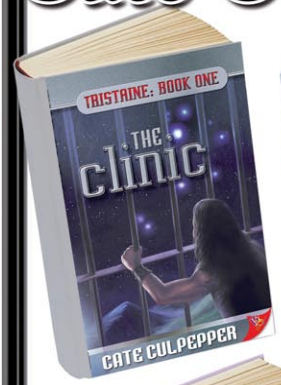
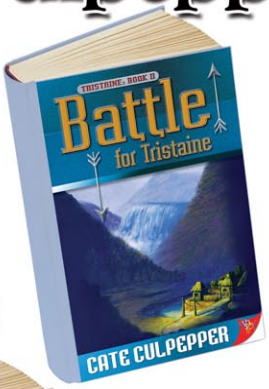
Cate Culpepper





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Cate Culpepper

THE CLINIC

TRISTAINE BOOK ONE

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THE CLINIC

TRISTAINE BOOK ONE

by

Cate Culpepper

2006

THE CLINIC

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DEDICATION

To the women of Shann's Clan:
Jay, Monica, Dana and Lisa
We will go home someday

Chapter One

The steel doors at the end of the cell block parted with a resounding crash.

"They're not taking you, Jesstin."

"Stand down, Cam." Jess rested her hand on the younger woman's shoulder. "It might be another interrogation."

"They bring you back bloody from those," Kyla hissed. Her brown eyes flashed both anger and fear as heavy footfalls moved down the stone hallway. "And what if it isn't, Jess? What if they're here to—?"

"Then tell Shann I died Tristaine's true daughter." Jess eyed them both. "We can't fight bullets and truncheons with our fists, adanin. Save your strength for the real battle."

"All right, Amazon." The lead guard waited until the five other armed staff gathered close to the small cell. "Stand away from the door."

"We're all Amazons, you dim City prick," Kyla spat.

"Watch your mouth, little whore." The guard nodded down the hall, and someone threw a switch to open the barred gate.

It was still moving when Camryn flew at the men with the deadly ferocity of a warrior twice her age. Jess cursed and dove after her, and Kyla was only a heartbeat slower. The next moments were filled with roars of alarm and the thudding of clubs on flesh. It finally took a shower of mace to restrain Jess and force the younger Amazons back into the cell.

"I wouldn't pull that shit where you're going, banshee." The red-faced commander jutted his chin toward Jess's sisters,

who lay gasping and raging on the concrete floor. “Not if you want to see those two alive again.”

The beating that followed seemed senseless. The guards didn’t fire questions at Jess, as they had in the past. They simply battered her until she couldn’t stand. She swayed on her knees, bleeding from a cut over one eye, until a cudgel smashed into the side of her head and took her down. As her senses faded she heard Kyla’s voice calling her, choked and despairing.

As long as they leave Kyla and Camryn alone, Jess thought. *As long as they’re okay, we can give Shann time.*

She was unconscious when she was transferred to the Clinic.

❖

Biting cold woke her.

Jess surfaced through the familiar, unpleasant haze bestowed by blows to the head. She found herself strapped into a jointed chair, a kind of recliner, equipped with arm and ankle cuffs. Her long body lay full length on its padded surface, and the cuffs were tight but not biting. She figured if she hadn’t been freezing and aching with fresh bruises, she’d be comfortable enough.

Another intense light flooded over her, courtesy of an arc lamp suspended over the recliner. It took Jess several tries to squint her eyes fully open. She still wore Prison blacks, a standard-issue sleeveless shirt and slacks, and she was barefoot. Her wrists were cuffed to the chair at her sides. Her ankles were similarly bound to the base of the recliner.

She shifted, wincing at the pain in her side, her gaze ticking methodically around the small, antiseptic room. A detention cell, judging by the heavy steel door, empty except for the reclining restraint and shelves of medical supplies, and cold as a Fed’s heart. The frigid air smelled astringently sterile. With a nostalgia that was almost grief, Jess longed for the light pine spice of Tristaine’s mountain breezes. She wondered if this eye-watering chemical stench would burn it from her memory forever.

Jess knew where she was. Horror stories of this place abounded in the Prison population. Tales of the research done here had even reached Tristaine. If half the rumors about the Clinic were true, Jess might have opted for execution over transfer, given a choice.

She shivered and craned her neck. She couldn't see the cooling unit in the wall behind her, but judging from the chill blasting through the cell, it was cranked high. She lay still and concentrated on her breathing. The crease between her arched eyebrows faded as she relaxed. Jess knew she wasn't badly hurt. She was cold and hungry, but she'd been hungry for weeks. She still had a pulse. She could wait this part out.

Camryn and Kyla were relatively safe, the young idiots. They'd been arrested in a brazen attempt to free Jess, mistaking their adolescent selves for the seasoned warriors celebrated around Tristaine's storyfires. If Shann hadn't been sick with her own grief for Dyan, she would have realized Cam and Ky couldn't abide the thought of Jess rotting in a City Prison. The women of Tristaine were adanin, sisters, and they watched out for each other.

Jess wondered how long her respite would last before someone came for her and this bleak nightmare continued. She was too cold to sleep, so she allowed herself the rare luxury of remembering home. To her lifelong dismay, she had no control over her tear ducts. She hated it, but she cried easily and always had. Her mentor, Dyan, taught her warriors never to shed tears before an enemy. Jess didn't risk remembering Tristaine now unless she was alone.

Her shoulders relaxed against the leather surface of the restrainer, and her breathing deepened as her mind filled with images. Nothing drawn out, just quick flickering images of her sisters and her village.

