thinking the healer was trying to catch her out—why would her leg need a supportive wrap if she wasn’t going to use it? But Appollonia gave her a look that said she knew exactly what Shale was up to, and she didn’t seem annoyed by it, so Shale nodded. “Please.”

Appollonia proceeded to bandage her knee. “I bet you’re fed up with being stuck inside?”

“Sometimes,” Shale replied. When Blake’s not here, she added silently. Shale was quite content to stay inside the cabin when Blake was with her. She held back a grin. More than content.

“There you go,” Appollonia said, as she finished.

“Thanks.” Shale was keen to get some fresh air. “What’s the weather like out there?”

A smile flicked across her face at Shale’s eagerness. “Warm. Perfect to sit on Blake’s steps and rest your leg.”

Shale laughed outright. “Is that a hint?”

Appollonia’s smile widened. “A mere suggestion. Do you want me to help you?”

Shale had spent plenty of time with the healer because of her numerous injuries, and was a lot more comfortable around her. She decided to accept her assistance. “All right.”

Appollonia looked surprised, but pleased, and helped her to stand. It was a good thing she did, because Shale couldn’t keep her weight on her leg for very long.

Shale managed to walk outside, and she followed Appollonia's suggestion, seating herself on the cabin steps.

"I have some more people to treat. Will you be able to get back inside?"

Shale nodded confidently. "I'll be fine."

"Try and stay out of trouble," Appollonia teased, as she ambled away. "I'm running out of medicinal supplies."

Shale chuckled. "I'll try my best," she called after her. She glanced around the village—nothing had changed. Tilting her head back, she closed her eyes, enjoying the sun as it bathed her face. Shale didn't know how long she stayed like that, but it was quite a while.

She heard footsteps heading for her, and looked toward the sound. The queen was approaching.

Shale returned the smile, though hers was slightly anxious.

"My Queen."

"Shale. I'm glad to see that you're up and about."

"Thank you. I'm afraid Blake's not here."

"I know. It's not her I came to see." Zayla indicated the steps. "May I?"

"Certainly." Shale shuffled over slightly to give Zayla more room.

"How are things?"

"Fine, my Queen. Better than fine actually. Kale and I are finally settling in, we're finding our place here."

"Good."

"I want to thank you again for your patience. I know we haven't been easy at times."

"Nonsense." Zayla's smile grew. "Well, perhaps at times."

Shale's anxiety eased considerably, and she produced a sheepish grin.

"Blakaea tells me you've moved into her cabin, excuse me, it's your cabin now, too. I've never seen her this happy, so I owe you my thanks as well."

“I assure you it works both ways. I’ve never been this happy either,” Shale said. “I love Blake very much.”

Zayla patted her shoulder in a maternal gesture. “And I know she loves you. I’m very pleased for you both.”

They spotted Blake making her way across the village.

“I wondered why my ears were burning,” she said goodnaturedly, as she neared.

Zayla didn’t deny it. “The gods blessed me with a beautiful daughter, Blakaea. Is it so wrong of me to want to share that gift?”

An amused expression crossed Blake’s face. “That’s the nicest possible way of admitting you were gossiping.”

“We were doing no such thing,” Zayla said. “A discussion is hardly gossip.”

“Mm-hmm.” Blake didn’t sound convinced. “Shale?”

“It’s true,” Shale said, growing somewhat flustered. She didn’t want Blake to think she was talking about her behind her back. She had been, but it certainly wasn’t in the negative sense. She decided to tell Blake what was said. “I was just telling your moth...the queen, that I’ve never been as happy as I am with you, and that I love you deeply.”

Blake’s eyes shone with affection. “I love you, too. Though that’s not what I was going to say. I was going to ask how you managed to get outside.”

“Oh.” Shale blushed in embarrassment, even more so when she noticed Zayla’s hazel eyes twinkling at her. “Appollonia came by. She helped me.”

“Was she able to tell if your knee is broken?”

“It’s not broken. I just need to rest it.”

“That is good news,” Zayla said.

Shale nodded, smiling when Blake winked at her. “I think Appollonia will refuse to treat me soon,” she joked.

Mother and daughter laughed, and Shale soon joined in.

WHEN SHALE AWOKE, she found herself under close scrutiny. Blake was watching her avidly, a soft smile playing on her features.

“Good morning.”

“How long have you been up?” Shale asked, giving Blake’s naked body a squeeze. She always woke with her arms around Blake, no matter what position they slept in.

“A little while. You slept through again,” Blake noted in a pleased tone.

“Mm. Let’s hope that dream was a one off.”

“Let’s hope,” Blake said. “Have you got any thoughts about what you want to do today?”

“A couple.” Shale smirked. “Though since I can’t go very far, my ideas are revolving around you and our cabin.”

“Oh really?” Blake sounded intrigued. “And what do these ideas entail?”

Shale kissed her leisurely, only parting when they had to break away for air.

“I’m sure…” Blake had to catch her breath. “I’m sure you could convince me.”

Shale chuckled. “Actually, there is something I’d like to do when my knee is better.”

“What’s that?”

“I’d like to take you to my old village, or where it used to be. It really is beautiful around there.”

Blake lightly rubbed Shale’s stomach. “I’d like that, too.”

“Of course it would be a lot easier if we had a horse, it’s a Hades of a trek on foot. Why don’t you keep any here?”

“There’s nowhere for them to graze,” Blake said. “The nearest meadow’s a good distance away.” She paused briefly. “I’d rather walk anyway.” At Shale’s questioning look, Blake said, “Horses scare me, they’re too big.”

Shale couldn’t hold back her smile, and Blake slapped her midriff.

“Don’t laugh. I’m being serious.”

“Does that mean you can ride but don’t like to?” Shale asked. “Or that you’ve never ridden?”

“I’ve never ridden. You won’t get me near one of those things.”

“You should really know how, though. You never know when you might need to.” She sat up, flashing Blake a mischievous grin. “Come on, I’ll give you a lesson.”

Blake looked at her as though she’d lost her mind. “Shale, you’re not leaving this bed, you need to rest that leg.”

“Who said anything about leaving the bed?” Shale’s grin became seductive. “Come here.” She waited until Blake sat alongside her before giving her next instructions. “Put one leg over, straddle me.” As Blake did so, she said, “Stay on your knees.” Blake was now positioned over Shale’s lap, legs apart. “Now, there are only two motions you make on a horse, up…” Shale pushed her upward. “And down.” She pulled Blake down. “Very good. Just repeat that a few times, I want to make sure you’ve got it.” Her eyes sparkled in merriment.

“Mm-hmm.” Blake’s amusement was clear, but she moved up and down, gripping Shale’s shoulders to keep herself steady.

“Faster,” Shale said, enjoying herself immensely.

“I think I’ve got it,” Blake said wryly, though she did increase her speed.

“You need practice. I don’t want you to fall off,” Shale teased, greedily watching the bobbing of Blake’s breasts.

“We wouldn’t want that now, would we?” Blake deadpanned. Her breathing quickened, the motion clearly stimulating her. The heady scent of arousal was apparent in the air, and Blake kissed her thoroughly.

Shale’s tongue duelled with Blake’s for several long moments before Shale pulled back. “Don’t distract your teacher.” She held Blake still. “There are four different speeds a horse can go, but we’ll start with walk, nice and slow.” Shale pushed a finger inside Blake, then another, taking her time deliberately, not wanting to rush.

Blake cried out in surprise, and began to gyrate against Shale’s hand.

“No,” Shale said firmly, stopping Blake’s movements. “You’re riding, you can’t make that motion.” Blake immediately rose up, but Shale withdrew. “No,” she repeated. “Just sit in the saddle. I’ll tell you when you can go.”

Blake nodded and lowered herself. Shale re-entered her, watching as Blake struggled to hold still as Shale’s fingers slid in and out of her with long, slow strokes.

“Then there’s trot,” Shale said, picking up her pace, moving within Blake eagerly.

“Shale,” Blake pleaded, begging to be released.

“Easy, Blake. Not yet.” Shale squirmed a little. Only Blake had ever made her this aroused. She couldn’t get enough of her.

Blake was panting now, and Shale reacted strongly to it, fighting to keep herself under control.

“Canter,” she said huskily, thrusting harder into Blake, deeper. Shale couldn’t wait any longer. “Ride, Blake,” she urged.

Blake, now free, surged upward, then sank onto Shale’s hand, driving her in to the hilt. She rode hard, her breath coming in ragged gasps.

Every time Blake was impaled, she let out the most erotic sound Shale had ever heard. It was a cross between a groan, a whimper, and a grunt, and it grew progressively louder on each descent.

“And gallop,” Shale finished. Blake was driving her crazy.

To Blake’s obvious delight, Shale went even faster, pumping into her with firm, sharp thrusts. Blake moaned, her grip tightening on Shale’s shoulders as she rammed herself down, frantically bouncing onto Shale’s hand.

Shale tensed in anticipation, the stimulation too much for her. “Blake!”

Shale’s face transformed in pleasure, then when she started to tremble, Blake plunged her tongue into Shale’s mouth, kissing her through her orgasm. Her lips caught Shale’s full-throated groan, and she reflexively clenched around Shale’s fingers.

Blake let out a needy whimper when Shale flexed and wriggled inside her, then gasped as Shale’s thumb rubbed hard against her clitoris.

Blake bucked wildly. “Shale, oh!” she cried. “Oh, Shale!” Her climax was that intense, her entire body convulsed powerfully. Shale stroked her down, and Blake sagged limply against her, trusting Shale to catch her.

Shale held her close, gently cradling Blake’s head on her shoulder.

“Shale,” Blake whispered, saying her name in such a way that it sounded like a prayer.

“I’m here, Blake.” Shale affectionately tucked several strands of hair behind Blake’s ear. “I’m right here.”

Blake’s breathing began to level as she gradually calmed down. She let out a blissful sigh, wrapping her arms around Shale in a warm embrace. “If riding a horse was like that, I wouldn’t have a problem.”



Shale chuckled. "It might be, can't say I've ever tried it myself."

"Ew! Shale, I didn't mean it like that!" Blake paused, as if thinking over what she'd said. "It was badly phrased."

Shale played with her blonde locks. "I know what you meant, sweetheart."

Blake pulled back to look at her, a tender expression on her face. "Did you just call me sweetheart?"

"Sure did."

"I'm surprised it's not against your warrior code of toughness."

A quiet laugh. "I'll only use it in private. I do have a reputation to maintain."

"Does the same go for me?"

"No. You can call me what you want, when you want." Shale paused. "Why? Have you been holding back?"

Blake nodded. "I wasn't sure you'd like it. I didn't want to embarrass you."

"Blake, nothing you do could ever embarrass me. Please don't worry about that. Just be yourself. That is, after all, who I love."

Blake looked touched. "You say the most beautiful things to me."

"That's against the code, too, but I never have been one to stick to the rules."

Blake smiled and kissed her softly. "My Shale." She caressed her cheek, then kissed her again. "My love. My heart."

"HERE YOU GO." Kale handed Shale the few items she had left at camp. "There's not much." She dug into the pouch on her waist. "Found this, too." She held up a delicate woven bracelet. "You don't wear jewellery."

"It's not for me." Shale cleared her throat self-consciously. "I was making it for Blake."

Blake's head whipped up, the scroll she was perusing forgotten. She stepped out from behind the table. "Can I see?"

Shale nodded. "I'm not sure it's big enough. I might have to extend it."

Blake took it out of Kale's hands, examining the intricate pattern with a keen eye. It was made up of three separate colors, all of which were pastel shades: green, yellow, and brown.

"I thought it would go with your coloring," Shale said timidly, indicating her eyes and hair.

"It's beautiful," Blake said, smiling brightly. She slipped it onto her wrist. "It fits perfectly." She kissed the top of Shale's head, then moved down and captured her lips. "Thank you."

Shale was pleased that Blake liked it. "You're welcome." She pointed at Kale, forestalling her comment. "Not a word."

Kale's mouth clicked shut, drawing a giggle from Blake. It soon opened again though. "Are you up to seeing my cabin, Shale? I'm all moved in."

"Sure." Shale scooted off the bed, taking Kale's hand to pull herself upright.

"You want to come along, Blake?"

Blake smiled at Kale, but shook her head. "No, thanks. I need to finish this." She gestured to the scroll she'd been reading.

"You know where we are if you complete it," Shale added, leaning heavily on Kale and hobbling toward the door.

"All right, sweetheart. I might join you later."

Kale smirked at the term of endearment, but she kept her teasing to herself.

It took awhile, but they made it to Kale's cabin.

They went inside, and Shale whistled. "It's nearly as nice as mine and Blake's."

Kale snorted. "No accounting for taste."

"I tell you what would look great, Kale, you should put that deerskin on the wall there." Shale pointed to above the bed.

Kale rubbed her neck, her way of showing embarrassment. "I, uh...gave that to Amber."

Shale's brow shot up in disbelief. "And you have the nerve to rib me about making that bracelet for Blake?"

"I didn't rib you."

“You were going to,” Shale said, before chuckling. “Did she like it?”

A smile touched Kale’s lips. “Yes. It’s hanging on her wall.”

“Do you think you and Amber might get together?”

The smile left Kale’s face. “No. She’s already tried. I told her I wasn’t interested.”

“What? Why? She’s exactly your type.”

Kale frowned at her. “You know exactly why, Shale.”

“Yes, but...look at me and Blake, you and Amber could have that, too. I know you want that, so don’t try and convince me otherwise.”

“I’m not going to risk myself like that again. No matter how much I like Amber.”

“We’ve got a fresh start here, Kale. Why not make the most of it? I know it’s hard for you, but what if Amber’s the one? Like Blake is for me. Are you really going to let her slip through your fingers?”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It is if you let it be. You always said that if you want someone enough you can make it work. I know it didn’t work out with Aeron, but she didn’t want you enough. Amber does, I can see it when she looks at you.” Shale knew that Kale wanted to believe, her tough exterior crumbling for just a moment. “Do you really want to be alone, Kale? Forever? It’s true you’ve got me, but we both know it’s not the same.”

“No. I don’t want to be alone.”

“Do you love Amber?”

“I care about her a lot,” Kale said, trying to skirt around her feelings.

Shale sighed. “Kale, answer the question.”

Kale hesitated, and then nodded. “Yes. Yes, I do.”

“Then that’s all that matters.” Shale grasped her shoulder. “I know why you were so awful to Blake. Because you wanted to protect me from what you went through. You did it because you wanted the best for me, just like I’m trying to do for you now. You deserve to be happy. Allow yourself that.”

“I can’t just forget what’s happened.”

“I’m not asking you to.”

“That’s exactly what you are asking. You’re telling me to put it behind me, to move on. I can’t do that.”

“I know it’s difficult,” Shale said, her voice steady.

“It didn’t happen to you!” Kale exploded. “Just because you were there doesn’t mean you know how it felt.”

Shale winced. “I know that. I also know that you’re hurting, and scared.”

“Scared? Don’t be soft. You’re spending too much time with Blake.”

Shale’s lips tightened. “She’s got nothing to do with this. You are scared, Kale. Whether you admit it or not is irrelevant. Running from this won’t solve anything, you’re only hurting yourself.”

“You’re hurting my ears with this rubbish,” Kale snapped.

“I’m only trying to help.”

“Well you’re not!” Kale yelled. “You’re just trying to pair me off so you can spend more time with Blake.”

“Now who’s talking rubbish?”

“Just because everything’s perfect for you, doesn’t mean it will be for me.”

“And it never will be if you keep acting like this. Stop running, Kale.”

“I. Don’t. Run.” Kale bit off each word. “I’m a warrior.”

“Even warriors get scared, Kale.”

“Not me. And you never used to either. If this is what love does to you, I’d rather stay clear of the whole mess.” Kale shook her head, her disapproval clear. “You always were too soft.”

Shale flinched, the words stinging her. She had no reason to be ashamed of her emotions. Blake had told her as much. And Shale believed her. “No, Kale. You were too hard. You still are.”

Shale limped past Kale, struggling somewhat with no support. Kale moved to help her.

“No,” Shale said. “You don’t need my help, I don’t need yours.” She waited until the door clicked shut behind her before teetering down the steps.

## Chapter Ten

SHALE BARELY MADE it back to their cabin, much less up the steps. She managed them somehow, and got the door open. She couldn't go any farther though, her leg threatening to give way at any moment.

"Blake, could you..." She didn't need to finish her sentence, Blake was already moving.

Blake was at Shale's side in an instant, an annoyed look on her face. "Why isn't Kale helping you?"

"We had an argument." Shale bent her leg, raising it slightly off the floor.

Blake placed Shale's arm over her shoulders, taking most of her weight. "Take your time," she said, as Shale hopped forward.

When Shale sat, she lifted her injured leg onto the bed using her hands. "Ow," she mumbled, straightening it out in front of her. "That wasn't smart."

Blake squeezed her forearm gently. "Kale still should have helped you."

"I wouldn't let her." Shale shrugged sheepishly as Blake frowned at her. "As I said, it wasn't smart. I was proving a point."

"A rather painful point by the look of you." Blake sat also, and began to rub Shale's tense back.

"I'm all right," Shale said. "I just don't like it when Kale and I disagree."

"I know you don't." She pressed her lips to Shale's shoulder. "What did Kale say?"

"It was my fault, actually." Shale saw the surprised expression, then the scepticism. "I'm not taking too much responsibility either. I started it, though I should have known better." Shale's eyes flicked to the table where Blake had been working. "Sorry, I know you're busy."

"It can wait."

"No, I'll tell you later. I know it's important."

“Not as important as you.” Blake’s hand moved up into dark hair. “Tell me what happened,” she requested quietly.

“I tried to convince her to give it a go with Amber,” Shale said. “Apparently Amber tried, but Kale knocked her back.”

“Poor Amber,” Blake said. “I’ll have to go and see her.”

Shale nodded. “Kale admitted that she loves her, but she can’t move on from Aeron.”

“She’s scared it will happen again.”

“Precisely. That’s what I said.”

Blake raised her eyebrows. “I bet that went over well.”

“Kale told me that warriors shouldn’t feel fear, and that I’m too soft.” Shale tried to keep her tone light, nonchalant. She must have failed, because Blake took hold of her hand.

“And that’s why you walked back by yourself? To prove you weren’t?”

“That, and she didn’t want my help, so I wasn’t going to accept hers.” A flash of hurt crossed Shale’s features. “She looked so disappointed in me.”

“She’s just lashing out because you hit a nerve. I’m sure she didn’t mean it.” Blake’s green eyes locked onto clear blue. “And you are certainly not soft.”

“I know,” Shale replied. “I told her that she’s too hard.”

“You did, huh? Good for you.”

“OH, GREAT,” KALE said dryly. “Now you’ve come to have a go at me.”

“May I come in?” Blake asked stiffly. She pushed past Kale and into the cabin without waiting for a response.

“Be my guest,” Kale muttered, closing the door behind Blake. “Don’t tell me she sent you over to fight her battles for her?”

“Shale doesn’t even know I’m here. She thinks I’ve gone to see Amber.”

Kale gestured to the door. “Don’t let me stop you.”

“I’m going there next, but first you’re going to go and make up with Shale.”

Kale raised a challenging eyebrow. “I am? Why would I want to do that?”

“Because you care. Because you’ve upset her and you’re the only one who can make it right.”

Kale faltered. “She’s upset?”

“Of course she is. Shale hates fighting with you.”

“This has nothing to do with you, Blake,” Kale said. “It’s between us.”

“When it affects my partner, it affects me. Your twins only rule won’t work with me, Kale.”

“I’m the one who should be upset. Shale’s trying to tell me how to live my life.” Kale glared at her. “Though I expect she’s already told you all about it.”

“Shale’s just trying to help,” Blake responded simply, neither confirming nor denying Kale’s accusation. “I would have left you to come on your own terms, but I know you take a few days to cool down. And I’m not having Shale upset for that long.”

“Shale doesn’t have to wait, she knows where I am.”

“With her leg? Real mature, Kale. And you’re supposed to be the elder.”

“Just go, Blake.” She threw Blake’s own words back at her. “I’ll see you in a few days.”

Blake didn’t budge. “Shale thinks you’re disappointed in her.”

Confusion appeared on Kale’s face. “I’m not disappointed in her. Why would she think that?”

“You called her soft. To a warrior, that’s a pretty big insult.”

“I didn’t mean it. I was just...mouthing off.”

“As you always do.”

“She insulted me, too,” Kale said.

“Hers was true,” Blake said, point blank. “And it wasn’t an insult, you are afraid. Shale was merely stating the truth.”

“And I wasn’t?”

“No. You weren’t. You were deliberately being mean. And I know why.”

“Oh? Enlighten me.”

“Because you don’t want Shale to realise that she’s so much stronger than you.”

Kale laughed. “You are kidding, right?”

“Not in the slightest. Shale is sensitive, I’ll give you that, but it’s through that where she finds her strength. Shale’s watched out for you her whole life, cleaning up after you, taking the blame, the responsibility for your mistakes. You say what you like, when you like, because you know you can get away with it. You know that Shale will pick up the pieces. And yet Shale never complains, never moans about it, she just gets on with it, because you’re her family.

“Shale doesn’t shy away from anything, whereas you go through life avoiding everything. Nothing gets to you, nothing gets in, you won’t let it. That’s not strength, Kale, that’s weakness. Shale isn’t afraid to live, or to love, or to let people in, despite what she’s been through. That’s real strength.”

Kale was silent for a long moment, staring down Blake confrontationally. Kale was the first to look away, recognising the truth in Blake’s words. “Please go.”

Blake tipped her head. “Please don’t keep Shale waiting too long.”

“I JUST HEARD about you and Kale. I know you wanted to be more than friends. Are you all right?”

Amber ushered Blake inside. “No. But I’ll get there.”

Blake gathered Amber in her arms, giving her a supportive squeeze.

“I feel so stupid, Blake. I truly believed Kale felt the same way.”

Blake knew that Kale did, but she wouldn’t divulge that information. She drew back to look at Amber. “There’s no reason for you to feel stupid, Amber. I’m sure Kale was flattered by the attention.”

“She was certainly nice about the whole thing. Understanding.”

Blake was relieved to hear that Kale had let her down gently, she knew how forthright Kale could be. “Good. I’m glad.” She noticed the new skin on the wall. “Keeping busy I see. Nice catch.”

“Kale gave it to me.”



“She did?” Blake asked in surprise. She was able to place the skin immediately from its size, recognising it to be the large stag that Kale had shot a while back. Blake unconsciously fingered her bracelet, it seemed neither twin was afraid of a little hard work when it came to giving gifts.

Amber noticed and lifted Blake’s arm, studying the woven jewellery. “That’s lovely, Blake. Shale’s got talent.”

“How did you know she made it?”

“The colors. It’s clearly been made for you.”

“I could have made it.”

“Ha. I don’t think so. You can barely stitch.”

Blake frowned, then chuckled, nodding in defeat. “Good point. May the gods help me when I want to give Shale something. I’m not exactly creative.”

“That’s not true,” Amber said. “You’re good at drawing. Besides, warriors are easy to get presents for.”

“They are?”

“Sure. Just get her a weapon.”

Blake laughed. “That’s hardly personal, Amber.”

“True.” She smiled. “But I guarantee she’ll like it.”

A sudden thought struck Blake. “I know, I’ll design a set of bracers, and get the blacksmiths to make them.”

“That’s brilliant. Personal and practical.”

Blake looked pleased. “Why don’t you come round tomorrow? Or would you rather I came here?” At Amber’s questioning look, she added, “Kale might be at ours.”

“It’s fine, Blake, I’ll come to you. I see Kale every day to spar. We’re still good friends.”

“I just thought you might want some time...”

Amber shook her head. “It’s fine. It was a bit awkward to start with, but now things are getting back to normal.”

“Great.” Blake gave her another hug. “If you need to talk...” “I know where you are,” Amber finished for her.

IT WAS EVENING before Kale turned up, but Blake knew that was a considerable improvement from her usual sulking time. Blake kept her head buried in her work, giving them some privacy. Normally, she would have gone outside, but it was raining heavily.

Kale got straight to the point. "I'm sorry, all right? I shouldn't have spoken to you like that."

"I'm sorry, too. I know how you feel about relationships, and I shouldn't have pushed."

"And I'm not disappointed in you either. I don't want you to think that."

Shale glanced to Blake questioningly, but Blake was keeping a low profile, and wouldn't meet her gaze. "That's how it seemed to me."

"Well you're wrong," Kale said. "That's not how it is."

Shale remained silent for a long, awkward moment. "All right," she finally said. "I accept that."

Kale nodded in something very close to relief. "I'll see you in the morning, Shale. Goodnight, Blake."

"Goodnight."

"Kale?" Shale called to her, stopping Kale in her tracks.

Kale looked back, smiling when she saw Shale's outstretched arm. She walked over and clasped it, locking their forearms together.

Shale returned her smile. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Kale nodded again, and then left the cabin.

Blake peered across at Shale, who was regarding her with a serious expression.

"Blake," Shale let out a heavy breath. "Come here a moment." She waited until Blake sat in front of her. "Why did you do that?"

"I couldn't stand to see you upset. Not when I could do something about it."

"So you lied to me?"

"No! I did go to see Amber, I just didn't mention that I had seen Kale also."

“Blake.” Shale shook her head. “I don’t know what to say.”

“I was just trying to make things right between you. I’m sorry if you feel I stuck my nose in, but I won’t stand back and see you hurt. You can’t ask me to do that.” She took a breath to continue, but Shale spoke first.

“Blake?”

“Yes?” she asked hesitantly.

“I love you.”

“You’re not mad?”

“Of course not.” Shale brushed her thumb across Blake’s lips, then leaned in and kissed her. “That’s the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Shale draped her arms around Blake’s neck, who in turn encircled her waist. “I think you should be rewarded.”

“I didn’t do it for a reward,” Blake said.

Shale’s eyes sparkled. “Does that mean you don’t want it?”

Blake chuckled. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

Shale grinned, and pushed Blake slowly down onto the bed.

BLAKE AWOKE LATE, much later than she usually slept. She instantly missed the feel of waking up in Shale’s arms, and wondered where Shale had got to. She didn’t have to speculate for very long. As she opened her eyes, she saw that Shale was sitting at the foot of the bed, bending and flexing her injured knee, trying to strengthen it. Shale had her back to her, but when Blake stretched, Shale glanced over her shoulder and smiled.

“Why didn’t you wake me up?”

“You were tired. And you didn’t mention that you had any meetings this morning, so I didn’t see the harm in it.”

Blake yawned widely. "It's because of you I'm so tired," she teased. "If you weren't so damned attractive, I'd get a decent night's sleep." Blake crawled over to a chuckling Shale, her hand snaking around from behind and covering Shale's breast. "We don't all have the stamina of a warrior, you know."

Shale shook her head. "There's nothing wrong with your stamina. I've been with warriors who've had a lot less than you."

Blake was pleased to hear that. She began to play with Shale's nipple, feeling it respond immediately to her touch.

Shale stopped exercising her knee. "Blake?"

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"I take it you're not tired now?"

"No." Blake grinned. "I assure you I'm fully rested."

Shale turned, meeting Blake's mouth with her own. "I might have to take advantage of that."

"Please do."

They kissed again, but were interrupted by a knock on the door.

Shale groaned, and with obvious reluctance, tore her lips away from Blake's. "Not now, Kale," she yelled. "Kind of busy at the moment."

Kale was heard sniggering outside. "You told me to come round in the morning."

"No, you said that. I said I'll see you today, not necessarily this morning."

"I get it. I'll come back later." Kale laughed. "I'm glad to see some rumors are true in this village."

"Goodbye, Kale," Shale said.

Blake chuckled, hearing Kale's laughter fade as she left. "Now, where were we?" She answered her own question by kissing Shale passionately.

"AMBER, HOLD UP," Kale called, jogging over to her.

Amber stopped. “Hi, Kale. What’s up?”

“You’re not headed to see Blake, are you?”

“Actually, I am. Why?”

“I’ve just come from there. They’re busy at the moment.”

“Oh. Are you sure? Blake’s expecting me.”

“Shale was expecting me, too.” Kale smirked. “Let’s just say they’re somewhat...indisposed.”

Amber burst into laughter. “Thanks for warning me. I’ll come back after dinner, I’m not going to risk disturbing anything.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Kale said. “So are you free till then?” Since Amber had planned to spend time with Blake, and Blake was now busy, Kale knew that Amber was indeed free, but she asked anyway, giving Amber an out if she wanted one. At Amber’s nod, Kale said, “I am, too. Do you want to do something together?”

“Like what?”

“Go hunting, or for a walk, or we can spar a little if you like. Whatever you want, I don’t mind.”

“Well, I don’t fancy a busted knee, so sparring’s out,” Amber teased, causing Kale to roll her eyes.

“That happened once,” Kale said, her lips curling upward.

“Uh-huh, and I don’t want to be number two.”

“You will be if you don’t stop going on about it.”

“Ooo, that sounds like fighting talk to me.”

“It was, but a certain red-head’s too chicken to fight me.”

“And that certain red-head’s not stupid enough to fall for your baiting words either.”

“All right, what do you want to do instead?”

“I’m starving already, so...” Amber looked to Kale for her reaction.

“Hunting it is,” Kale replied. They walked the short distance to Kale’s cabin to collect her hunting gear, and she bumped Amber playfully with her hip. “I’ll bring something back for Shale and Blake, too. I don’t think they’ll be getting out much.”

Amber laughed. “They probably won’t have the energy.”

“YOU GO AND knock, I’ll wait here,” Amber said. “Here, I’ll take those.” She took the freshly plucked birds out of Kale’s hands before she could protest.

“Surely you don’t think they’re still at it?”

“I’m not chancing it. You go and see.” Amber pushed her toward the cabin.

“Why me?”

“She’s your twin.”

“Blake’s your friend,” Kale shot back.

“Actually, Blake’s our friend, but Shale’s only your twin.”

Kale opened her mouth to argue, but had nothing to respond with. She sighed. “Fine.”

Amber gave her a smug grin. “Make sure to make plenty of noise when you approach.”

Kale narrowed her eyes at the giggling Amber. “I don’t need to make noise, Shale will sense me.”

“And that’s another reason why you’re the one going,” Amber said, giggling harder.

Kale shook her head, chuckling. She jogged over to the cabin and went noisily up the steps. She glanced behind to Amber, who was doubled over laughing.

Blake opened the door before Kale had a chance to knock. “Since I know you’re trained in stealth, I’ll assume you’re making that racket on purpose.”

“Just checking.”

“Just checking what? That the steps are sound?” Blake noticed Amber, who was waiting across the village. “What’s Amber doing over there?”

“It’s safe,” Kale called, sending Amber into another set of hysterics as she made her way over.

Blake seemed puzzled. “Safe?” Kale’s droll look filled her in on what they were referring to. “Oh for Zeus’s sake. You two are worse than a couple of kids.”

That set them both off laughing again.

“We brought you something to eat,” Amber said, in between laughs. She handed the birds to Blake.

“Thanks. I’m starved.”

“I bet,” Kale muttered, receiving a slap from Amber as she dissolved into laughter yet again.

Blake shook her head, though she didn’t look annoyed. “Come on in.”

“Amber,” Shale greeted, clearly pleased to see her.

“Hi, Shale.” Amber gestured to the healing wound on Shale’s forearm. “You’ll get a good scar from that.”

“It’s definitely a warrior thing,” Blake noted despairingly.

Shale spared Blake an amused glance before replying to Amber. “Yes, it’s better than I thought it was going to be.”

“Am I the only sane person here?” Blake asked. “I’m the only one who’s glad it wasn’t any worse.”

“That’s not true,” Shale said. “Appollonia was relieved, too.”

Kale nodded. “And that’s merely because a smaller wound means less stitches, and less work for her. What’s your excuse, Blake?”

“Well excuse me for not wanting to see the remnants of where my partner was almost hacked to bits! I must just be sensitive about that kind of thing.”

Shale laughed loudly. “When you put it like that, it does seem kind of strange that we like them.”

“Thank you,” Blake said.

“Show her the scar on your back,” Kale said. “Wait till you see this one, Amber, it’s exquisite.”

Shale grinned and turned around, raising her top as she did so.

“Ooh, that’s a great one,” Amber said.

Blake buried her head in her hands. “I’m not going to win this debate.”

“THIS MEAT TASTES wonderful,” Shale said, around a mouthful. She clasped Kale’s shoulder, who was sitting alongside her at the table. “Thanks for bringing some for us.”

Kale grunted and tipped her head. “So, Blake, do you have any other blood kin? Or is there just your mother?”

If Blake was surprised by Kale’s curiosity, she didn’t show it. “No, there’s only my mother.”

“What about you, Amber?” Kale asked.

“Just me,” she responded, a wistful smile appearing. “Though some of my friends I consider to be family,” Amber said, looking pointedly at Blake.

Blake grinned, and squeezed Amber’s arm. “Likewise.”

“We had a friend like that in our old tribe.” Shale started to chuckle, and she glanced to Kale. “Tell them about the time we went after those boars with Senna.”

Kale let out a short laugh, and eagerly leaned forward, resting her weight on her forearms. “When we were younger, and a lot more reckless—”

Shale snorted in amusement. “No more reckless than you are now.”