All the clichés of poetry applied to Tristaine: sunlit meadows and craggy, brooding peaks, surrounded by the lush thickness of old-growth forest. The mountain air was as crisp and

pure as chilled wine and vibrant with birdsong. A river coursed through the center of the village, wending between their cabins and lodges. Its quiet, rushing music nurtured the daughters of Tristaine, even in their sleep. Through the long, bleak City nights, Jess still ached for that reassuring whisper.

She summoned faces, and they came. Shann and Dyan, sitting quietly in meetings of Tristaine's high council, listening more than speaking, their hands joined loosely on the oak table. Dyan's scarred knuckles, her blunt fingers stroking Shann's wrist. Kyla's sweet, rich soprano, raised in song at a harvest festival dance.

Camryn's younger blood sister, Lauren, following Dyan around everywhere she went like a worshipful puppy. She blushed crimson whenever Dyan spoke to her and raised her hand to hide her crooked front teeth when she smiled.

Jess's eyes filled as more brutal memories surfaced. Riding a routine patrol on a moonlit mountain trail, at Dyan's side. The ambush by City soldiers, and Dyan falling under a deadly spray of bullets. Little Lauren dying seconds later. Jess shivered and shook her head slightly to banish those wrenching images.

She heard the pneumatic pump over the door whoosh as a young blond woman elbowed it open. She was carrying a clipboard, and she wore a white coat. Some kind of healer. Jess blinked rapidly, stinging the cut over her eye.

"What the—?" There was surprise in the girl's voice. The white coat was too big for her, and she wrapped it more tightly around her shoulders as she went to check the cooling unit behind the jointed chair. Jess noted that she moved like an athlete, in spite of her diminutive size.

She studied Jess's restraints silently for a moment, and her green eyes narrowed when she saw the emerging bruises on the prisoner's face. Then she sighed and blinked at the steam her breath made in the cold air.

"My name is Brenna. I'm your medical advocate." She

consulted the form on her clipboard. “Who left you in here like this?”

“Hello, Brenna.” Jess flexed her sore jaw. “I’m Jesstin.”

Brenna blew tousled bangs off her forehead and slapped the clipboard against her thigh. “Well, this tells me exactly jack. You came in when, last night?” Without waiting for a reply, she snatched the penlight out of the breast pocket of her white coat, thumbed it on, and moved the beam across Jess’s glassy eyes. “Were you examined on arrival, Jesstin?”

“No. I’m all right.” It would have sounded butch if her teeth hadn’t been chattering.

Brenna measured Jess’s pulse at the throat and frowned at her bloodshot eyes. “How long since you’ve had any solid sleep or a decent meal?”

“A while.”

Brenna muttered something derogatory about Prison health-care services as she palpated the base of Jess’s jaw. Judging from her contusions, both fresh and faded, her patient had been beaten more than once in the recent past. Brenna wondered uneasily what this prisoner, with her mild brogue, had done to merit such abuse.

For her part, Jess wondered when the Feds had started handing out hypodermics to school kids. At least this girl had good instincts. Her touch was light and careful, and her green eyes had that same look of focused concentration that Shann’s held when she tended Tristaine’s wounded. She doubtless had excellent training. City dwellers were tested for aptitude in childhood, then educated rigorously in a single discipline. Jess hoped this Brenna had held no dreams of teaching or practicing law.

Jess tightened as Brenna’s fingers probed a tender area low on her right side, and Brenna instantly shot her a look of concern before continuing. This little pixie didn’t seem callous enough for Government work.

"Were you given anything for pain at the Prison?" Brenna asked.

"They don't keep analgesics at the Prison. Your hands are cold, Brenna."

"Jesstin?" Brenna straightened. "You're supposed to answer my questions as simply and briefly as possible. If you're insolent, or too familiar, or uncooperative, there'll be consequences. You know that, right?"

"Right."

"Great, we understand each other." Brenna pulled a thick blanket from the stand beneath the restraining chair. "You may be bigger than me, but in your condition I could deck you with one punch. Don't forget it, please." She flipped the blanket out and settled it over Jess, then tucked it around her sides with that odd gentleness. "Okay. I'll find someone in maintenance to turn down the damn cooler. We'll make you comfortable enough to rest. Sound all right?"

"Yes'm."

Brenna glanced at Jess warily, but her sky blue eyes were guileless. She nodded and left the cell.

❖

Brenna slapped her clipboard on the executive secretary's desk. "Charlotte, I need to see Caster."

Charlotte batted heavy eyelids at her. "Goodness, Brenna. Is there a problem with your patient?"

"Yes. Is Caster in?"

"Well, she is, but generally she's not available on demand, you know." Charlotte smiled sympathetically, and her penciled eyebrows rose. "Military Research is really nothing like the Civilian unit, sweetie. Now you're working with the top scientists in the City, and you can't expect them to be at the beck and call of every entry-level—"

"It's quite all right, Charlotte." An elegant woman with a silver cloud of hair and a patrician carriage emerged from the

office behind the desk. “My door is always open to my staff, particularly this brilliant young medic who’s so vital to our current study.”

“Oh, well, that’s fine then.” Charlotte flushed. “Brenna, you are so incredibly lucky to be working with Caster. You know she received *another* Government citation only last week? Let me bring you two some coffee. It won’t—”

“Thank you, Charlotte, but we can’t take you away from your busy desk. Come, Brenna, walk with me.” Caster took Brenna’s elbow and steered her gently down the richly carpeted corridor. “I hope you’re not in need of a caffeine fix, dear. I can take only so much fawning before noon. Now tell me, how are you finding your first days with us?”