Kale playfully nudged her, then continued on, “We decided to try and impress our queen and the other warriors. We thought that if we brought a sumptuous feast home, we’d be the toast of the village.” Kale nodded to Shale, who effortlessly picked up the story where she’d left off.

“We set off early morning, and came across some boar tracks. We followed them, and were lucky enough to find an abandoned piglet. It had fallen into a hole made by an uprooted tree, and since it was raining, the piglet couldn’t get out of the muddy trench, so the sow had left. Senna got the piglet out easily enough, but we weren’t satisfied with one. We all agreed to let it loose, hoping it would lead us back to its den.”

“By this point,” Kale pitched in, “it was raining so heavily the boar tracks had been washed away. The piglet was fast for such a small creature, but we managed to keep up. It led us straight to its den, but unfortunately for us, it contained four sows, and no less than ten piglets.”



“Uh-oh,” Blake murmured.

Kale snickered. “We didn’t realise until we were on top of them, and we sprinted right into their nest.”

Amber’s eyes widened. “What did you do?”

“We turned and sprinted right on out,” Kale said, amidst laughter. “The roles had suddenly reversed, and we were being chased by them. Shale and I bolted up a tree, and Senna tried to follow.”

Shale spoke up once more, “Since it was slippery, Senna couldn’t manage to get up the tree. We grabbed her wrist and hauled her up, but not before one of the boars skewered her with its tusk. Right in the backside.”

“Ouch,” Blake said, obviously amused.

“I think she cursed all the gods on Olympus,” Kale said. “And instead of bringing home a feast, we brought back an injured Senna.”

“We never lived it down,” Shale added with a chuckle.

“I bet Senna wasn’t proud of that scar,” Amber said drolly.

“No, but she was always showing it off,” Shale said. “She had a great sense of humor. Never afraid to laugh at herself.” Shale realised that this was the first time she’d thought about her tribe without being overwhelmed by sadness. She recalled several other fond memories, and met Kale’s eyes for a long moment.

Twin smiles appeared—they were beginning to heal.

## Chapter Eleven

“I WISH I could have met Senna,” Blake said quietly, her mouth close to Shale’s ear.

“You and she would’ve got on well,” Shale said.

“How close were you?”

Shale lifted her head to look at Blake. “Do you mean were we ever intimate?”

“Yes.”

“No. Kale neither. We all grew up together, she was like another sister.”

Blake kissed Shale’s collarbone consolingly. “I’m sorry.” She snuggled into Shale, feeling the arms around her tighten as she did so. Blake was nearly asleep when Shale next spoke, but the question roused her completely.

“Do you think she’s mad at us?”

“Who?”

“Senna.”

Blake’s brow creased, and she peered up at Shale. “Why would she?”

“Because we haven’t avenged her or the others. For settling down here and building a new life, without killing the people who slaughtered them first.”

“Shale, you know why you couldn’t do that. If you had followed those tracks you would have put us all at risk.”

“I know, but that doesn’t change what happened to them. They still need to be avenged.”

“And we will avenge them. All of them,” Blake said. “But when the time is right.”

“When I pass over, I want to be able to look them in the eye, to tell them that we got the bastards who did this.”

“And you will. Senna won’t be mad at you, sweetheart, she’ll just be glad that you’ve found a new home. She would want you to be happy.”

A smile touched Shale’s lips. “I am happy.”

Blake kissed her. “Me, too.”

“YOU DO REALISE I’m going to be the laughing stock of the whole village,” Blake moaned.

“Why?” Shale asked, an innocent expression on her face.

Blake narrowed her eyes. “You know exactly why, Shale. Look.” She indicated the love bite on her neck.

Shale held back a grin. “It’s hardly noticeable.”

“It’s huge!” Blake said. “I’ve got a meeting with the counsel first thing. And my mother’s going to be there.”

Shale broke into laughter, suppressing it when Blake glared at her.

“If my mother asks, I’m sending her straight to you,” Blake said.

Shale sobered instantly. “You wouldn’t?”

“I would,” Blake said, though her twinkling eyes gave her away.

“I’m sorry. I got a little carried away.” Shale smirked. “Next time, I’ll make sure it’s where no one can see it.”

Blake raised a single eyebrow. “Oh you will, will you?”

Shale nodded cockily. She got out of bed, limped to where Blake was dressing, and wound her arms around Blake’s waist. Shale drew her close, kissing her gently. “Forgive me?”

Blake linked her hands behind Shale’s neck. “Only if you kiss me again.”

Shale smiled. “I’m sure I can manage that.”

“I’M NOT QUITE sure I understand.”

“What’s to understand, Kale? I merely want to go for a walk, get some exercise. Now are you coming or what?”

“Sure. Though I’m surprised you’re up for any more exercise. I thought Blake was keeping you pretty busy.”

“On second thought, I’ll go myself,” Shale said, heading outside.

“All right, I’ll be good.”

Shale shook her head at Kale’s mischievous grin. “Why don’t I believe you?”

“Trust issues?”

Shale scoffed. “That must be it,” she replied wryly. “Will you fetch me a staff?”

“There’s no way you’re sparring, Shale. Blake would kill me if I let you.”

Shale chuckled. “She’d kill me, too. It’s to lean on, for support.”

Kale frowned at herself for the misunderstanding. “Of course. I’ll go and get one.”

Shale found a blank piece of parchment on the table and wrote a short note, explaining where she had gone. She didn’t want Blake to worry.

Kale soon returned, staff in hand, and tossed it to Shale, who caught it nimbly.

It wasn’t until they had left the village that Shale had to use the staff, and she was quite pleased by her progress. She pushed on, determined to go as far as she could.

They walked a good distance, Shale having to stop and rest three times before she accepted defeat. “That’s it. I’ll have to turn back.”

Kale patted her shoulder. “You’ve done well.”

Shale grinned at her, and they started to retrace their steps. They hadn’t gone very far when Shale stumbled, though it wasn’t down to her knee giving way.

Kale’s fast reflexes saved Shale from falling, her strong hands keeping her upright. “Steady.”

Shale didn’t acknowledge her words, her head whipping around to look behind her. She stared into the surrounding trees. Her gaze flicked to Kale, then back to the trees, confusion ruling her features.

“Shale?”

“You are here, aren’t you, Kale?”

“What?” Kale frowned. “Of course I’m here.” Her hands squeezed Shale’s waist to verify her statement.

“Then how come I can sense you over there?”

“What?” Kale asked again. “I don’t— What?”

“You know how we can sense each other’s presence?” Shale didn’t wait for a reply. “I know you’re here, but I can sense you over there...only, it’s not quite you...it’s slightly different.”

“Have you bumped your head recently? Maybe when making love to Blake? It’s easily done, in the heat of the—”

“Kale, I’m serious.”

“I know. That’s what’s worrying me.”

“Just see if you can pick up on it,” Shale said.

“How am I supposed to sense myself?”

“Just do it. Besides, I told you, it’s not quite you.”

“Well that makes all the difference,” Kale said. She appraised the area briefly. “Nothing.”

“Try, Kale. Focus.”

Kale sighed, but did as Shale wanted. She concentrated, her gaze going inward. After a long delay, Kale shook her head. “Nothing. There’s nothing near us.”

“I didn’t say it was near us, it’s right on the edge of my senses. Try searching farther away.”

Kale hesitated, then tried once more.

“Hurry, it’s fading.”

Kale abruptly straightened in surprise. “Something’s there. It’s like you, but... It’s gone.”

Shale sat down, her legs suddenly shaky. “What do you think it was?”

“Mass hysteria,” Kale quipped.

“I think it was Zale.”

“What? Are you mad? What would a farmer’s boy be doing on Amazon territory?”

“It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“None of this makes sense.”

“That would explain my dream, too. I had man’s hands, Kale.”

“Not that again. You need to let it go.”

“I think he was there when our tribe was killed. That’s why I saw it happening, through his eyes. He gutted Senna. He’s an animal.”

“Why would this only start now, Shale? You’ve never experienced this before.”

“I don’t know. I’d guess that we connected through sharing the same event, or maybe it’s his close proximity to us. I have no idea, but it is happening.”

“All right, let’s just say I believe you for a moment. If we can sense him, surely he can sense us? And if he’s as bad as you say, why doesn’t he just come and kill us?”

“The same reason you didn’t sense him, or have the dream that I had. You’re not as receptive as I am, and from what I saw in that dream, Zale certainly isn’t either.” Shale thought for a moment. “And it’s unlikely he would know what it was anyway, even if he did sense us.”

Kale shook her head. “We’ve both been out in the sun too long. Let’s get back.”

“You wouldn’t have even noticed his presence if I hadn’t pointed it out. There’s no one to point us out to him,” Shale said.

“And I wish you hadn’t pointed it out,” Kale said, her annoyance clear. “Now I admit it was strange, but that doesn’t automatically make it Zale, so just drop it.”

“But—”

“Shale, we share the same blood. Do you really want to believe that our own brother is capable of that? Not just killing our tribe, but massacring them? If that’s true, what does it say about us?”

“DID YOU ENJOY your walk?” Blake asked, when the twins entered the cabin.

“Sort of,” Shale replied.

“No,” Kale said bluntly. “I’ll see you later, Shale.”

Shale caught her wrist. “Kale, I really think we should talk about this.”

“Well I don’t.” She looked down to where Shale was restraining her, but the hold wasn’t released.

“You two haven’t had another fight, have you?” Blake glanced to each of them, and they shook their heads.

“Something happened when we were out, it...unsettled us,” Shale said.

“What was it?”

“Nothing. Shale’s merely losing her mind.”

“I am not. You sensed Zale, too.”

Blake was surprised. “Zale?”

“It wasn’t Zale,” Kale said. “We don’t know what it was. It’s never happened before, and it’s not likely to either. Shale’s simply speculating.”

“It has happened before. I told you, my dream.”

Kale groaned loudly. “Don’t start, Shale. Blake doesn’t want to hear about your delusions.”

“Actually, I do,” Blake said.

Kale rolled her eyes. “I should’ve known.”

Shale smiled at Blake. “I think that’s why I had man’s hands, I was seeing it from his point of view.”

“You think he was there?”

“Yes. I saw exactly how Senna died, how Zale killed her. How would I know that?”

“You saw her body,” Kale said. “You could easily imagine the rest.”

“Why would I want to? You might not believe me about the dream, Kale, but I saw your face, you sensed him too.”

“I sensed something, but only briefly. It was over too quickly, it could have been anything.”

“Don’t you think it could be possible?” Blake asked.

“No. We’re not like that,” Kale said.

“I know you’re not, but what about him?”

“He shares our blood. He’s a part of us,” Kale said. “I won’t believe that a part of me, or Shale, is capable of murdering our sisters. I won’t.”

Blake frowned, and tried to make her see reason. “He’s a separate person, Kale. His actions don’t reflect on you or Shale.”

“We’re linked. We shared the same womb. He’s as much a part of us as we are to him. If Shale’s right, and he did slay our tribe, then a part of us did as well.”

“That’s absurd, Kale.” Blake glanced to Shale. “Please tell me you don’t feel the same way?”

Shale thought for a long moment. “No, I don’t. Zale’s actions are his own.” She turned to Kale. “Deep down you know this. We could never be a part of that. Never.” Shale held her gaze until Kale nodded. “Though I do think we have to be connected to him in some way, or else I wouldn’t have had the dream, or have been able to sense him.”

“Assuming it is Zale,” Kale added.

“If it is Zale,” Shale said. “Whether we’re connected or not, he needs to be stopped. We need to stop him.”

“WE WERE IMPRESSED by that waterfall we passed, weren’t we, Kale?” Shale looked at Kale, who was busy refilling her plate.

“Yes,” Kale said, before digging into her meal. “It was quite a sight.”

“Did you just pass the one?” Amber asked. At Shale’s nod, she said, “If you’d kept going, there’s an even better waterfall. It flows directly into a large lake.”

“Is it much farther?” Shale asked.

“Yes, quite a bit,” Blake replied.

Shale frowned slightly. She couldn’t have gone any farther, at least not yet.

“Why don’t we go when your knee is healed?” Kale said.

“I don’t know how long it’ll take to completely heal, and the best weather is here now.” Shale bit into a chicken leg. “I think you three should go.”

Blake shook her head. “I’m not going without you.”

Shale swallowed her food. “Why not? The four of us can go another time.” She gestured to Kale. “I know Kale’s dying to see it.”

Everyone turned to Kale, and she shrugged. “It’s true. I love waterfalls.” When both Blake and Amber raised their eyebrows at her in surprise, Kale scowled. “What?” she said. “I can’t like nature?”



Amber held up a hand in defence, causing Shale to chuckle.

“I think you should go,” Shale said. When no one spoke, she added, “You shouldn’t all miss out just because I’m injured. I tell you what, I’ll give my knee another week, and if it’s still not up to the walk by then, you three go without me.”

“All right.” Kale nodded. “That seems fair enough.”

“I’M NOT GOING.”

“Blake, we’ve talked about this. I really think you should go.”

“I’d rather stay here and spend time with you, Shale.”

“And I appreciate that, but we can spend time together when you get back. I want you to spend some time with Kale, get to know her better. This is the perfect opportunity.” Shale paused. “Please?”

It’s important to me.”

Blake sighed. “Fine.”

Shale could tell that Blake still wasn’t happy about leaving her behind. “It’s not for very long,” Shale said. “I’ll meet you at noon in the meadow. By that large boulder.”

“All right,” Blake said. “But only because it means so much to you.”

Shale smiled and kissed her. “Thank you. Now go.” She gave Blake a light push toward the cabin door. “And make sure you have a good time.”

SHALE REACHED THE gigantic boulder a little before noon. Even though she was disappointed that she hadn’t been able to go to the waterfall, she was relatively impressed by the recovery of her knee.

She perched on the edge of the rock, giving her leg a chance to rest before the others arrived. She knew Blake and Kale had been getting on a lot better recently, and Shale hoped that the journey today would help to solidify their friendship.

She sensed Kale approaching, but it was from the completely wrong direction. That set off warning bells in her head, and she picked up on the slight difference—it wasn't Kale.

Her ears detected the sound of several hooves, and Shale stood, listening intently. Despite the trees surrounding the meadow, the horses were moving quickly, and they were headed straight for her.

Shale knew that with her leg, she would never reach the cover of the trees in time, so she circled behind the boulder, hiding herself from view.

Six horses emerged into the meadow, and the leader, a tall helmeted man, pointed toward where Shale was taking refuge.

“There,” he ordered, in a voice so deep it was almost a growl.

Shale's heart started to hammer in her chest. Was that Zale? She was drawn to him above the others, but the faceplate on his helmet was down, so she couldn't be certain.

More importantly, if it was Zale, had he sensed Shale was here?

KALE OFFERED HER hand to Blake, assisting her as she scrambled down a steep incline. “Thanks, Kale.” Blake smiled at her. “Who knew you were this chivalrous?”

Kale scoffed. “Don't get carried away, I'm only doing it so you don't slip. Shale would never let me hear the end of it if you did.”

“Is that right?” Blake asked amusedly, seemingly unconvinced by her tough act.

Kale held out her hand to Amber, scowling at Blake when she giggled.

“I've got it,” Amber told her.

Kale lowered her hand but didn't move away.

An instant later, Amber cursed as the ground she was standing on shifted, throwing her off balance. She fell forward, straight into Kale's awaiting arms.

Kale stood her upright, but her hands still remained on Amber's waist. She felt Amber's warm grip on her shoulders, and their eyes held for a long moment. Kale cleared her throat and pulled away.

“You planned that,” Amber said playfully.

Kale chuckled, relieved that Amber could see the humor in the situation. She didn't want things to become awkward again.

Blake, who had been studiously examining the ground, looked up at the sound.

"Thanks for catching me," Amber said. "But next time, remind me to take your hand."

Kale shrugged, an impish look crossing her face. "I offered. It's not my fault you're so obstinate."

Amber put her hands on her hips. "So if the roles had been reversed, you'd have taken my hand?"

A short laugh. "No."

"Well then, there you go."

Blake shook her head at the two of them. "Warriors. I just don't understand you sometimes. Surely it's common sense to accept help when needed? Why you see it as a sign of weakness, I'll never know." She shook her head again, and they both grinned at her in response.

Kale faced Amber once more. "But I wouldn't have fallen," she added egotistically.

Amber burst into laughter. "If you say so."

"I do."

"I guess we know which twin got the modesty," Amber teased. "Speaking of which, we'd best get moving, we're going to be late as it is."

THE HORSES STOPPED alongside the enormous boulder, and the riders dismounted. Shale kept out of sight, keeping herself pressed close against the rock.

"We'll stop here to rest," the leader said.

Shale let out a relieved breath. Zale hadn't sensed her.

"They have to be around here somewhere."

"Sir, we've searched half this region."