“I have some concerns, Caster.” Brenna drew a breath. She wasn’t easily intimidated, but the scientist’s regal aura demanded deference. “Our test subject was transferred from the Prison last night, and not only was she badly beaten before arrival, no one—”

“Ah, our Tristainian is here at last.” Caster beamed. “Do you know what lengths we had to go to in order to secure a subject for this study, Brenna? Why, it took months of planning and coordination with a dozen different Federal agencies.” She paused, and the fingers on Brenna’s arm tightened. “Jesstin is fully functional, isn’t she? No bones were broken, no organs ruptured?”

“I haven’t done a full physical, but there was nothing critical on initial exam. However, whoever did the transfer just dumped her in a detention cell, Caster, and she lay in restraints for hours without medical attention. And some idiot cranked up the cooler in there so high she—”

“All quite deliberate, Brenna.” Caster smiled at her stunned expression. “For this study, our subject must be kept in a state of constant vulnerability. For some prisoners, psychological duress is enough. But Jesstin, as you’ve probably noticed, is quite a formidable physical specimen, and she doesn’t frighten easily.

It's vital that she understand we have complete and utter mastery over her fate, and unfortunately, the only way to remind her of that is through punitive dominance."

"Punitive dominance," Brenna repeated. She pulled her white coat closely around her and folded her arms. "I…I see, Caster. I'm sorry, it's just a very…different way of handling things than the protocols I'm used to."

"I'm sure it is, dear." Caster slipped an arm around her shoulders. "You came to us from the Civilian unit, and their clinical approach differs greatly from ours. On the C.U., you worked primarily with petty criminals, artists, religious zealots, and the like, testing new medications. Here, your patients will be felons. Murderers, political dissidents, arsonists. Prisoners who present a genuine, ongoing threat to Government security."

"All right, Caster." Brenna hated the meekness in her voice. "Thank you for explaining. I guess I'm still getting used to my new role here."

"Well, the good news is your essential role hasn't changed." Caster nodded at a passing colleague as they moved past a tastefully appointed atrium. "You're still in charge of ensuring your patient's physical welfare. You're to treat any illness or injury Jesstin incurs, to the best of your ability, in order to keep her properly healthy for the rigors of clinical trials. You're not to give her anything for pain, however."

"Nothing?"

"Strict unit policy. In fact, I want you to apply a small pain stimulus yourself, dear, during the first examination. No doubt you did this occasionally in the Civilian unit."

"Yes," Brenna said.

"While Jesstin should look to you as her medical advocate, she shouldn't be led to believe your role with her is entirely benevolent."

They had reached the doors leading to the laboratories and treatment rooms, where plush carpeting and carefully nurtured

plants gave way to cold tile and disinfectant. A uniformed man with a studied bearing of command came through them briskly.

"General Lorber!" Caster lifted a hand to one breast.

"The good doctor." Lorber's eyes crinkled above his walrus mustache. "I hear our mighty Amazon is finally in residence!"

"That's right, General. In spite of the best efforts of some sadly deluded civilians, clinical trials will open right on schedule. Oh, I'm so glad you stopped by." Caster beckoned to Brenna and put a hand on her shoulder. "I'd like to present our unit's new medical technician, who comes to us with the most glowing professional references imaginable. Brenna, General Lorber is the Clinic's Military liaison."

"Miss Brenna." Lorber's large freckled hand devoured Brenna's. "With a Clinic team of such breathless beauty, how can we fail?"

Caster tittered girlishly. "The General is our own Roman warrior, Brenna, surging into battle against the rapacious Amazons of old! We couldn't have a more valorous ally."

Lorber's fleshy thumb drew lazy circles over Brenna's knuckles. She smiled up at him politely and slowly tightened her grip until he stopped. "It's an honor, sir."

"If you have a moment, General, I'd love to show you our latest estimates on the value of Tristaine's timber rights." Caster bestowed a parting smile on Brenna. "Run along and see to our illustrious patient, dear. And remember, I want you to feel free to come to me at any time, yes?"

Brenna watched the flirtatious brush of Caster's hand on the General's arm as they strolled back toward her office. She noted the distinguished Roman warrior avoided her eyes. She started to push through the double doors, then reversed herself and took a detour to the staff lounge. She checked to make sure she was alone, then opened her locker and pulled out a small silver flask.

She tipped it twice, whispering invectives. That brief lapse of professionalism worried her. Angering a General was

simple stupidity. She couldn't let emotion goad her here. Her job was keeping her patient healthy, then cashing paychecks from the most prestigious research facility in the City. She would not make waves.

When Brenna pushed the heavy door of the detention cell open, she was relieved to note some improvement. While still cool, the cell's temperature was bearable. The prisoner lay quietly under the blanket, but she opened those disconcerting eyes when Brenna approached her.

"What do you say we start again?" She folded her hands behind her. "I'm Brenna, I'm Clinic staff. I'm going to take care of your health needs during the research study and be your medical advocate while you're in clinical trials. Remember that I have the authority to discipline or disable you at any time, if necessary. Understood?"

Jess swallowed. "Would this be a Military study or Civilian?"

Brenna heard the dryness in her throat, and she lifted a blue decanter of water and fit the bendable straw between Jess's lips. "This is the Military Research unit."

For a moment Jess was still, and then she pulled hard on the straw. The cool water sluiced down her sandpapered throat in a welcome flood, but she hardly tasted it. She would have preferred organ harvesting or the morgue to this. A Civilian study would probably kill her too, eventually, but Military research meant the Feds planned to use her against Tristaine.

"Caster is the scientist in charge of your project. She'll explain everything you need to know later." Brenna replaced the decanter on the table, and her voice took on a practiced, soothing cadence. "You just need to concentrate on following directions, Jesstin, and obeying rules, and you'll be fine. All that clear?"

"Clear," Jess said. She smelled whiskey. Wonderful. Clinical trials, Military research, and a Government pixie with a fondness for spirits and access to long needles. The luck of Tristaine's women hadn't turned yet.

"Also," Brenna rummaged in the pocket of her lab coat, frowning again, "I should have read this to you earlier." She pulled out an index card. "'Jesstin, your transfer to this medical facility was arranged under conditions of highest security. Be aware that armed peace officers—'" Brenna scowled and glanced up. "They mean orderlies with guns. 'That armed peace officers, stationed throughout the Clinic at all times, will ensure your compliance with unit rules.'"

She pushed the card back in her pocket. "It goes on like that for a while. Translated, you can rebel or try to escape if you wish, but someone will shoot you if you do."

Jess filed away Brenna's apparent distaste for this edict for future reference. A medical advocate must not rank highly enough in the hierarchy to know that the Feds had assured her compliance above and beyond the firepower of Clinic staff. She had little doubt that Camryn and Kyla would pay the price for any resistance she might offer.

"I need to patch you up." Brenna surveyed Jess critically. "Save us both time. Tell me where you're hurt."

"My head stings." Jess thought about it. "My side hurts. Other than that, cuts and bruises."

Brenna unbuttoned Jess's shirt and spread the black cloth apart. At first she thought the mark high on Jess's left shoulder was a deep bruise; then the intricate swirls of color asserted themselves into a complex design.

"Is this a tattoo? I've never seen one."

"It's a clan marking. It identifies my guild and the crest of my home village." Jess had seen her glyph inspire the same wonder in jaded Prison guards that softened Brenna's features now. In a society so threatened by individual expression that most forms of commercial art were illegal, the work of Tristaine's glyph-painters seemed magical. All but unreadable to City dwellers, the small circular etching of an arrow in flight marked Jess as a warrior, and the dancing stars formed a constellation signifying her Amazon heritage.

"It's beautiful," Brenna murmured.

"Thank you," Jess said simply. "I think so, too."

Brenna forced her eyes away from the glyph. Standing on her tiptoes and leaning over, she spotted a thunderhead bruise low on her patient's right side and drew in a breath. "That's got to hurt like hell, Jesstin. You might have a few cracked ribs."

"Don't think so."

"Well, I've got to be sure." Brenna straightened and regarded Jess. "I'll have to examine that bruised area and decide if you need X-rays. That's going to be painful. And I need to stitch the cut on your head." She paused. "You were right about analgesics, Jesstin. I can't give you any."

"Brenna?" Jess squinted up at her. "Just curious. How in blazes did you end up here?"

"What do you mean?"

"You don't seem to enjoy inflicting pain. I'm trying, but I can't see you as the bloodthirsty type." Jess's brogue deepened when she was tired, and she was starting to twirl her *r*'s.

"I'm a certified medical technician, Jesstin. I may be new to this particular unit, but I've seen my fair share of gore. Don't worry. I'm no green nurse's aide."

"You're a kid." Jess closed her eyes wearily. "You're probably a capable medic, lass, but how you got assigned to a gruesome outfit like Military Research—"

Brenna laid the flat of her hand over the bruise on the prisoner's ribs and pressed, gently but deliberately. Jess stiffened hard in her restraints.

"Okay." Brenna cleared her throat again. "Now you know I'm not just a capable medic. I'm also capable of correcting you if I have to." She folded her arms tensely. "Look, I'm required to apply a pain stimulus like that with a new patient. That makes it clear that I'll do what I—"

"Clear," Jess gasped.

Brenna waited uneasily until her patient was able to lie flat again in the restrainer.

Then she pushed up the sleeves of her coat, as if to reset her professional mode. “The other unit I was assigned to in the Clinic didn’t do Military research, Jesstin. But we did lots of Civilian projects there, and I’ve worked with a dozen prisoners. Some of my patients did well, and they were released. Some of them wouldn’t cooperate, and they went back to Prison.”

Jess studied her, the pain still pounding in her side, and wondered if this girl really believed that release was an option in her case.

Brenna shrugged, her face impassive. “It didn’t matter to me, my pay was the same. So don’t push me, okay?”

Neither of them spoke while Brenna deftly stitched the cut above Jess’s brow. She knew her fingers were cold on the rugged face, in spite of the restored warmth in the cell. She’d never stitched anyone without at least a numbing spray, and she found her patient’s utter stillness beneath the fiery needle unnerving. However, her stitches were characteristically neat and even. She held herself to high standards when it came to patient care.

She moved to the other side of the recliner and used her palms and the flats of her fingers to detect any sign of fracture in the prisoner’s ribs. She found none. Brenna applied salve and bandages as needed. Then she wrote clinical notes on the clipboard for some time while Jess dozed beneath the blanket.

Brenna brushed one hand through her bangs and noticed she’d gotten a smudge of blood on the corner of the blue intake form. She slapped down her pen in annoyance and went to the sink. She didn’t realize her hands were trembling until she held them beneath the water, and she thought longingly of the flask in her locker.

She took a white cloth and folded it. Her patient was still shivering, from exhaustion and pain now rather than cold. Brenna patted the beaded sweat off Jess’s forehead with the cloth and summarized her clinical impressions.

Jesstin of Tristaine was a slightly malnourished Caucasian female in her late twenties. She was in surprisingly good health and

obviously was fit and physically active before her incarceration. To say the least, Brenna thought. She looked as strong as a horse. Her shoulders were broad, and according to her orders, her powerful arms and legs required constant restraint. She might have been sentenced to field work at the Prison, judging by the healing scratches on her long fingers.