“Then we’ll search the other half!” he bellowed. “I won’t stop until every one of those Amazon bitches are dead!”

Shale stiffened. She kept an eye on the trees where Kale and the others would be coming from. She couldn’t sense Kale yet, but silently urged her to hurry. This was a great chance. If the scouting party and the leader didn’t return, Zale’s army would disperse and the threat would be neutralised. And even if someone else took command, it would be unlikely that he would share the same goal. There was no profit to be made from killing Amazons, and their forested lands were worthless to most people.

Shale would have fought them, even with her injury, if it hadn’t been for Zale. But she’d seen his fighting prowess in her dream, and knew he was of equal skill to her, more so since she wasn’t at full capacity. Kale could fight him though, and Amber could back her up if needed.

Shale knew she had no choice but to wait, and hoped that the others arrived in time.

One of the men suddenly turned and walked toward her, fumbling with his belt as he did so. Shale moved as far as she could around the boulder, any farther would alert the rest of them to her position.

The man kept coming. How much privacy did he need? This was just her luck, she would have to get the one man in all of Greece who was shy about urinating in front of others.

His eyes grew wide as he spotted Shale, but her hand clamped over his mouth before he could call for help. His mumbling was still quite loud though, as was the crack when she broke his neck.

“Nicholydus?” a scout called. “Is everything all right?”

“Leave him be,” another said. “He’s probably just eaten something that disagreed with him.”

Shale heard them sniggering, and she lowered Nicholydus’s body to the ground.

“Nicholydus?” the same voice called again.

Shale silently drew her sword, cursing the man who couldn’t mind his own business.

“Hey?” A new tone this time, gruffer.

When they got no response, Shale recognised the sound of swords being unsheathed. Three men circled around from the left, one from the right.

Shale took out the man on her right first, running him through so no one was behind her. She moved away from the boulder, giving herself room to move.

The three remaining scouts surrounded her, but she wasn't worried about them. Shale briefly wondered where Zale was, though she soon found him. He stood atop the boulder, staring right at her. Even through his helmet, she felt his piercing gaze.

The men kept glancing to their leader, and then back to Shale, confused expressions on every face.

"This is just too perfect," the leader said to Shale, his delight evident. "I thought you were dead, since you weren't at the tribe you were born into, but now I get the pleasure of killing you myself. It's turning out to be a very good day." He paused briefly. "I am Theron. Remember it. For I'm the man who will wipe out the entire Amazon nation. Take her," he ordered.

"Do you want us to kill her, sir?"

"No, you fool! She's just saved me the trouble of mobilising my army. By kidnapping her, the Amazons will come to us, and we'll be on our own ground," Theron said, speaking slowly as if talking to a small child. He looked back to Shale. "Besides, I want to have some fun with her first." A cruel laugh erupted from his throat.

The scouts attacked.

Shale couldn't afford to take chances, not with her weakened leg, so she showed no compassion, killing each man at the first opportunity. It didn't take her long to dispatch them, and as the last fell at her feet, she heard the crack of a whip.

Shale threw herself sideways, but felt it strike her back. Searing pain tore through her. She'd been whipped before, but never had it felt like that. She scrambled to her feet, seeing that it wasn't an ordinary whip. Small, but sharp pieces of metal had been inserted along its length, adding a monstrous cruelty to an already vicious tool.

Shale now knew why her back felt like chunks of flesh had been torn out—they had.

She immediately backed off, knowing that if the whip got hold of her she would be in deep trouble.

Theron jumped down from the boulder and advanced. "I would let you fight back, but..." He indicated her bandaged knee. "Unfortunately you're already hurt, so you'd hardly test my skill." He sighed dramatically. "Never mind, you'll serve as bait well enough." Theron unleashed the whip.

Shale managed to block with her sword, and the whip wrapped around her blade instead.

Theron pulled it out of her hands. As he did so, Shale ran at him, knowing the whip would be entangled for a moment. Thankfully, her leg held, and she tackled a surprised Theron to the ground.

She used his surprise to her advantage, pulling out the dagger from his boot and stabbing him in the thigh with it. “Now we’re even,” she said. “Will you let me fight now?”

Theron growled in fury and backhanded her, sending her flying. She rolled and stood, latching onto her sword as she did so. She freed it from the whip, and kicked Theron’s awful weapon out of his immediate reach.

Theron alarmed her by laughing, a maniacal sound that sent a chill through her bones.

He pulled the dagger out of his thigh, and tucked it calmly back into his boot. “I’m impressed. Though I suppose I shouldn’t be, you do share my blood.”

Shale would have found this reunion amusing if it had been under any other circumstance—he was even more arrogant than Kale.

Theron removed his helmet. It was definitely Zale, no doubt about that.

As the last born, Theron was technically the youngest, but Shale thought he looked older than they did. He was indeed handsome, as Blake had suspected. Shale met his ice blue eyes, noting that his features were sharp and angular also. His long black hair reached his shoulder blades as hers did, and the only major exception between them—because of their gender difference—was their build. Though Shale was well-muscled and toned, she still maintained her femininity, whereas Theron was much broader, his bulging muscles dwarfing hers in comparison.

“You don’t look surprised,” Theron said disappointedly.

“Oh, I am,” Shale replied quickly. She didn’t want him to know about their extra sense regarding each other. Just then, her extra sense alerted her to Kale’s nearing presence. She wasn’t close by yet though, so Shale needed to delay things.

Theron drew his sword. “I’d really like to continue our family gathering, but I’ve got Amazons to kill.”

“I can’t let you do that.” Shale levelled her sword at him.

“Do you really think you can stop me?” he asked incredulously.

Shale noted that his name was fitting, Theron meaning hunter. He locked his piercing gaze onto her, and Shale realised that she had just become his prey.

“SO THERE I am under the water, waiting for the bees to leave,” Kale said. “I’d got stung a couple of times, but I figured it would be worth it. Honey was always in demand in our old tribe, so we knew we’d get good trade from it.”

“How come you were the distraction?” Amber asked.

“I drew the short straw.” Kale began to chuckle. “But actually I ended up better off, because the next thing I knew Shale was jumping into the river beside me. All the bees hadn’t left as we’d intended, and another swarm had chased her. We had to swim downstream quite a way before we could emerge.” Her chuckling increased. “Shale was covered in stings, all red and puffy.”

“Did you at least get the honey?” Blake asked.

“No. It was all for nothing,” Kale said, making them laugh. “We’ve stayed away from beehives ever since.”

“That’s probably wise,” Blake said.

“We were so embarrassed going back empty-handed. It wasn’t as if we could pretend it hadn’t happened, the evidence was all over us.” Kale grinned. “We wore a lot of long clothes that summer.”

“I bet.” Amber was still laughing. “You should have...” She fell silent as Kale stopped dead in her tracks, her features suddenly serious.

Blake watched Kale anxiously, growing even more so when Kale met her eyes. “It’s Shale, isn’t it?”

Kale nodded and took off running.

“I knew I shouldn’t have left her,” Blake said as she followed Kale. “She’s still unsteady on that knee.”

“It’s not her knee.”

SHALE DEFLECTED HIS sword, parrying the strike with her own blade. She backed up swiftly, having no choice but to go on the defensive. She blocked several more attacks, then launched her own.

Theron was a skilled fighter, and matched Shale’s speed and stamina. He was stronger than her though, and as their swords locked, Theron pushed down, his upper body strength

overpowering her. Shale's weaker knee gave out, and she dropped onto it, but managed to keep her sword in place.

"That's not too painful, is it?" Theron taunted, grinning at her like some deranged animal.

Shale knew she couldn't hold against his superior strength much longer. She had to do something. With a surge of energy she managed to get to her feet, and pushed him back. She lashed out with her good leg, and it connected with the wound on his thigh. He stumbled backward.

"Not as painful as that," Shale said, her own smile becoming feral as they faced off against one another.

Theron roared at her, his sword arcing high as he swung it toward Shale's neck. The metal clashed loudly as the blades collided, and Shale hoped the sound of a fight would spur Kale on.

They wrestled for control, and Shale shoved Theron away, swiping her sword across as he staggered back. A trickle of blood appeared from his torso, but Shale had barely nicked him.

Both grew fatigued as the battle drew on, but neither slowed or lessened their pace.

Shale knew Theron had the upper hand. Not because he was a better fighter—they were both equally matched in skill—but because all he had to do was wait, her knee wouldn't hold out indefinitely.

She was surprised that he hadn't attempted to go for her weakness. Maybe Theron thought he was better than that? Shale hoped her knee would hold out until Kale arrived, but she doubted it, the limb was already beginning to buckle.

His sword got past Shale, and it cut into her bicep. Theron took a step back, and used his forefinger to collect some of the blood from his blade. He brought the finger to his face, examined it intently, and then licked the crimson fluid away.

Shale was disgusted, but her face remained impassive.

"My blood," he said, as if that explained everything.

Theron thrust his sword toward her, and Shale deflected it, knocking it downward. She then rammed the hilt of her weapon directly into Theron's face. He stumbled back, and Shale unleashed a diagonal slice that would tear him in two.

Theron's sword blocked at the last possible instant, and he lurched forward, his leg lashing out for her bandaged knee. Shale jumped, barely clearing the strike. When she landed, her leg gave way, and Theron pounced, taking her to the ground.



Theron lost his sword in the tumble, and he wrenched Shale's out of her grip, tossing it aside. He pinned Shale to the ground, and delivered several blows, battering Shale fiercely with his colossal fists.

Shale raised her arms, protecting her head as best she could. She tensed her muscles as Theron punched her stomach, but the wind was still knocked out of her. She kned him hard in the groin, and he relented briefly. It was all she needed, a sharp jab rocked him backward, and she wriggled free, releasing a savage kick to his face. Her boot connected, and a spray of blood erupted from his nose and mouth as he fell onto his back.

Shale struggled to her feet, mortified when she immediately fell back down. She tried again, swaying wildly as her vision swam. And she thought Kale had a wicked punch.

Shale descended on him, pounding Theron relentlessly. She yelled in pure rage, this man had annihilated her tribe. She'd seen his brutality firsthand in her, or rather, his dream. When Theron coughed up blood, Shale recognised that he was barely conscious— she had won.

Shale stood, kicking him away from her. She teetered toward her sword, and was halfway there when it dawned on her that she could have just used the dagger in Theron's boot to kill him. She shook her head, her mind was still hazy from the hits it had taken.

She suddenly realised that she had kicked Theron right near where she had discarded the whip. Shale turned in horror, hearing the snap of the weapon too late. The whip curled around her stomach and waist, the barbs digging deeply into her flesh.

Theron wiped blood out of his eyes, and despite a missing tooth, he was still grinning. "Got you."

## Chapter Twelve

DESPITE THEIR BEST efforts, Blake and Amber lost sight of Kale pretty quickly, she was much faster than they were. It didn't matter though, they knew where she was headed.

It was a hot day, without even the slightest breeze, but Blake felt a shiver run through her. Her stomach was in knots. Never in her life had she ran so fast. She was desperate to get to Shale. She prayed to all of the gods on Olympus, begged them, to keep Shale safe. She kept going over different scenarios in her head, each one more terrible than the last, wondering what had happened to Shale, what was happening to her that very moment.

Not knowing was driving her slowly insane, and through sheer determination, Blake increased her speed.

SHALE GRAPPLED WITH the whip, but the barbs sliced into her hands, making it difficult to get a good grip. She found the whip's tail end, and started to unravel it from her waist, the embedded metal sliding free from her skin. It was excruciating, but she kept going.

“Ah-ah,” Theron scolded, giving the whip a sharp tug to keep her still.

Shale bit into her already split lip to keep from crying out. The barbs sank deeper into her flesh, firmly embedding themselves.

“Keep fighting and I'll yank it out of you,” Theron said. “I hope you're not too fond of your skin?”

Shale stopped struggling—he had her. She held her hands out, away from her body, cooperating with him. If Theron did as he said, and Shale had no doubt that he would, pulling the whip from her would rip out a good portion of her midriff. And even if she survived that, there would be no skin for Appollonia to stitch together, she would bleed to death.

“Clever girl.” Theron walked toward her, reeling the whip in as he moved, keeping it taut. When he was in range, Theron punched her with all his might.

Shale fell, hard. Blackness tried to engulf her, and she fought to stay conscious. Kale would be here soon, she had to stay awake.

She heard Theron standing over her, laughing, but couldn't see him. Her eyes wouldn't open. The sound infuriated her, but even her anger wasn't enough to rouse her. She slipped into unconsciousness.

KALE SLOWED CONSIDERABLY as she neared the boulder, treading carefully so she didn't disturb the marks in the soil. The bodies of five men were strewn around her, but she barely glimpsed their way. She followed the tracks of the fight, kneeling down where blood had been spilt.

Though Shale had killed most of them, Kale could tell she had been taken down by one man. That worried her. Shale had clearly fought back, but either the man was too good for her, which Kale doubted, or Shale had been hurt enough so that she couldn't hold him back.

The blood she found added proof to her second theory, and Kale's hand tightened around the hilt of her sword.

Amber and Blake emerged into the open meadow, both sprinting full out. They were soon by Kale's side, and Kale filled them in while they caught their breath.

"Six men attacked, looks like a scouting party. Shale killed five of them, but the sixth got her, put her on horseback, and he took her that way." Kale pointed.

"One man?" Amber asked dubiously.

Kale shifted her position, and gravely indicated the red soil she was squatting next to. "She's hurt."

"Oh, no," Blake whispered, shaking her head. "You don't know it's Shale's," she said desperately.

Amber draped a comforting arm over Blake's shoulders. "Shale wouldn't have been captured otherwise."

Blake nodded.

Kale stood abruptly, and started for the trees she'd pointed toward.

"Where are you going?" Blake moved swiftly to intercept her.

"Where do you think? After Shale."

"We need to get Aris and the warriors," Blake said. "It's likely to be the same man who destroyed your tribe. We need backup, Kale. If he wanted Shale dead, he'd have killed her already. He's setting a trap. Let's make sure we're prepared."

Amber nodded in agreement. "Blake's right, Kale. We need to get reinforcements."

"You two go." Kale stepped forward. "I'll go on ahead."

Blake grabbed her arm. "No, you won't. You said he was on horseback. Even you can't catch up to a horse."

"I can try," Kale said stubbornly, trying to wrench her arm free of Blake's grasp.

Blake held tight. "We need you with us, Kale. He's on horseback, so he could be travelling for days. What if it rains? What if we lose his tracks? You can find Shale without them, we can't." A brief pause. "We need you," Blake repeated.

Kale, despite her unwillingness to head in the opposite direction to her twin, could see Blake's logic. She hesitated, then tipped her head ever so slightly.

Blake squeezed her arm before releasing it, and they took off toward the village.

NOT ANOTHER WORD was spoken until they reached the village. Then they all began to talk at once.

"I'll find my mother," Blake said.

"I'll get Aris," Amber said.

"Meet us in the center," Blake told her.

Amber nodded and darted away.

"I'll go and fetch some supplies," Kale added, striding off.

"Stop by Appollonia's, too," Blake called after her. "Get some bandages, and whatever treatments she'll give you."

"Will do," Kale said, impressed by Blake's focussed determination. She hadn't missed the torment in Blake's eyes, but the princess didn't falter, calmly organising the things they would need for the ordeal ahead.

Kale stopped by her cabin to collect a travel bag, and scrunched a blanket inside, followed by some bread, biscuits, and fruit. She then went next door and did the same for Blake, shoving an extra blanket into her own bag for Shale. She repeated the process at Amber's cabin, and then filled the three waterskins at the nearby stream.

By the time Kale got back, the village center had filled with Amazons, and she had to work her way through them to reach the healer's lodge. Kale could hear Blake's voice clearly, but didn't stop to listen to what was being said.

She entered the lodge, nearly colliding with Appollonia, who was making her way outside, as if to see what all the commotion was about.

"Kale, do you know what's going on?"

"Yes, that's why I'm here. Shale's been kidnapped."

"Oh my!"

“She’s also hurt. Can you give me—” Kale broke off as Appollonia started to bustle around the room.

“How is she hurt? It would help if I knew the injury.”

Kale shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know. I just saw blood.”

Appollonia picked up several bandages from the shelf at the far end of the room, and tossed them onto the nearby bed, along with a bone needle and yarn. Kale opened Blake’s bag and wedged them inside, knowing that she herself might not have time to treat Shale if she was busy fighting. Kale was in no doubt that Blake would take care of her though.

“This,” Appollonia held up a jar, “is to prevent infection. Sprinkle it over the wound before you wrap it.” She moved to the table, and transferred some of the contents into a smaller bottle so it would be easier to carry. She passed it to Kale, and selected another jar. “This will help with the pain. Mix it with a drink, preferably something warm. Two pinches if it’s mild, four if it’s serious, but no more than that.” Appollonia again poured it into a bottle. “Do not mix them up, the herbs for the infection are poisonous to drink.”