Brenna unsnapped Jess's shirt again and patted the cloth over her throat before moving it over her stomach and sides, studiously avoiding the firm, pale breasts.

Jess lay quietly under her skillful ministrations. The feather-soft brush of Brenna's fingers soothed her at first. Then Jess became aware of the persistent tightening of her nipples. A wry smile curved her cracked lips. She would have sworn Prison life had banished all trace of her libido. She supposed she had Gaia to thank for the durability of Amazon lust.

"I'll tell you a secret of the medic's trade, Jesstin." Brenna ran the soft cloth down each muscled arm. "If you know how, and when, to administer pain, and your patient knows you're willing to, then you don't have to do it very often. Makes life more pleasant for both of us."

"Did you learn that bit of wisdom from this Caster, Brenna?" Jess's brogue softened the words. "That's the strategy of a bully, not a healer."

Brenna stared at her, but she saw another small tightening around Jess's eyes as pain flickered through her again, and she let the comment pass. A few minutes later she folded the cloth. "All right, Jesstin, you're patched for the night. Think you can sleep?"

"Sure." Jess shifted stiffly on the padded recliner, and another shadow of pain crossed her face.

Brenna studied her patient pensively. She flicked off the floodlight above them, plunging the cell into blue-hued darkness. Her searching fingers touched Jess's bare shoulder, then slid gently beneath her hair. She cupped the strong neck, noting the velvet-sheathed tension thrumming in her palm. She began

working the tight muscles with strong fingers, closing her own eyes in order to concentrate.

"You're like me," she said. "We carry all our tension in our shoulders and neck. My little sister can put me to sleep in ten minutes doing this. Try to relax, Jess."

She probed the steely muscles silently for a while.

Jess remembered Kyla's cool hands on her back. Every night, in spite of a punishing shift in the Prison's kitchens, the young redhead spent hours on her and Camryn, kneading the ache from their locked muscles. Shann called Kyla her best student in the healing art of touch. Jess let the darkness hide the welling in her eyes.

"Listen." Brenna kept her voice low. "Your chart says you've got nothing but physical therapy for the next week. Caster wants to build your strength for the clinical trials. That means bed rest, decent meals, light exercise when you're ready for it…"

Brenna heard a light, buzzing snore in the darkness. She smiled and edged her hand carefully from beneath Jess's thick hair. She smoothed a stray lock off the sleeping woman's brow, sifting its softness through her fingers.

"I'm so good," she murmured.

Chapter Two

They used to lop off one breast, so they could draw a bow to shoot arrows in battles with the Greeks." Dugan leaned on hairy forearms crossed on the circular desk next to the staff locker room.

Brenna's Amazon patient was hot gossip, particularly among the male orderlies. Morning shift change consisted of little else. The three men had already seen Brenna, so it was too late to avoid them. She continued her trek behind the desk to retrieve Jesstin's chart.

"Amazons were Greeks," the big, pock-faced man slouched next to Dugan corrected.

Jodoch was a recent addition to Clinic staff, and Brenna hadn't met him formally, but his association with Dugan left her less than eager to make his acquaintance.

"Modern Amazons don't do that." Dugan tipped a toothpick at Jodoch. "Lop off a breast, judging by the cleavage on this one. Hell, judging by the cleavage on this one, I wouldn't mind if they hauled the rest of those renegade banshees down here."

"Even the dusky ones, stud?" The third orderly, Karney, yawned as he poured coffee from the staff urn. "I hear they've got Amazons in all colors up there."

"We got dames in all colors down here too, Karney, which is why we built separate boroughs for 'em. Once that bitch-nest is wiped out, the duskies can be locked up in their own Prisons. If those ditzy witches up there are dense enough to give the whole race relations mess another try, we'll mow 'em down without

breaking a sweat. Homeland Security has taught us how to deal with perverts like this."

Brenna slipped Jess's file out of the locked metal bracket reserved for Military projects, actively avoiding Dugan's avid gaze. His muddy eyes followed her, as they often did, but she'd grown accustomed to ignoring him.

"It's all bullshit." Karney sipped his coffee and grimaced. "Amazons died out tons of generations ago. They're comic-book fodder now. Beats me why Caster's got her knickers in a knot over this invert."

"Well, but see there, that's more proof that big honey in there is an Amazon. The Amazons were all inverts, Karney. Ask Jodoch here. He has a permit to study history." Dugan nudged his friend, but his eyes were still on Brenna. "The real Amazons were dykes. Right, Miss Brenna? You think that's why the sainted Caster is so hot on this study?"

"Caster's got three kids," Karney scoffed, stirring the murky brew in a Styrofoam cup. "She's sure not inverted."

"Is she, Brenna?" Dugan grinned. "You can tell us."

"I'll let her know you're interested." Brenna kept her tone pleasantly bland. She ducked under the wooden flap of the desk and headed toward the gymnasium to check out equipment for Jess.

"She wants me," Dugan crooned, and Karney chuckled.

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Brenna's chart notes over the next week were encouraging. Jess's bruises bloomed to full glory, then began to fade. The cut on her head closed neatly, and she showed no signs of concussion. She regained full range of motion on her right side, so the bruised ribs were coming along well. Jess healed faster than anyone Brenna had ever tended.

The sun burned high and hot in a flawlessly blue sky. Brenna blinked sweat out of her eyes as they entered the arena

grounds. She tossed one of the sleek quarterstaves she carried to Jess, who walked beside her and caught it neatly.