Kale looked around. “Have you got a small knife?”

Appollonia glanced up, and indicated the shelf behind her.

Kale spotted it and retrieved the cutting tool. She etched an x onto the bottle she was holding.

Appollonia gave her a look of approval, and handed Kale the other bottle and also a mug.

Kale tucked both bottles carefully inside Blake’s blanket. She knew that out of the three, Blake would fight the least, so had the smallest chance of breaking them. The mug went in next, then Kale closed the bag and shouldered it once more.

“And most importantly,” Appollonia added, “get Shale back to me as soon as you can.”

ONCE ARIS, THE warriors, and the queen had gathered in the center of the village, Blake spoke up, “One of our sisters, Shale, has been kidnapped.” Gasps and mumbled conversation came forth, and Blake waited a moment for the crowd to quieten before continuing, “We suspect by the same man who wiped out the tribe south of here.”

“We’re under attack?” one woman asked worriedly.

“He has taken Shale to draw us to him,” Blake said. “But we had best prepare for an all out assault. We don’t know what he’s going to do.”

“You cannot take all of the warriors, Blakaea,” Zayla said.

Amber glanced to the queen in surprise. “But Shale...”

“I know, Mother,” Blake said. She turned to Amber. “We must leave most of the warriors here. We can’t leave the village defenceless. That could be his plan. And when we leave, his army swoops in.”

Aris nodded her agreement. “How many do you want?” She looked between Zayla and Blake.

“Take six of the best,” Zayla instructed.

Aris nodded again. “Anataeus, Demetria, Hellana, Arkayus, Charis,” she called out immediately. “I’ll go as well, my Queen. Lathana can stay and organise a defence here.”

“Very well,” Zayla said.

“Step forward,” Blake said. The chosen warriors came to the front of the crowd. “This is a very dangerous task you are about to undertake. Our main goal is to rescue our sister, but I will not lie to you, we could end up fighting an entire army. I am giving you the option, step back if you don’t want to go. You’ll be replaced. No one will think any less of you.” Blake paused for several moments, but as she suspected, none of them moved. She’d wanted to give them the choice though. “Then as princess, and on behalf of this tribe, I thank you all for your bravery.” Blake locked eyes with each warrior, and then nodded to Aris.

“Pack light, we’ll be moving fast.” Aris dismissed those selected with a wave of her hand. “Be quick. We’ll be leaving shortly.” She faced Blake and Zayla, as if checking to see if she was wanted for anything else before she left to get ready herself. Neither spoke, so Aris departed.

“Blakaea, a word.” Zayla placed a hand on Blake’s shoulder and moved her toward the queen’s cabin. Once inside, Zayla opened her mouth to speak, but Blake cut her off. That action in itself told of how uneasy she was.

Blake was adamant. “I’m not staying, Mother. Don’t even ask me to.”

“I wasn’t going to, Blakaea. I know you better than that.” Zayla stepped closer and embraced her. “But please be careful.”

“What if Shale’s...” Blake couldn’t even bring herself to say the word. She clutched Zayla fiercely but didn’t cry, knowing that once she started she’d never stop.

“Shale is strong, Blakaea,” Zayla said. “She’ll not leave you easily. She’ll fight till her last breath, for that is her nature.” She kissed the top of Blake’s head, and Blake nodded in response. “I have something to give you.”

Zayla crossed to the corner of the room and picked up the sword there, offering it to Blake. “This sword has protected the royal line in many battles. I wish for you to carry it now.”

Blake took it gratefully.

“Turn around,” Zayla said. When Blake did so, she fastened the sheath onto her back, and Blake slid the sword into it. “Be safe, my daughter.”

They hugged again, though it was all too brief. Then Blake was gone, striding swiftly toward the cluster of warriors.

THE FIRST THOUGHT Shale had when she came to, was how uncomfortable she was. She knew she was draped ungraciously over a horse’s back, and from the wind buffeting her face they were travelling quite fast. She felt Theron’s hand gripping her top, keeping her in place, and had the sudden urge to break all of his fingers.

To her dismay, she couldn’t even sense Kale. Theron must have got away before she arrived. Shale cursed herself for losing consciousness.

She opened her eyes, but could see nothing except a close up view of horse’s hooves and the ground. She needed to look around, to get a sense of their direction and where they were heading, but she didn’t want Theron to know she was awake and alert.

Shale stayed motionless, carefully assessing her injuries. Most places hurt, but she’d expected that. She knew she wasn’t in the best of shape, but neither was Theron, she’d got in some good hits. She realised in relief that the whip had been removed from her waist. Shale was surprised, she’d thought Theron was smarter than that.

As soon as Theron stopped, she would make her move. She would take his horse too, she wouldn’t move very quickly on foot in her current condition.

Theron’s hand snaked downward, pressing hard against the wounds on her back. It was so unexpected that Shale tensed, and she paid for her mistake an instant later, when Theron removed his boot from the stirrup and kicked her perfectly positioned head.

As Shale sank into oblivion once more, a grudging respect emerged—Theron certainly knew what he was doing.

KALE SQUATTED OVER the trail, examining it expertly. “They went that way.” She pointed to the west as she straightened up.

“I agree,” Aris said from beside her.

Kale glanced impatiently over her shoulder, to where the rest of the group was emerging, all red-faced and breathing heavily. Kale knew she was pushing them hard, but she still wasn’t satisfied by the pace they were going. If she were alone she’d be travelling much faster, and would have covered a lot more ground.

Kale stiffened when a hand touched her back, but relaxed when she saw it was Amber. The red-head had kept up well, following closely to Aris, who was only second to Kale. To Kale’s surprise, and to the chagrin of the other warriors, Blake was after Amber, and Kale made a mental note to tell Shale about it later, knowing Shale would be both proud and amused by that.

Amber didn’t speak, but her touch calmed Kale significantly. Their eyes met, and for an instant Kale was distracted from the horror of the situation. From the fear that gripped her. Then the reality sank back in, and Kale moved away, breaking into a run as she led the group on.

Aris observed the tired faces. “Kale, we need to rest,” she called after her.

“Not yet,” Kale yelled back, not even slowing her pace.

Aris shared a quick glance with Blake, but they had little choice except to follow.

SHALE’S OBSERVANT BLUE eyes took in her surroundings, missing nothing. She was inside a cavern, with rough, dark rock all around her. It was well-lit with torches, though Shale was in no doubt that it would be pitch black without them, as she couldn’t see any natural light coming in. She had to be deep within the caves.

Shale was positioned in the center of the cavern, secured to a wooden post. Her shackled hands were held overhead, and her feet were bound to the floor in a similar fashion. She must have been unconscious for a while, because her shoulders ached unpleasantly.

Theron entered through the only entrance, a crack in one of the walls that was barely big enough to allow his broad frame. The gap was of good height though, nearly extending to the roof of the cavern they were in.

“Good, you’re awake. Now I can begin. It’s no fun when you’re unconscious.” Theron hefted the pail of water he was carrying. “I was getting impatient.”



Although her face remained emotionless, Shale's heartbeat picked up slightly. She was freezing as it was, her summer clothes not protecting her against the chill of the cave.

Theron grinned at her. "Seems a shame to waste it." He threw its entire contents onto Shale.

Piercing cold engulfed her, and she bit her lip hard when her wounds protested with a vengeance. The water reawakened her tiring senses though, and she blinked repeatedly, allowing the moisture into her eyes to refresh them. Shale licked her lips to obtain the small amount of liquid there, her throat was parched.

"There, now," Theron said. "That woke you up, didn't it?" He raised his voice. "Guard!"

One of his soldiers instantly appeared, coming through the crack in the wall. Theron wasn't taking any chances with her, Shale noted, she was bound and under guard.

"Theodysius." Theron thrust the pail into his chest. "Another. And make sure it's cold. Ice cold."

"Yes, sir," he replied dutifully, then hurriedly departed.

Listening intently to the guard's footsteps, Shale heard him go off to the left, and she wondered if that was the way out, or if there was an underground stream nearby. She soon had her answer. Theodysius came back quickly, much sooner than anticipated. Shale seriously doubted he'd had time to leave the caves. There had to be a stream close by.

The stream had to emerge outside somehow. Shale could use the current to carry her out of here. It was risky, but she would have to hope she had the strength to keep her head above water.

Theodysius held the pail out in front of Theron for his approval. Theron dipped a calloused hand into the water, withdrawing it swiftly at the low temperature.

"Perfect," he said, emptying it once more over a now shivering Shale. Theron clapped a hand on Theodysius's wide back. "I have a job for you." He again handed him the pail. "Every time she starts to dry off, or lose consciousness, I want you to douse her with cold water."

"Yes, sir." Theodysius again left to refill the pail.

Theron untied the whip from his waist. "Don't worry," he said. "I'm not going to use this." A pause. "Not yet anyway. I figure by the time anyone notices you're missing, it will be evening, so your sisters won't track until first light. Which means, I can take my time with you." He put the whip down and moved closer. "And I intend to do just that."

Shale knew his theory was flawed, a rescue party would already be on their way. But since Theron didn't know about the meeting at noon, he'd made the logical assumption. Shale didn't correct him, the surprise would go in their favor.

Unfortunately, she had no sense of time in the cave, and since she'd been unconscious for most of the journey, Shale didn't even know how long it had taken. Though Kale would have discovered she had been captured shortly after the event, Shale knew they'd be on foot, so would take longer to cover the same ground.

Shale was distracted by the smell of food, broth it smelled like, and her stomach rumbled hungrily. She now knew it was meal time, and since an army marched on its stomach, they usually had food at regular intervals. Shale suspected it to be around early evening, which, if true, meant that her fellow Amazons had a good chance of getting here by nightfall. She was glad it was summer, because the longer day would give them extra time. If her sisters did make it by then, Shale knew they would attack under the cover of darkness.

Her spirits picked up slightly at that notion. "Don't you want any food? I'll happily wait," Shale said, though her teeth chattered.

Unfortunately for her, Theron didn't seem to be hungry.

"WE ARE NOT stopping!"

"We need to rest, Kale," Aris said.

"No, what we need is to cover as much ground as possible while it's still light."

"We'll be no good to Shale exhausted," Aris said.

"We'll be no good to her if she's dead either."

"Whoever kidnapped her wouldn't have taken her all this way just to kill her," Hellana said, holding her side to try and relieve her stitch. "She's bait, remember?"

"When he reaches his camp, he can kill her. We wouldn't know, and the trap would still be set. We would still try to rescue her. As long as there's a possibility of her being alive, he knows we'll come for her," Kale said. "Now, let's get moving."

"Soon, Kale, we're not all as fit as you," Aris said.

"Well you should be!" Kale exploded. "Your warriors should be. You should have trained them better!"

Blake raised her bowed head out of her hands. "Kale," she said. "I know you're upset, but arguing won't help Shale."

“Come on,” Amber said quickly, as Kale opened her mouth to retaliate. “Let’s get some space.” She escorted Kale away, but didn’t touch her, knowing from Kale’s tense form that any contact would be rebuffed.

KALE PACED BACK and forth, clearly anxious to get going.

“Kale, sit down.” Amber sighed when Kale ignored her and kept on pacing. “Look, you’ve got to wait anyway, so you might as well rest yourself.”

Kale sat down beside her. “There. Happy?”

Amber’s tone was dry. “Ecstatic.”

Kale began to tap her feet, and Amber, taking her life in her hands, laid a calming hand on Kale’s well-muscled thigh. The tapping instantly stopped and Kale looked at her. Amber was upset by the distress in Kale’s eyes, and she produced her best reassuring smile.

“Shale will be all right.”

“You don’t know that,” Kale said quietly.

Amber knew she wasn’t arguing, merely stating a point. “I do know that,” she said. “You share the same stubborn streak.” She nudged Kale teasingly.

The faintest hint of a smile appeared, and Kale reached up and brushed Amber’s cheek. Her hand lingered. After a moment, Kale leaned in and kissed Amber firmly on the mouth.

When her lips were released, auburn eyebrows shot up. “I thought you didn’t think of me in that way?”

“Oh, I do,” Kale said. “I was holding back because of what happened with Aeron.”

“You needed time to adjust?”

“Exactly.”

“So why didn’t you tell me that?” Amber said. “You would have saved me so much heartache if you’d just told me.”

“I’m sorry. But I’m telling you now.”

“Why?”

“Why, what?”

“Why are you telling me now? What’s changed?”

“I just realised that we could all die today.”

Amber sprang to her feet, facing Kale angrily. “Oh, that’s great. Thanks a lot. You thought I’d be up for a quick roll in the hay, with no strings attached.”

“No! You didn’t let me finish.”

Amber crossed her arms over her chest. “All right. This had better be good.”

“I realised that we could all die today, and,” Kale locked onto Amber’s brown eyes, “there’s only one thing that I regret—not being with you. I want to live, Amber, I don’t want to hold back anymore. And I want you by my side...if you’ll have me?”

Amber smiled brightly, and then gave Kale a meek look. “That was good. I’m sorry I jumped to conclusions.”

“It’s all right,” Kale said. “So, about my question?”

Amber sat back down, a mischievous grin forming. “I don’t know. I think you’ll need to persuade me.”

Kale smiled for the first time since noon. She pulled Amber close, meeting her awaiting lips eagerly.

The kiss was passionate, full of promises of what was to come.

“You persuaded me,” Amber said as soon as they parted for air. “Damn, me and my big mouth. I think I was too hasty about that roll in the hay idea.”

Kale chuckled. “There will be plenty of time for that when we get home.”

“And if we don’t make it back?”

Kale kissed her again, long and hard. “That’s for encouragement.”

Amber blinked dazedly for a moment, then grinned. “Oh, we’re so going to make it back.”

SHALE TENSED AS Theron probed at her stomach, hissing in pain as he found a particularly sore spot.

“Seems a couple of your ribs are broken.” He chuckled, sounding pleased with himself.

She squinted at him through swollen eyes, barely conscious. Theron grabbed her hair, jerking it savagely to rouse her. It wasn't enough, and he moved out of the way as Theodysius covered her with icy water.

Shale spluttered and coughed, which was excruciating to her battered body, as was her constant shaking.

She thought about the two most important people in her life— Kale, her only family. She had to survive for her. Shale's death could mean Kale's also, and even if Kale lived, Shale knew that their forced separation would never allow either of them any peace. And Blake, her one true love, her heart. Shale had only just found her, she couldn't bear the thought of leaving her. She had to stay alive for them.

Theron withdrew a wicked looking dagger and its blade caught the torchlight.

Shale tried to calm her frantic heartbeat. She could do this. Kale and the others would be coming for her. All she had to do was wait.

“With you here, I know our sister won't be far behind. There aren't many who can match my fighting skill, I'm looking forward to meeting her. Of course, she'll come whether you're dead or alive, so I really don't have any further use for you.”

“If you kill me...” Shale murmured, having to pause due to the agony she was in. “Kale's judgement will be clouded by rage. If you truly want to prove you're the best...she needs to have her wits intact.”

Theron laughed. “I see your mind is still sharp.” He nodded. “I'll keep you alive until I have beaten her in combat.” His intense eyes bore into hers, and Theron sliced the dagger into Shale's side. “I didn't say anything about not harming you.”

Shale begged for Kale to hurry. Though Theron said he wouldn't kill her outright, he obviously wasn't concerned with her blood loss, or her dangerously low body temperature. She was completely helpless, and couldn't even stem the bleeding.

Shale closed her eyes, and prayed.

## Chapter Thirteen

“WHAT A GREAT place to defend from,” Aris noted quietly, examining the cave’s entrance. “Not so great for us though,” she added as an afterthought.

“I only see four guards at the entrance,” Amber said. “The problem is going to be reaching them.”

Blake nodded in agreement. They were well hidden in a small clump of trees, but there was no other cover between them and the cave’s entrance. They would be spotted instantly, and the alarm would be raised. They couldn’t afford that. Stealth was their best option.

“We’ll have to wait for nightfall,” Blake decided.

Kale, who was squatted beside her, spoke up, “You can wait. I’m not.”

“You will wait, Kale,” Blake said. “Nightfall won’t be long.”

“The gods only know what’s happening to Shale in there. You can’t ask me to just sit and wait.”

“Actually, I can. And I’m not asking, Kale, I’m telling you.” Blake’s voice was firm, resolute. “If you go rushing in there, you’ll give away our greatest advantage—surprise. You can’t take on everyone yourself, and you’d be lessening our chance of success.” Her tone softened. “And that doesn’t help Shale.”

Kale seethed for a moment, then rolled back on her heels and sat. “Blake.” Kale met her gaze. “Shale’s still alive. I can feel her.”

Relief flooded Blake’s features, and she squeezed Kale’s hand in thanks, surprised when Kale returned the grip. She had wanted to ask Kale that question since they arrived, but Blake hadn’t been able to muster the courage, terrified of what the answer might be.

“She’s alive,” Blake whispered, unconcerned by the silent tears that fell down her face.

KALE GRABBED THE guard’s head, and twisted his neck in one fast, smooth motion. Aris, Amber, and Anataeus took care of the other three guards, and no one inside was alerted to their presence.

The cave they had entered was actually a tunnel, and chambers sprouted off from it.

Blake sniffed the air, and quietly went into the first chamber, which was right near the entrance. Kale was directly behind her, and they found themselves inside a large cavern, which was filled with horses. A wooden pen had been erected to keep the animals inside. They shared a look, they would use the horses to escape.

The cavern didn't lead anywhere, so they backtracked into the tunnel.

Kale indicated the guards' bodies, and they were soon hidden out of sight in the horses cavern.

The tunnel was well-lit with torches, so they were vividly aware that they couldn't hide very easily. They listened intently, hearing laughter echo down the tunnel. It sounded far off though. They spread out, covering more ground.

The next cavern they came across was filled with supplies, and again it was unmanned. They checked it thoroughly, not wanting to have an enemy at their backs as well.

The tunnel curved around, and then split into two. One route wound back on itself, the other continued straight ahead. The voices and laughter came from the tunnel straight ahead, growing steadily louder as they crept closer.

Aris slipped into the next cave, but came out shaking her head. It housed only armaments.

At the fork in the tunnel, footsteps were heard.

Amber pointed to a cluster of good-sized boulders off to the side of the passageway. The five warriors bringing up the rear darted into the armaments cave, while Amber, Kale, Blake, and Aris hid behind the rocks.

Aris reached up and unhooked the torch above them. She snuffed the flame in the dirt, putting it out, then returned the torch to its holder. The extra darkness provided them with more cover, and it was doubtful whoever was coming toward them would notice. And even if he did try to relight it, it was only one soldier, if he got that close, they could easily kill him.

The soldier came from the tunnel that doubled back on itself, and headed down the other, toward the laughter. Kale suspected that was where the majority of the army was, a gathering place for them to eat, drink, and sleep.

Since the soldier was walking away from her, Kale poked her head out, seeing that he carried a pail in his hand. He suddenly stopped, but since his back was to her, Kale couldn't see what he was doing. She strained to hear and she detected water splashing, and the faint sound of a running stream.

The soldier soon returned, retracing his steps, water sloshing over the rim of the bucket.

Kale's eyes narrowed. She knew Shale was down that same tunnel. A fierce shiver passed through her, confirming her suspicions. Two worried hands were instantly on her back, and she looked first at Amber, then Blake. "It's not me," Kale whispered, tipping her head to the water. She was amazed by the abrupt transformation in Blake, the normally gentle face hardening considerably as that knowledge sank in.

"Shale's down there?" Aris asked, keeping her voice low.

"In the cave he's just gone into," Kale said.

"Are you sure?"

A raw cry of pain reached their ears, stripping away any remaining doubt.

THERON LAUGHED AT Shale's cry of pain. "See!" he gloated to Theodysius. "The fiercest warriors fall before me. Even the mighty Amazons."

Shale yelled again on the third strike of the whip. Though she was still clothed, it offered no defence, the barbs ripping straight through the material and tearing deep grooves into her skin. Blood flowed freely down her back.

Theron stretched his arms and rolled his broad shoulders. He tilted his head side to side, cracking his neck. "It's been a long day," he finally said, tossing the whip to the ground. "Now I have broken you, you no longer interest me."

Shale noticed that Theron caught Theodysius ogling her scantily clad form, but rather than discipline him, Theron grinned wickedly.

"I want you to continue what you're doing, Theodysius." Theron indicated the pail of water.

"How long for, sir?"

"Until morning. She's not to sleep. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"You may do what you wish with her."

Theodysius's eyes widened. "You mean..." He leered at her openly, leaving no doubt as to what he wanted to do.

Shale spat at him, utter contempt on her face.



Theron laughed. "That's your reward."

"Thank you, sir."

"I'll leave my whip, use it if you wish." He grinned at Shale. "Goodbye, sister. I do hope you have a pleasant night."

"Our mother...should've...drowned you at birth," Shale mumbled. She had lost a lot of blood, and kept losing consciousness from the extreme pain.

Theron's laughter increased. "Now, is that any way to talk to your family?" He shook his head at her, and faced Theodysius. "Teach her some manners, would you?" Theron said, then left the cavern.

"Yes, sir. Gladly."

Shale felt Theodysius's lustful gaze on her body, and the thought sickened her. She briefly considered allowing herself to fall unconscious, but she wouldn't let him have her that easily.

As if reading her mind, Theodysius threw the pail of water over her. "Oh no, you don't. I want you to be awake for this."

KALE HAD TO be forcibly restrained when Shale cried out. "Let me go," she hissed. "That's Shale!"

"Think!" Aris said. "You can't just go rushing in. You don't know how many are in there."

"No one wants Shale out more than me, Kale," Blake said. "But you're no good to her dead. We need a plan." She winced as Shale yelled again, the sound cutting her up inside. Blake looked to her chief warrior. "Aris?"

Aris responded instantly, "It echoes in here, the sound of a fight will draw out the rest of the soldiers. Since most seem to be down that tunnel, I suggest we try and hold them there, it's vital that our way out remains clear. You three rescue Shale and get to the horses. Leave enough for us, then set the rest loose, they won't know which to track."

Blake nodded and started to move, but halted when a tall, broad-shouldered man emerged from the cave Shale was being held in. He walked away from them, farther into the tunnel they were about to go down.

They waited several more moments to make sure he had gone, then again tried to move. This time the disturbance came from the other tunnel, a rowdy group of soldiers that emerged near the

stream. The men were clearly drunk, and they staggered slowly away, in the opposite direction to the hidden Amazons. Despite that, they couldn't afford to move until the soldiers were out of sight.

The soldiers stopped abruptly, their voices rising as they began to argue.

THEODYSIUS SEIZED HER hair roughly, close to the scalp so he had a firm grip. His other hand clutched at her breast, pinching and squeezing harshly.

The chains rattled as Shale pulled against them, straining to be free. They held her tightly. She wasn't going anywhere.

Theodysius forced their bodies together, and Shale clamped her thighs shut when she felt him rise and press against her. He squirmed, and his hand lowered to his belt, trying to unbuckle it single-handedly. He soon grew impatient, and released his hold on her hair.

Shale slammed her forehead into his. It wasn't as powerful as she would have liked, but it still had the desired effect, and he staggered back.

Theodysius glared at her. "You've just made it so much worse for yourself, bitch." He raised a hand to strike her. Someone spoke up from behind him, and he whirled around, pulling out his dagger.

"That's just what I was about to say."

Shale's eyes widened. She would recognise that voice anywhere—it was Blake's.

Blake stabbed Theodysius through the chest, then pushed him off her sword with her boot. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Kale and Amber, who weren't far behind her, shared an impressed and somewhat alarmed look. Blake, it seemed, had a fierce protective streak.

Shale was surprised that she hadn't known Kale was approaching, but her body had been through a lot, and she was exhausted.

Shale locked onto worried green eyes. "Hi, sweetheart."

BLAKE SHEATHED HER blade, unable to speak, her emotions overwhelming her. She wrapped her arms around Shale, careful to keep her touch light.

Shale let out a soft whimper.

Blake drew back immediately. "Did I hurt you?"

Shale shook her head slightly. "So glad...to see you."

Kale cleared her throat teasingly.

A faint smile appeared. "All of...you," Shale added.

Kale laid a hand on her shoulder. "That's better." She took hold of Shale securely as Amber raised her sword to strike the chain. Kale nodded, and Amber swung. The first slice took care of the restraints that held Shale's feet, the next cut through the chain overhead, and into the wooden post it was attached to. Both strikes rang loudly within the cavern, but they'd had no choice, there was no other way to free Shale.

Shale buckled instantly, and Kale lowered her smoothly to the floor, placing her head in Blake's awaiting lap.

Shale's eyes squeezed shut at the movement, and her jaw clenched.

Blake watched in concern, studying Shale closely. Most of her skin was either cut, bloody, or bruised, and Blake didn't know quite where to touch her. She noticed the numerous repetitive cuts in Shale's skin, most of which were small, but deep. Some were longer, leaving jagged holes in their wake, as though something had torn out of Shale's flesh.

Amber held up a whip, an appalled look on her face. "I think this is the cause, Blake."

Blake blanched, aghast. "That's barbaric!"

Kale looked furious, but remained silent. She pulled the blanket out from her pack and covered Shale with it.

"Need to go." Shale tried to lift her head out of Blake's lap, without much success.

"Easy, Shale," Blake said, "You're going to be all right, sweetheart."

"No, Zale's...here." She grew agitated. "Must go. Now."

"Zale's here?" Kale asked, raising her eyebrows. "Did he do this to you? Where is he?"

"Yes." Shale couldn't manage any more. Her shaking grew worse, and her eyes closed.

“Stay with us, Shale,” Blake pleaded desperately, hot tears flowing down her cheeks.

“Shale!” Kale shook her a little. “Don’t you dare go anywhere.”

“Not going anywhere. Can’t. Walk.” Shale joked feebly.

Blake sobbed as she laughed, and was grateful when Kale squeezed her shoulder.

“She’ll be all right,” Kale said.

Blake hoped that was her twin’s intuition talking, and not just wishful thinking. Shale reached up and touched her cheek, and Blake was alarmed by her hand’s cold temperature.

“Don’t cry,” Shale whispered.

Blake managed a shaky smile, and she kissed Shale’s hand. “Please don’t leave me, Shale.”

“Never. I give you...my word.”

Blake nodded, kissed her hand again, and consciously pulled herself together.

“You two take Shale. I need to be able to fight,” Kale said, helping them to get Shale upright. Shale couldn’t stand at all, which concerned Blake. Kale draped the blanket over her, and Blake and Amber each took a corner, holding it in place over the shivering woman between them.

“I have a question,” Amber said, but kept her voice low. “Who is this Zale?”

A tall, broad-shouldered man, who was the spitting image of the twins, chose that exact moment to enter the cavern.

“Ah. Never mind.” Amber glanced across to Blake. “How many of them are there?”

“Just three,” Blake replied, her gaze never shifting from Zale.

He was certainly handsome, but there was a coldness about him that unsettled her.

“I thought I heard something,” he said casually, apparently not the least bit disturbed to find uninvited guests in his camp. “It seems I underestimated you.”

“Zale, how could you do this to your own blood?” Kale said angrily.

“My name is Theron. I know nothing of this Zale you speak of.” He appraised Kale keenly. “I revile the Amazons. I certainly don’t want to be related to one.” He sneered. “Or two in this case.”

“The Amazons haven’t done anything to you,” Blake said.

“What do you know of it?”

“I know that you were given to a farmer to be raised.”

“You’re correct. But my village was raided, my family murdered, and I was taken in by my new father, Xerton. He taught me how to fight, how to lead,” Theron smiled darkly, “how to kill. And who the real enemy was.” He pointed his sword at them. “The Amazons.”

“It was Xerton who destroyed your home, not us,” Kale said.

“I agree. That’s why I killed him and took his army. But Xerton was only there to get a treaty signed with the Amazons. On behalf of Kedross.”

Kale latched onto the name. “So you’re working with Kedross?”

“No. I outgrew him years ago.”

“You still use his land,” Kale muttered, clearly connecting the pieces together. Blake understood that she wanted to know exactly who was involved in wiping out her tribe, and how they had done it.

Theron’s eyes narrowed. “Now how do you know that?” He thought quickly. “You found the tribe south of yours.” He grinned. “That was a good day. An entire tribe of you bitches dead. A personal accomplishment of mine.”

“Not quite an entire tribe,” Kale said. “You missed two.”

His face lit up. “So it was your tribe. I wondered why you’d left the tribe you were born into.” Theron broke into laughter. “That is just perfect. You took my family, now I have taken yours.”

No one bothered to argue that they hadn’t taken his family, that the Amazons had nothing to do with it. Theron clearly believed it, and they would never convince him otherwise.

Theron looked to Shale. “You didn’t tell me that.” He shrugged. “Well I’d better finish the job. I don’t want people to think I’m a liar.” He raised his sword at Kale. “I’ve been looking forward to this. I hope you’re better than your twin.”

“I don’t know that you could handle any better,” Kale said.

“From the looks of you, Shale messed you up pretty bad.”

“I got her here, didn’t I?”

“My guess is you used that whip. You got lucky and wrapped it around her. She’d have had no choice but to submit.”

Theron nodded. "I'm impressed. I still won though."

Kale didn't hide her disgust. "If you call that winning."

"Oh, I do."

Kale drew her sword, but Blake grabbed her arm and lowered her voice. "Kale, you can't kill him. If it's true about your souls being linked, it could hurt you too, and in Shale's condition she might not survive. You can't risk that."

"You don't know we're connected."

"What about Shale's dream?" Blake said. "That had to be him."

"I don't...want to be...linked...to him," Shale struggled to say. "He's...a monster."

They both regarded Shale for a long moment, and then Kale nodded. "I'll try to lead him away from the entrance. Get Shale out of here."

"What about you?" Amber said.

"I'll be right behind you." Kale hesitated briefly before she closed the distance and kissed Amber deeply.

"How sweet," Theron mocked. "I hate to interrupt..." He twirled his sword in a swift arc.

Kale stepped forward, then brother and sister began to fight.

"OH, IF MOTHER could see us now," Theron taunted. "Did I kill her?" he asked hopefully.

"No," Kale replied flatly. Her anger toward him built to a boiling point. She didn't let it control her though, she channelled it. Her sword clashed against his, and she kicked him, causing him to stumble away from the entrance.

Blake and the others darted forward. Theron tried to intercept, but Kale blocked his path. He was determined though, and managed to push her back a few steps before Kale dug her heels in, refusing to budge any farther.

Kale shoved him away, quickly glancing behind to make sure they'd got Shale safely out.

"Looks like it's just you and me." Kale smirked at him.

Theron growled and launched his attack. He fought fiercely, and Kale matched it, knowing time was of the essence. Her sisters wouldn't leave until she was clear.

Theron ducked under her swing, rolling and coming up behind her. He slashed the back of Kale's calf.

She stumbled, but didn't fall. Theron dropped his sword and threw himself at Kale, lifting her off the floor and slamming her into the rough wall. His strength was immense, and he gripped Kale's wrist tightly, trying to make her release her weapon.

Kale wouldn't comply, a decision she regretted an instant later when he coldly snapped her wrist. She grunted in pain, and the sword fell from her now useless hand.

Theron punched her twice, then rammed her head off the rock wall.

BLAKE WENT THROUGH the crevice first, since they had to turn sideways to fit through the narrow gap. The trio hurried down the tunnel, pleased that no skirmish was going on up ahead.

Blake knew they'd been lucky so far, they had yet to be noticed. Though she could clearly hear Kale and Theron fighting, and suspected it wouldn't take long for the sound to reach Theron's army.

Blake signalled to Aris as they passed the fork in the tunnel, letting her know that they were clear, but Kale was still in the cavern.

Soon shouts were heard, and the trio picked up their pace. They reached the cave that the horses were kept in just as the battle broke out, and they rushed inside.

"Good thing...gave you...riding lesson," Shale murmured.

Blake laughed unexpectedly. Shale was still making jokes despite both the situation, and the obvious agony she was in. She loved this woman.

With difficulty, they managed to get Shale on a horse, and Blake clambered on behind, wrapping her arms around Shale to keep her steady. Blake secured the blanket snugly around Shale, trying to give her as much defence against the cold night air as she could.

Amber quickly fitted the horse's bridle, and passed the reins to Blake. "I'm going back to help Kale. Keep riding, we'll catch up."

Blake didn't try to stop her. "All right. Be careful."

“Ready?” Amber asked. At Blake’s nod, she smacked the horse’s backside. “Yah!”

The horse took off, and they were soon outside. Blake kicked the animal on, her hair whipping back as its speed increased.

“You’re...doing great,” Shale said through clenched teeth.

Blake grimaced at the amount of raw pain in Shale’s voice. This bouncing around had to be excruciating for her.

“Can you...hold me? Can’t. Stay awake. Hurts...too much.”

“I’ve got you,” Blake reassured, tightening her grip. She had barely finished speaking when Shale sagged against her, trusting Blake completely to keep her safe.

Theron GRINNED DOWN at her. He stood over Kale to haul her upright, and she lashed out with her leg, delivering a well-placed kick to his shin. It gave way, and Theron fell onto her—or he would have if Kale hadn’t moved.