"Hey, this is beautiful." Jess balanced the staff in her hands with apparent pleasure, studying its carvings. "I haven't done staffwork in years. Are these yours?"

"Just this one is." Brenna twirled the unadorned quarterstaff in one hand. "I signed that one out, and it's a matchstick by comparison, so watch it."

They were both somewhat hindered by attire. By regulation, Jess could wear only the black shirt and trousers of the Prison population. Brenna could have opted for something with a little more protection, but in fairness she dressed in scrub greens when they drilled.

Jess's physical therapy had quickly moved beyond bed rest, stretching, and exercise machines. Brenna had allowed her to graduate to drilling in a small enclosed arena that separated the Clinic from the Prison.

Two orderlies, usually Dugan and Karney, were posted on the high walkway encircling the neat workout field. They lounged lazily against upright posts in the sun, their rifles slung over their shoulders, watching. They would have been skeptical if told the two women drilling below were virtually unaware of them.

"You anchor your right foot rather than your left on attack?" Jess parried a confident thrust from Brenna's staff.

"Yep, helps me build momentum before I strike." Brenna danced a little, watching Jess's center of balance to predict her next move.

She knew her small stature was deceptive, as anyone meeting her in a ring found out. She was quick, even with alcohol making its first inroads in her fitness. And her compact, sturdy body was well proportioned. She still trained regularly, even in days clouded by a mind-numbing hangover, and she was stronger and healthier than she had any right to be.

"So whenever you shift your weight to your right foot," Jess noted, "I know you're about to smack me from the left?"

Jess sounded so confident that it was doubly satisfying when she mistook Brenna's pivot, bobbed when she should have weaved, and would have received a nice clout in the stomach if Brenna hadn't pulled her strike.

Jess grinned as Brenna indulged in a fist-pumping victory dance. Lately, after these sessions in Jess's company, her cheeks carried a healthy flush and her eyes danced in a way they usually didn't.

"You do announce that thrust, Brenna. Decent feint, though. You're fast."

"Gracious of you to admit it, since I all but gutted ye." Brenna managed a teasing imitation of Jess's brogue, then looked past her, and lowered her staff.

A middle-aged woman in a white coat was making her way across the arena grounds toward them. She lifted a hand in greeting as she minced carefully over the uneven ground in her sensible heels.

"That's Caster," Brenna said, sotto voce. "Be respectful, Jess."

"So this is Jesstin." Smiling, the woman came up to Jess and rested a nicely manicured hand on her shoulder. Nearly as tall as Jess, Caster appraised her with keen clinical interest. "She's looking well, Brenna. You're doing a fine job preparing her for her trials."

"Thank you, Caster." Brenna adopted a tone that was a shade more formal than usual. "Yeah, she's coming along. She's not ready for clinical trials, yet. Maybe next week—"

"My name is Caster, Jesstin. I'm Clinic staff." The slender woman reached into the pocket of her pristine lab coat and pulled out something small and metallic. "I've heard that members of your tribe are marked with some mystical symbol of their clan. Is that it? This lovely tattoo?" She laid the tip of the instrument against the glyph on the swell of Jess's left shoulder and pressed a button. There was an ugly buzzing sound.

Jess grunted, spun tightly, and fell, clutching her arm.

Brenna started, then stared at Jess in shock. "What are you doing?"

"I'm demonstrating the new patient-control device we're introducing to the unit." Caster's voice was calm and richly feminine.

She stepped away from Jess and showed Brenna the stunner, a streamlined, gleaming stylus. "It gives off quite a charge, but it's adjustable. I gave Jesstin here a fairly large jolt just now. Quite painful, but no lasting tissue damage, and the pain and disorientation fade after a few minutes."

Brenna watched Jess climb back to her feet. Her face was chalk white, and her long legs were visibly trembling.

"Why was that necessary?" Brenna asked sharply.

"Well, let's consider our subject, Brenna." Caster studied Jess, who carefully kept her expression inscrutable.

This is a ripe one, Jess thought, drawing deep breaths to dissolve the spun glass webbing her mind. Her shoulder throbbed as if it had been kicked by an iron-shod horse. She watched Caster lift a pair of half-glasses, draped around her neck by a jeweled silver chain, and gesture with it as she spoke.

"Remember our discussion, dear, about how difficult Jesstin finds it to accept her status as a convicted criminal? Her Prison chart indicates she is highly contemptuous of all forms of legal authority. Given her flagrant and chronic flaunting of regulations, it seems it would be perfectly all right with our Amazon if we returned to the chaos of democratic rule! A reminder of the wisdom of compliance was in order. Don't you agree?"

An almost irresistible urge to go to Jess held Brenna silent.

Caster rested her hand on Brenna's tense arm. "And you should have some backup yourself, dear, if you're working with her alone."

"I don't think I'll need a stunner, Caster." Brenna swallowed. "She's been pretty cooperative."

"And I'm sure she'll continue to be, now." Caster smiled,

with a carnivorous flash of white teeth. She gestured at the staff Brenna held. “I didn’t mean to interrupt your therapy session, Brenna. Please continue.”

“We were finished,” Brenna said quickly.

“Nonsense, it’s not even noon. Pick up your weapon, Jesstin.”

Jess thought sourly that she should have seen this coming. Put this cold City shrike in stiletto heels, and she was a bloody cartoon version of a dominatrix. She bent stiffly and retrieved the staff from the grass.

“Caster, even drilling with a quarterstaff can be dangerous, and Jesstin still looks pretty groggy.” Brenna used her hands to decorate her words, an old habit when she was agitated. “Maybe you’d like to come back after our lunch break and watch us go hand-to-hand. That’s really her specialty.”