She rolled quickly, reaching her sword and lifting it with her left hand as she stood.

Theron sneered. “Do you really think you can beat me one-handed?” His sword was out of reach, so he withdrew the dagger from his boot.

Kale’s head hurt from where it had struck the rock, and she felt warm blood trickling down her neck. “Do you really think you can beat me without your whip?”

Theron snarled, his features twisting in rage.

Kale had to jump backward to avoid being gutted by his dagger. His swipe went wide, and Kale got in a side kick to his head, causing Theron to collide with the wall.

He dodged and weaved, then went for an opening. Theron lunged, and stabbed his dagger deep into Kale’s side. “Got you,” he wheezed, seeming surprised when his mouth filled with blood. Theron looked down, finding Kale’s sword protruding from his chest. “But...I always win,” he said, a puzzled expression on his face.

“Not this time.” Kale ripped her sword out of him.

Theron sank to the floor, his eyes glazing over. One final shuddering breath emerged, and then he was dead.



Kale sheathed her sword and fell to her knees, slowly pulling the dagger out of her side. She heard hurried footsteps approaching, and glanced up as Amber ran in.

Kale beamed at her. "You came back."

"Of course." Amber squatted in front of her, taking the dagger from Kale's crimson stained hand and throwing it away. She then pressed Kale's unhurt hand against the stab wound. "It's a good thing I did. Keep pressure on it."

Kale leaned on Amber as she got to her feet.

"I'm afraid I can't offer to carry you," Amber joked, reminding Kale of their first meeting.

Kale chuckled. "I'm all right."

"You've been stabbed," Amber pointed out dryly. She then became serious, cupping the back of Kale's neck. "Are you sure you're all right?"

Kale kissed her gently, touched by Amber's concern. "I'm fine."

Amber nodded, and guided her out into the tunnel. Kale couldn't sprint, but she broke into a jog, seeing her sisters were struggling to keep Theron's army at bay.

Aris yelled as they passed by. "Fall back!"

Kale stopped when she reached the cavern full of supplies. "You release the horses," she instructed Amber.

Amber didn't question her reasons, and continued on without her. She soon had the animals' pen open, and striking her sword against the rock made them flee.

Amber kept eight horses locked in, mounted one, and led another into the tunnel beside her for Kale.

With her teeth, Kale uncorked the bottle that she'd retrieved from the supply cavern, pouring the ale in a thick line that stretched right across the width of the tunnel. She went through several bottles, but managed to get it done before her sisters reached it. Kale grabbed a torch from the wall, and whistled to Aris.

Aris clearly saw what Kale intended to do, for she said, "Together. Push them back!" Her warriors surged forward, shoving the soldiers away, causing many to lose their balance and crash into the row behind.

The Amazons turned and ran.

Kale lit the alcohol, and the flame darted along the line, burning brightly. It was close, but every Amazon made it through before the fire blocked the passage behind them.

Kale knew that the army wouldn't be held back for long, as the fire could be put out with dirt. It would give them the time they needed though.

Aris, bringing up the rear, was the last to a horse. She jumped on it bareback, clutched its mane, and kicked it on, following her sisters out of the cave and disappearing into the darkness.

## Chapter Fourteen

WHEN SHALE CAME to, they were in a forest, and she blurrily noted several sets of hooves.

"Blake," she murmured, though it came out sounding more like a moan than a name. She felt an answering kiss on the back of her neck.

"Shh. It's all right, Shale. It's all right," Blake said, her voice impossibly gentle.

Shale's vision started to darken again, but she didn't fight it. Blake's words of comfort had soothed her, and she drifted into unconsciousness once more.

KALE BROUGHT HER horse closer to Blake's. "Did she wake?"

Blake nodded. "Briefly."

"All right, we're far enough away. Let's stop here and treat the wounded," Aris said.

Kale looked skyward as she slowed her horse. They were fortunate that the clouds had shifted, revealing a full and bright moon overhead. The trees around had grown sparse, allowing the light to shine down unfiltered. Despite the night sky, she could see quite well.

Aris drew to a halt and dismounted. "Charis, Anataeus, start making a litter. Demetria, sit down, I need to stitch that arm."

Though exhausted, no one delayed, and the warriors all went into motion.

Aris helped Amber to lift Shale off the horse. They laid her carefully on the blanket that Kale placed on the ground.

Blake was soon beside them, and she tipped out the contents of her bag. Amber selected the fine bone needle, and threaded it with the yarn. Kale draped another blanket over Shale, though this time it was over her legs. She then uncovered her top half.

“Gods,” Aris uttered, upon seeing Shale’s injuries.

Kale touched Shale’s pale skin. “She’s too cold.”

“We can’t afford a fire, Kale,” Aris said. “The light will give away our position.”

Kale nodded. She knew that. Using her left hand, she stretched across and retrieved the two small bottles. After checking them, Kale held one out to Blake. “Sprinkle that on her wounds.”

Blake took the bottle, tipping her head in acknowledgement.

Kale then turned to Aris, who was filling the mug from a waterskin. Kale traded her the other bottle for the mug. “Put four pinches in,” Kale said.

Aris did as instructed, not quibbling as to who was in charge.

When complete, Kale added, “Make sure the litter is strong enough to hold two.” Shale needed body heat, and another person beside her would help to keep her warm.

Aris nodded, then put the bottle down beside Kale and moved away.

Shale didn’t even stir while Amber stitched the deepest of her wounds. Blake patched the others as best she could, dusting the herb over them before they were covered. There were so many lacerations, that by the time they had finished, the litter had been constructed and attached to the horse.

Shale’s body was mottled with bruises, but it was her stomach that worried Kale the most. It was dark and discolored, and Kale wondered about internal bleeding. Kale looked up into Blake’s concerned face, and knew she was thinking the same thing.

Kale indicated the drink, and Blake lifted Shale’s head. Kale poured it in a little bit at a time, so Shale wouldn’t choke. She felt Amber start to work on her own injuries, but Kale focussed on the task at hand.

“Do you feel any different, Kale?” Blake asked. “Now that Theron’s dead?”

Kale was pleased for a distraction from the pain. She thought about Blake’s question seriously for a long moment. “No, not at all. I guess the mystic must have been mistaken.”

“It’s been known to happen,” Amber said. Kale tipped the last of the drink into Shale’s mouth, and Blake wiped away the liquid that spilled down her chin. Kale held out the mug to Blake. “Can you mix me some?” She hated to ask for help, but she couldn’t do much with one hand. “Sure. Four pinches?” At Kale’s confirmation, she set to work.

“Blake, I need you to travel in the litter with Shale. Use your body to keep her warm,” Kale said. “I’ll ride the horse.” They couldn’t afford to wait until daybreak, and would continue on through the night. Shale was too weak. If a fever kicked in, she would need the expertise of their healer.

Kale drained the mug Blake gave her, almost retching at the taste. “That’s foul.”

“You’re hurt, you should—”

“I’ll ride,” Kale repeated firmly, her mind made up.

Blake nodded, not arguing with her.

Amber finished stitching Kale. “Stay still till I splint your wrist,” she said, moving away to fetch some sturdy sticks from the forest. When she returned, Amber positioned the supports on either side of Kale’s wrist, and held them there as Blake wound the bandage round.

Blake then put everything else back into her bag, stood, and gave it to Aris to treat the others with.

“You and Kale ride on,” Aris said. “We’ll follow on foot and cover our tracks.”

“All right,” Blake said. “We’ll see you back at the village.” She waited until Shale was placed on the litter before climbing in herself. Blake wrapped her body around Shale’s, wincing at the coldness of her skin. Blake moved closer still, and they were both swaddled from head to toe in blankets.

Kale didn’t waste a moment, mounting the horse and clicking her tongue to encourage it forward.

Amber frowned as they started to leave, clearly wanting to go with them.

Aris took pity on her. “Are you going or what?”

Amber grinned, gave Aris’s arm a squeeze, then ran to a horse.

“WE’LL SOON HAVE you home, Shale.” Blake kissed her cheek. “Appollonia will fix you up, don’t you worry.” Blake’s throat was sore, she’d been talking to Shale for that long, but she wanted her to know she was there. She kept talking, soothing her with words of comfort.

The litter shook slightly as the ground became uneven, and Blake tightened her hold, keeping Shale steady. Shale’s eyelids fluttered, but they didn’t open.

“I have you, sweetheart,” Blake vowed quietly. “You’re safe.”

Blake could have sworn a ghost of a smile appeared, but it was gone before she could be certain.

“Shale?” Blake waited, but didn’t get a response. “It’s all right,” she added. “You rest.”

Kale came back to check on them, as she had many times. They didn’t stop moving though, Amber guiding the horse alongside her own. “How’s she doing?”

Blake looked troubled. “Warming up, but I think she’s getting a fever.”

Kale leaned over and felt Shale’s forehead. “Damn,” she cursed, her brow knitting. “You’re right.”

Kale brushed Shale’s cheek tenderly, and Blake finally saw the woman beneath the warrior. A moment later, she was gone, and Kale straightened as she gathered her composure.

Kale returned to the saddle, and made the horse pick up its pace.

BOTH HER HANDS were being held, and as Shale slowly opened her eyes, she saw Blake on her left, Kale to her right. Amber was there, too, her head resting on Kale’s shoulder. All were slouched over the bed, fast asleep. And they looked as bad as she felt.

She was in Appollonia’s cabin—a place she recognised well from her frequent visits. She tried to talk, but all that emerged was an unpleasant rasping. It still had the desired effect, and all three heads snapped up.

“You’re awake!” Blake exclaimed, utter relief on her features.

“You had us worried, Shale,” Kale scolded, though she smiled at her.

Shale squeezed their hands lightly, dismayed by the amount of effort it took.

Appollonia appeared, and touched Shale's forehead, a pleased expression crossing her face. "Her fever has broken."

Blake burst into tears, and Shale wondered what had happened to make her so upset.

"You've been out for two days, Shale," Appollonia said. "We almost lost you."

Shale was shocked. No wonder Blake was in such a state. No wonder they all looked exhausted. "I..." She strained to speak.

"You'll be weak for a while." Appollonia fetched a mug of water. "Slow sips."

Blake raised her up slightly, supporting Shale's head. She managed a few sips, pleased when it removed some of the dryness from her throat.

"Had to...keep my word." Shale smiled tiredly at Blake.

Blake beamed at her, amidst her tears. "Yes, you did." She wiped them away. "And I thank you for that, Shale, from the bottom of my heart."

Ever the modest warrior, Shale's eyes twinkled. "It was...nothing."

Blake shook her head in amusement, then leaned in and kissed her gently, but devotedly.

Shale's smile strengthened. "For a reward," she had to pause, "like that," she was about to say that maybe she should get hurt more often, when she got her response.

"Don't you dare." Kale replied sternly.

"Don't even think about it." Blake said, equally firm.

"Looks like you're outvoted," Amber said, grinning when Shale gave a short chuckle.

"Looks...like."

"THERON BROKE IT," Kale answered, though Shale hadn't asked a question. She didn't need to, Kale had seen her observing the bound wrist.

"Is..."

"He's dead," Kale said

“His army?”

Amber leaned forward. “We covered our tracks. They don’t know where we are.”

“They’ve likely dispersed,” Kale said. “But we have extra guards on patrol just in case.”

Shale’s eyes darted nervously to the door, as though she expected an army of men to come barging in at any moment.

“Don’t worry,” Blake said, “You’re safe here.”

Shale’s breathing had quickened slightly, and she looked uncomfortable. “Tight,” she gasped.

All eyes flew to Appollonia, who came over swiftly. “You’ll feel restricted around your middle, Shale, I have wrapped your ribs to give them support. Is that what you’re feeling? Or is it inside?”

Shale focussed, concentrating on her breathing for a moment. “Bandage,” she finally said, hearing sighs of relief being released around her. Shale glanced at them meekly. “Sorry.”

Blake smiled and squeezed her hand.

“Your back is covered also, that whip cut you up pretty badly,” Appollonia said.

“But look at it this way, you’ve got a lot more scars to add to your collection,” Kale said. “The wound on your side is a beauty.”

Shale perked up a little. “Can I see?”

Appollonia shook her head. “Later, Shale, when your bandage needs changing. You shouldn’t be moved unnecessarily.”

Shale was disappointed, until she realised that her ribs would have to be unwrapped first, before Appollonia could get to the dagger slice on her side. Then she saw her point.

“Well, at least you have something to look forward to now,” Kale said, drawing a mortified sound from Blake. “What?”

Blake just shook her head, and Shale smiled.

“Warriors,” Amber imitated Blake perfectly, making her laugh outright.

“Precisely,” Blake said. Her tone became wry. “I’m surprised you haven’t shown her your injury yet.”

Kale's eyebrows rose. "I'd forgotten." She reached down to her side and began to remove her bandage. "Thanks for reminding me." Kale grinned when Blake rolled her eyes.

Shale shifted a fraction, trying to get a better view. She grimaced as searing pain lanced through her, and she thought better of it, staying put.

"Don't try to move," Appollonia said.

Shale couldn't have continued anyway, that slight movement had taken most of her energy. She felt Blake's thumb caressing the back of her hand, and when the pain had subsided, she gave her a small smile.

"There," Kale said, revealing her stitches. "What do you think?"

With effort, Shale turned her head. "Stabbed?"

"With Theron's dagger," Kale said.

"Mine, too," Shale said simply.

"Really?" Kale sounded surprised. "That's a first."

"What is?" Blake asked.

"We don't all speak twin," Amber said good-naturedly.

Kale snickered. "Shale's saying the slice on her side was made by Theron's dagger, too."

"I got that," Blake said. "Why is it a first?"

"Because no one has ever been good enough to scar both of us," Kale said. "And in the same place, too. How weird." A thoughtful expression crossed her face. Amber took the bandage from Kale and started to rewrap her wound, and Kale brushed her cheek in thanks.

Shale's eyes widened at the intimate gesture, especially since Amber didn't look at all surprised. She caught Kale's gaze, not wanting to ask outright in case she was mistaken. Kale nodded, confirming that the relationship had developed beyond mere friendship, and Shale returned her smile, exceptionally happy for her.

Shale noticed that Blake was watching the silent interaction amusedly, and seemed to know what they were referring to.

Amber tucked the end of the bandage underneath the rest of the binding, and looked up, clearly taken aback to see them all smiling at her. "What have I done?"

"Nothing," Blake said.



Amber's eyes narrowed. "Is my hair sticking out or something?" she said, twirling red curls around her fingers.

"No." Kale laughed.

Shale chuckled too, though she stopped quickly when it pulled on her ribs.

"How is the pain, Shale?" Appollonia asked. "Do you want—"

"No drink," Shale said. She couldn't possibly stomach any of that vile substance. Shale knew she would just be sick, and the retching motion would cause her considerable pain. She was so tired of hurting. She couldn't stand any more. The possibility of it alone made her panic.

"No," she repeated. Shale shook her head as well as she was able, which wasn't very much given her weakened state, but it alerted them to her distress.

"It's all right, Shale," Blake reassured quickly, placing a soothing hand on Shale's temple to keep her head still. "You've already had it. We gave it to you when you were still out."

"You don't need to have any," Appollonia said. "I was just making sure you didn't want any more. And I can see that you don't."

Shale didn't calm down, though she recognised that this was about a lot more than just the drink. Her mind was reacting to the trauma she'd recently gone through.

"Shh," Blake said. "We're right here, Shale." She gently stroked her brow. "You're safe. No one's going to hurt you. You're all right. All of us are all right." As Shale started to relax, Blake smiled softly at her. "That's it, Shale. Shh. Shh."

Shale's eyelids drooped heavily, but she tried to resist going to sleep.

Again, Blake read her well. "Don't fight it, sweetheart. Just close your eyes."

Blue eyes shut. "Don't...go." The pleading note was evident in Shale's voice.

"I won't, love," Blake promised. "I'll be here when you wake up."

AS SHALE SUCCUMBED to sleep, Kale gave Blake a grateful nod. "You're so much better at that than I am."

"You all need to rest as well," Appollonia said quietly. "Please make use of the other beds," she added, since no one was willing to leave.

“I’ll sit with her,” Blake said firmly, her gaze never shifting from Shale.

Kale stood, walked around Shale’s bed, and gripped the next bed’s frame with her hand. “Move out of the way, Blake,” she said. Once Blake had done so, Kale lifted one end of the bed, and set it down next to Shale’s. She then repeated the process, making the bed into a double.

“I’ll have to remember that,” Appollonia said. “I often have people who won’t leave loved ones.”

Blake touched Kale’s arm appreciatively. “This is the nicest thing you’ve ever done for me.” She lay down, clasped Shale’s hand, and was asleep within moments.