“Brenna, I realize you’re not in on all the Military strategy involved in this.” Caster turned Brenna aside and slipped an arm around her shoulders. “You know that Jesstin comes from a faction of mountain women—yes, some are calling them descendants of the semimythical Greek Amazons—who are notoriously resistant to any kind of outside intervention. In spite of numerous overtures and rather generous terms, they blatantly refuse the patronization of our City Government. We’re beginning to fear that the women of Tristaine are far too stubborn to accept peaceful annexation. And unfortunately, dear, our subject is as obstinate as the rest of her clan.”

Caster kept an eye on the prisoner as she spoke soothingly to Brenna. “We don’t need more information about Tristaine, Brenna. We could get that at any time through the use of chemical interrogation. Our goal is to find out what it takes to break an Amazon’s will to resist. Permanently, not the short-term submission we can easily elicit through torture.”

Brenna tried to imagine what kind of force would be necessary to break this particular Amazon’s will. She would have to watch it happen.

"'Defeat the civilian's resistant spirit,'" Caster quoted from a journal article of her own that Brenna recognized, "'and defeat civilian resistance!' Hopefully, through bloodless assimilation—without our Army having to reduce Jesstin's lovely mountain haven to ashes and rubble. I'm simplifying vastly, of course, but if we're to have any hope of annexing Tristaine without bloodshed—if we wish to assimilate, rather than annihilate, an entire primitive culture, then we must use Jesstin here to give us a formula for transforming a savage Amazon into a peaceful, law-abiding citizen."

Caster pressed Brenna's shoulders. "Jesstin still needs discipline, Brenna. Even after months in lockdown and regular beatings, she is much too headstrong. If she goes into clinicals like this, she may not even survive them! We really need your help with this. And your part starts today."

Questions Brenna knew she couldn't ask moved sluggishly through her mind. "You want us to drill?" she asked faintly. "Now?"

"I want you to fight now," Caster corrected. "Take her down, Brenna. Hard. Make her feel it. Quickly. The effects of the stunner won't last much longer."

"But—"

"Now, Brenna."

Jess couldn't hear the murmured conference, but she braced herself when Brenna turned back with her staff clenched tightly in both hands. She streaked forward and attacked with a sudden fusillade of strikes, and Jess back-stepped several yards before she was able to fend her off. She finally locked their staves together and heaved Brenna back to clear space between them.

"Jesstin, listen to me." Brenna's tone was low and urgent. "Just drop your guard. Take one strike, fast and neat, and go down."

Brenna's staff flew out of her stinging hands, propelled by a kick so fast it hardly registered. Ordinarily, a blow to the

exposed throat would follow, but Jess was woozy, not crazy. She danced backward lightly and hovered on the balls of her feet.

Brenna moved almost as quickly as Jess had. Her sneakered foot swept out in a sharp kick that thudded into Jess's unprotected side with audible impact. Brenna was so astonished at her success that it took her a moment to realize she'd kicked Jess flush in her bruised ribs.

Jess dropped her staff and teetered, then went to her knees, folding over the pounding in her side. Brenna locked her own knees to block the instinct to go to her. Her heart was a timpani in her chest, and she felt a sudden roil of nausea.

"Nicely done, dear." Caster smiled approvingly at Brenna, then addressed the gasping prisoner. "Think of it this way, Jesstin. For the past week, you have experienced our City's benevolence in the person of your lovely medical advocate here. She has tended you, nourished you, and seen to your every need and comfort, yes? And in return, she has required only your obedience and compliance with simple rules. Now, my brawny friend, just as this slip of a girl struck you down without warning, so Tristaine should respect and fear the City's vast—"

"Save your benevolence for the men of your City, Cassie." Still clutching her side, Jess sat carefully back on her heels. She heard Brenna's quick warning breath and ignored it. "If the women down here keep escaping to the mountains to join us, their husbands will only have your frigid white butt to warm their beds."

Brenna was having trouble keeping any one thought in her mind right then, but she was practically certain Jess couldn't have spoken those words. Not in that husky, sensual, mocking drawl.

The elegant woman next to her became still, and Brenna's heart skipped another jagged beat. "Take this," Caster said.

Brenna looked down at the stunner Caster was pressing into her hand. "Y-you want me to use this on her? Now?"

"Unless you have a problem with my judgment." Caster's voice was mild, but her black eyes were flinty.

"I don't think I can do this."

"You can and you will. Whenever it's necessary." Caster leaned closer, and her minted breath blew in brief, hot bursts against Brenna's cheek. "You can go far in Military medical research, Brenna, with the right contacts. But I warn you, you must steel yourself to this sort of thing. You don't want to be limited to applying Band-Aids all of your life. Remember that there are a dozen applicants for every promotion at the Clinic. And none of those candidates are squeamish."

Brenna swallowed.

"Full intensity," Caster instructed.

Brenna met Jess's gaze. She adjusted the dial on the stunner with cold fingers. A moment passed.

"Come now." Caster sighed. "Full intensity is hardly more than the first jolt I gave Jesstin. In fact, it might be best to administer this one in precisely the same place. High on the left shoulder, please, over the tattoo. Since the first dose obviously had such little lasting effect."

"Jess," she whispered.

Jess was keenly aware of the rifles trained on her back from the guard posts and the banshee Caster's avid gaze. She sat motionless on her heels. "I can't help you with this, Bren."

Brenna stared at the stunner in her hand, then at the hard swell of Jess's shoulder. The swirling lines of the glyph were muted under a flushing circular burn. The tip of the stylus trembled as she rested it in place. She had no real choice. She could feel Jess's gaze on her face, but she didn't meet her eyes as she fingered the switch. The ugly buzzing sound barked again.