Kale draped a blanket over Blake, and chose to ignore the grin on Amber’s face. She followed Amber to the remaining bed. “Will you...”

“I’ll let you know when she’s awake,” Appollonia said.

Kale nodded, and she settled down beside Amber.

“YOU SURE ARE keeping me busy, Shale,” Appollonia teased, as she scattered some herbs over the numerous cuts on Shale’s back. Appollonia knew that this was painful for Shale—since she had to lie on her front for her back to be treated, and she didn’t yet have the strength to keep her weight off her broken ribs—so Appollonia intentionally distracted Shale with her banter, and tried to keep the mood light. “How many visits is this since you’ve arrived?”

“Lost count,” Shale said good-naturedly, though her body was tense. “I don’t want you to get bored.”

Appollonia laughed. “You’ll soon complain when I run out of remedies.”

Shale’s response was instantaneous. “Not if it’s that drink.”

Blake chuckled, handing Appollonia a fresh bandage.

“There must be a way to make it taste better?” Shale said. “Can’t you mix it with something?”

“I’ve thought of that, but nothing I’ve tried is strong enough to mask the flavor.” She paused briefly. “Actually, that’s not true. It did work once, but people complained it was worse.”

“Worse?” Shale asked incredulously. “Is that even possible?”

“Apparently so,” Appollonia said. “You’re healing nicely, Shale.”

“I’ve got a good healer.”

A pleased smile appeared at the compliment. “I’m still going to charge you the next time you get injured.”

Shale grinned, then sniggered. “How much?”

“Depends on the injury,” Appollonia replied easily. “A wolfskin for a broken bone, a deerskin for gashes or scrapes.” She shrugged. “It depends what I need at the time. Blake’s been showing me the bracelet you made her. Maybe I’ll ask for some jewellery.”

“She has, huh?” Shale gave Blake a delighted look. “What if I’ve got a mixture of injuries?”

“Then I’ll treat what you can pay for,” Appollonia said, straight-faced, causing Blake to burst into laughter.

Shale raised an eyebrow. “I’d best stock up.”

“Going off your previous visits, that’s probably a good idea,” Appollonia said.

KALE OPENED HER cabin door, and gestured for Amber to precede her. She closed it behind herself, and hovered there for a moment. This was the first time she and Amber had been alone together since they got back to the village, and Kale was somewhat unsure as to what was expected. It had been a long time since she’d been involved with anyone.

They had chosen Kale’s cabin because it was closer to Appollonia’s lodge, and Kale wanted to be nearby in case Shale needed her for anything. Amber didn’t mind, she seemed pleased by Kale’s thoughtfulness.

“I’m grateful you stayed with me the last couple of days, Amber. I know it was tough.”

“No problem. I’m just glad Shale’s going to be all right.”

Kale sat next to her on the bed. “She’s strong,” she said, with more than a hint of pride in her voice.

“She certainly is.”

“I don’t know what I’d have done if…” Kale shook her head, unable to finish.

“She’s fine,” Amber reassured gently, winding an arm around Kale’s back and gripping her shoulder. “Don’t think like that, Kale, you’ll just upset yourself.”

“You’re right.” She took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. “Are you hungry? I could rustle us up some food.”

“I’m too tired to eat,” Amber said with a smile. “And I promised Appollonia you’d get some rest. I always keep my promises.”

“Well I’m hardly in a condition to resist, so please, take me to bed.” Kale held out her hand.

Amber pulled Kale to her feet, and they came chest to chest with each other. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Kale chuckled. She let go of Amber’s hand, and wrapped her arms around the slim waist. She was mindful of her wrist, but she managed. The splint Appollonia had fitted was a lot less cumbersome, and didn’t restrict her too much.

“You do realise that the first time we met, you beat me up,” Amber teased, returning Kale’s embrace. “Who knew it would turn out like this?”

Kale laughed loudly. “I am sorry about that.” She grinned impishly. “But you should have ducked.”

Amber scowled playfully. “I’ll remember that for next time.”

“You do that,” Kale said. She placed her hand on Amber’s cheek, suddenly growing serious. She opened her mouth to speak, then shut it again.

“What?” Amber waited for several moments. Seeing Kale’s hesitation, she added, “You can tell me, Kale. Anything.”

That encouragement was all Kale needed, and she nodded. “You do know that I love you?”

Amber smiled warmly. “And I love you.”

Kale’s eyes sparkled with joy at her words.

“What brought that on?”

“Shale told me a while ago that I’m too hard.” Her fingers covered Amber’s mouth to forestall the protest. “She was right. I need to let people in. I want you to be the first, Amber.”

“I’d be honored, Kale.”

Kale grinned. “So, about that kiss?”

“DO YOU KNOW how embarrassing this is?” Shale grumbled, as she was carried across the village on a pallet, Aris at one end, Amber the other. She was now well enough to leave the healer’s lodge, and wanted to return to the comfort of her own home. Appollonia said she would call in on them to give Shale her treatment, so she wouldn’t have to be constantly moved. It was a good thing too, because Shale had no intention of repeating this humiliating process. “I don’t know why you wouldn’t just let me walk.”

“Hush.” Blake wore an amused look on her face.

“You would have collapsed as soon as you got out the door,” Kale said.

Shale frowned, and crossed her arms over her chest. She didn’t dispute it though. She was still weak, her body taking longer than she would have liked to recover.

Blake grinned down at her, and Shale felt a smile of her own forming. She couldn’t stay annoyed for long when Blake was around.

Shale was soon settled in her own bed, and despite her complaints, she thanked them profusely for their help.

“You’re welcome,” Aris said. She looked to each of the twins. “Hurry up and get well, the training ground is too quiet without you.”

They smiled at her. “Will do,” they replied together.

Aris chuckled, hefted the pallet, and turned to Amber. “Shall we?”

Amber nodded, gave Kale a quick kiss, then followed Aris out of the cabin. “Some of us have to train. We can’t all be lazy,” Amber called teasingly over her shoulder.

Kale snorted and shook her head. “Some of us have to train more than others.”

Even from her position on the bed, Shale heard Amber’s indignant cry of protest, and she chuckled. Shale slowly sat up with Blake’s help, and was propped upright.

Blake pushed dark hair back, off Shale’s face. “All right?”

Shale took a moment to gather herself, her ribs were extremely tender. Then she tipped her head to Blake, giving her a reassuring smile. “It’s good to be home.”

Blake kissed her lovingly. “It is, isn’t it?”

Shale sighed happily, and glanced around their cabin. “So, did you enjoy the walk?” At their blank stares, she added, “To the waterfall?”

“In all the chaos, I’d forgotten all about it,” Kale said. “Yes. It’s lovely up there.”

Blake nodded her agreement. “We’ll take you when you’re better.”

Shale’s smile widened. “I’d like that.”

“Oh, I meant to tell you, Blake’s been causing trouble,” Kale said teasingly.

“Me? What did I do?”

“You showed all the warriors up,” Kale said with a grin. She glanced to Shale. “When we were searching for you, Blake kept ahead of most of the warriors. She put them all to shame.”

Shale raised an eyebrow to Blake, impressed. “That doesn’t surprise me, I already know she’s got great stamina.” She winked at Blake.

Kale laughed, and Blake blushed, burying her face in Shale’s shoulder.

“I’m still amazed you managed to stay on the horse,” Shale said.

“I had a great teacher,” Blake said. She lowered her voice so only Shale could hear. “Though I prefer riding you.” She giggled as Shale flushed hotly, and Blake pressed her lips to her neck.

Shale saw that Kale was about to ask why she was bright red, and quickly thought of something to divert her attention. “You do realise I win on battle wounds now, too?”

Kale frowned in mock annoyance. “I know. Are you going to leave anything for me?”

“No,” Shale said, grinning.

“I can’t possibly beat that either, I’d have to be dead,” Kale said.

Blake chuckled. “You compete over the strangest things.”

SHALE WAS DOZING lightly in Blake’s arms, curled against her side. Her head rested on Blake’s chest, and she looked up as she felt Blake’s breathing hitch underneath her. She was alarmed to find Blake crying softly, and Shale reached up and cupped her face. “Blake, sweetheart, what’s wrong?”

“I was so s...scared, Shale,” Blake said. “Of losing you.”

“You’ll never lose me,” Shale promised. “I’m fine. Thanks to you. Thank you for rescuing me.”

The corner of Blake’s mouth curled up. “Kale and the warriors did most of it.”

“The fighting maybe, but you had the hardest job.”

Blake raised a questioning brow. “I did?”

“You had to keep Kale in line,” Shale said, only half joking. It had the desired effect, and Blake chuckled. “I know what she’s like. I’m guessing it was you and Amber who kept her in line?” She didn’t wait for an answer, and kissed Blake’s tears away. “So thank you.”

Blake produced a tremulous smile.

“I can only imagine how difficult it must have been for you, Blake.” Shale gave her a sympathetic look. “I know if it had been you who had been taken...” She shook her head sadly, not even able to finish the sentence. “I’m sorry you had to go through that.” Shale nuzzled into her, hugging Blake close, giving her as much comfort as she could. “I’m here, Blake. I’m not going anywhere.”

Blake’s arms tightened around Shale, and when she spoke, her voice was exceptionally gentle. “Shale?” She waited until Shale looked up, as if wanting the eye contact. “They didn’t hurt you in any other way, did they?”

Shale knew what Blake was asking. “No. The man with the pail...Theodysius,” Her nose scrunched up. “He was going to, but you took care of him.”

Blake released a heavy sigh of relief.

Shale smiled at her. “My hero.”

A shy grin appeared on Blake’s face. “A princess and a hero? Careful, I’ll get a big head.”

“Not with Kale around you won’t,” Shale said dryly. “She’ll soon put you in your place.”

Blake giggled. “I don’t doubt it. That reminds me, I asked Kale if she felt any different now that Theron’s gone. She said she didn’t, but I wanted to check with you since I know you’re more sensitive than she is.”

“I don’t feel any different either,” Shale replied. She shook her head. “It doesn’t make any sense, Kale and I were clearly linked to him. The mystic was right about that.”

“I’m just glad she was wrong about you dying if they did.”

Shale's eyes widened in sudden understanding. "She wasn't wrong. We were!" She sat up excitedly, clutching at her ribs as they protested painfully.

"Hey. Easy," Blake said. She sat up, too, placing herself in front of Shale. "What do you mean?"

"Where one will be, the other will follow. When one is seriously hurt, the other will pay the price," Shale said, quoting the mystic's saying.

Blake gave her a blank look.

"When one is seriously hurt." Shale pointed to herself. "The other will pay the price—that's Theron. She was telling us what would happen. We just misinterpreted it."

"I can see what you mean, Shale, but surely if the mystic knew that, she wouldn't have stopped your tribe from killing him."

Shale frowned. "Mm. Good point." She shrugged. "Maybe she didn't know which of us it was, you know how vague their visions can be. Or maybe it was meant to happen, although I can't see why. The only good thing to come of it was that Kale finally got together with Amber." Shale raised a speculative brow to Blake.

"Maybe they were destined to be together?"

Shale took hold of Blake's hand. "Like us."

Blake smiled and nodded. "It's a nice way to think of it."

Their lips met halfway, and they melded together. As one.

## Chapter Fifteen

Six Months Later



“IT CAN’T GO there.”

“Why not?” Amber said. “I think it looks nice there.”

“Because I’ll trip over it every time I get out of bed,” Kale said. “Are you trying to kill me?”

Amber paused, as if seriously considering it. “That’s where yours is.”

“There’s enough room for mine.”

Amber lifted the chest that was filled with her clothes, and turned to Kale expectantly. “Fine. Where do you want it to go?”

Kale shrugged. “Wherever you want.”

“You’ve said that three times now,” Amber said. She put the chest down at the end of the bed.

“Not there.”

Amber exhaled loudly. “Kale, I swear...” She stopped as Kale erupted into laughter. Amber scowled, realising she was being teased. “Why you...” She threw herself at Kale, and they fell onto the bed. “Four times I moved that chest, Kale. Four times!”

Kale looked unrepentant. “I would have made it five if I hadn’t laughed.”

Amber chuckled and slapped her shoulder playfully. “Seriously, where do you want it to go?”

“Amber, from now on this is your cabin, too.” Kale wrapped her arms around her. “Change or move anything you want.”

Her smile became mischievous. “Anything?”

“Anything.”

“All right. Move onto the center of the bed.”

Kale smirked, and with Amber still on top of her, she moved them both. “How’s this?”

Amber grinned. “Much better.”

“You do realise you can’t finish unpacking from here?”

Amber left a trail of kisses down Kale's neck. "You're right, I'd best get on with it." She went to roll off Kale, but found herself held firmly in position. Amber raised her eyebrows questioningly.

"I changed my mind," Kale said. "The unpacking can wait."

"Oh, I don't know," Amber said, lightly drawing circles on Kale's bare skin. "My clothes might get creased."

Kale swallowed hard when Amber's hand worked its way beneath her top. "They're in the chest..." She inhaled sharply as Amber found a very sensitive spot. "They'll...be fine there."

Amber didn't relent. "If you're sure?"

"I'm sure," Kale said. At Amber's giggle, she narrowed her eyes. "You're such a tease." Kale smacked her behind.

"Yow!" Amber squealed. "You started it."

"Yes, and I should have known better. You always win."

Amber looked smug. "And don't you forget it."

Kale flipped Amber onto her back, and they grinned at each other before their mouths joined.

The kiss was filled with a mixture of passion and tenderness, but most of all it was filled with love.

"I SEE YOU'VE been busy."

Shale glanced over her shoulder, then hammered the last nail into the wood. "Perfect timing, Blake. I've just finished." She put down her tools and stepped back to examine her handiwork. "What do you think?"

"It looks nice." Blake admired the newly completed shelves. "You've done a good job."

Shale grinned at her. "Only the best for my queen."

Blake gave her a droll look. "The coronation ceremony isn't for a week yet, Shale."

Shale's arms encircled her waist. "I'm just getting you used to it."

Blake linked her hands behind Shale's neck. "Do you think it will change much? When my mother passes her throne onto me?"

"You're already our queen, Blake, Zayla told me as much. Many already look to you as our leader, and they have for quite some time now. This coronation ceremony is just that—ceremony."

Blake raised her eyebrows in surprise. "And when did you and my mother have this little chat?"

"Today, actually."

"Today?" Blake frowned. "This morning, Mother told me she had something of the utmost importance to attend to, but she wouldn't tell me what it was. It's not like her to keep things from me. I've been worried about it all day."

Shale looked uncomfortable. "It's nothing to worry about, Blake."

Blake's eyes widened. "Do you know what it is?" When Shale didn't deny it, Blake added, "What was so important? It's not her health, is it?"

Shale shook her head. "No, it's nothing like that." She moved her hands onto Blake's shoulders, squeezing reassuringly. "Don't worry yourself."

"How can I not?" Blake said. "It has to be something for you both to keep it from me."

"It's nothing bad, sweetheart. I promise you that." Shale moved away from Blake and sat on the bed. "I asked Zayla to come here. I needed to discuss something with her, and that's what was so important. Please don't ask me what..."

"What was it?"

"...it was," Shale finished. She sighed. "I didn't want to do it like this."

Blake knelt in front of her, placing her hands on Shale's thighs. "Do what?"

"It was meant to be a surprise," Shale said good-naturedly. She pulled Blake up onto her lap, smiling as their bodies enfolded around one another. "I wanted your mother's blessing before I asked you. That's why she was here." Shale leaned back slightly, and produced an intricate ring, holding it up for Blake to see. "I love you, Blake. More than I've ever loved anybody. More than I ever thought possible. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

Blake threw her arms around Shale and kissed her, long and sweet. "I will."

They both grinned, kissed again, and Shale slipped the ring onto Blake's finger.

## Epilogue

“CONGRATULATIONS,” AMBER SAID, embracing Blake.

“That’s great.” Kale pulled Shale to her for a hug. “You’ve got a good one there. Don’t mess it up,” she teased.

Shale laughed and clapped her on the back. “Thanks.”

They broke apart and switched, Shale hugged Amber, and Blake went to embrace Kale.

Kale held out a hand, stopping her. “You do know what you’re letting yourself in for?”

Blake nodded. “I love Shale. Very much.”

Kale smiled and rolled her eyes. “I know that. I mean with me, I’ll be your sister-in-law.”

Blake feigned a look of horror. “By the gods, you’re right. I can’t possibly go through with it now.” Shale and Amber chuckled beside her.

Kale grinned. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” She opened her arms, and Blake moved into them.

“I’m sure I can manage,” Blake said with certainty.

“I think that deserves a toast,” Kale said, as she stepped back. She had barely finished speaking when Shale placed a mug into her hands, drawing further laughter.

The twins looked at one another, then to both Blake and Amber. They raised their mugs. “To family.”

The End

## 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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