Pain blasted through Jess's arm and chest and up to her throat, locking out breath. To her disgust, a sick gray haze settled over her, and she realized she was passing out. Brenna rose and backed away from Jess as if she were a snake thrashing in the grass. Jess sprawled on her back and lay still.

"Thank you, Brenna." Caster clasped her slender hands behind her and looked down at the unconscious prisoner. "I

think we'll give Jesstin some time to ponder her options. The fresh air out here will do her good." With a smile, she added, "Well, my young colleague, with one brief lapse, you've been most professional this morning. Now you're about to earn some lucrative overtime. I want you to stay here tonight."

Brenna was staring at Jess's motionless form through the heat waves blurring her vision, but she nodded.

"Have Jesstin tied down, just as she lies. She's to remain here until midnight." Caster ticked the points off on her long fingers. "Understood?"

"Midnight," Brenna repeated stupidly.

Caster nudged Jess's leg with her foot. "You can find some shade and get caught up with your paperwork. Be sure no one gives her water. Escort your patient to her cell after midnight. Patch her up as needed. Remember, nothing for pain. Then take off. With six hours of overtime on your clock."

Brenna shrugged and nodded, feeling like a child. Her thoughts were boiling.

A mechanical buzzing issued from the pocket of Caster's lab coat, and she pulled out a compact cell phone. "Yes? Hello?" Her face lit with pleasure, and she lowered her voice. "Robert? He did! Oh, darling, that's wonderful. Yes, steaks for dinner. Fire up the barbie, I'm on my way. Love you too."

She folded the small phone with a happy snap. "My oldest just won the freshman division of the All-City Science Fair. He worked so hard…dear, I do have to run. Please see to all this, yes?" Caster patted Brenna's cheek and strode off toward the arena gate, checking her watch.

Brenna looked up at the festering sun, and her throat went dry. Jess was going to lie under this for six hours. Then six hours more, in the chill of night. She took a tentative step forward and studied Jess's pale features, her dusky lashes still against the high cheek. Her breathing was normal now, and her color was coming back.

Brenna shook herself mentally, and her lips parted to

call Dugan and Karney down off the walkway. Then her breath trailed out of her. She knelt beside Jess and rested the backs of her fingers against her face.

"I didn't want this," she whispered. "Jesstin?"

If she wanted absolution, Jess couldn't provide it. She was deeply out. Brenna brushed some hair off Jess's damp forehead. Even senseless, she projected a nameless dignity. Her austere beauty only heightened the effect. She looked like a warrior, Brenna thought, a fallen warrior out of myth.

She rose quickly to her feet. "Karney, stay here. Watch her," she called. Targeting the exit opposite the one Caster had taken, she homed in on it, walking fast. "Dugan, bring restraints."

"Glad to," Dugan called back from the catwalk. "You'll join us again, won't you, Miss Brenna? Where you going?"

"Locker," Brenna snapped, and kept going.

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12:30 a.m.

Brenna paused outside the detention cell and stared at the steel paneling of the door. She had waited in a shadowed corner until she heard the fading echo of Dugan's voice and the jangling of Karney's keys as the two men strolled back toward the staff station. Brenna breathed into her palm and sniffed, then pushed the door open.

The brilliant lamp suspended over the restrainer flooded Jess's body with merciless light. Her black clothing was still covered with the dust of the arena grounds, and she was trembling slightly.

Brenna had endured the hours much as Jess had, in less physical discomfort, but equally robbed of the ability to act. She left her patient only twice, once while Dugan and Karney staked Jess to the ground, and again when they took her back to the cell. She emptied half the flask in her locker each time. And she was still dismally sober.

Brenna opened the small drawer on the supply counter and took out a chemical ice pack. “I know you’re awake, Jesstin.”

Jess opened her eyes.

“I’m going to put this on your side.” Brenna flexed the ice pack to activate it.

She unbuttoned Jess’s shirt and spread it open. Her patient’s firm breasts and belly were strikingly pale against her scarlet throat and upper chest. Her collection of faded bruises was highlighted by a newly painful discoloration low on her right side.

Brenna laid the ice pack gently in place, and Jess started. Her breasts lifted with the motion, and Brenna averted her gaze quickly.

Jess’s throat felt like it was stuffed with socks. “How ‘bout some water?” she croaked.

“Not right now.” Brenna raised her eyebrows in dismay. “No, I’m not withholding it. You just need to rest for a moment longer before you drink, if you want any of it to stay down.”

Jess nodded. Her extraordinary eyes were dull.

Brenna moved closer and laid her palm lightly across the base of her throat. The flesh beneath her hand was flushed with sick heat, but even as she watched, gooseflesh rose on Jess’s collarbones. Sunburn aside, she was wracked with chills. City nights were as cold this time of year as its days were hot, and Jess had been staked out there for nearly twelve hours.

Brenna picked up one of the medications she’d taken from the dispensary and pressed a small amount of ointment into her hands.

“Jess, you’re a little dehydrated.” She controlled her voice, keeping it low and calm. “We need to push fluids as soon as we can and get your body temperature back to normal. Meanwhile, this cream is pretty good for sunburn.” She hesitated. “I know you’re tender. I’ll be careful.”

Brenna settled her palms on Jess’s shoulders, avoiding the angry burn left by the stunner, and began to massage the cream into her reddened arms with gentle circular strokes.

Jess let her eyes focus blankly on a far wall and willed herself to relax under the soothing touch. She felt her nipples harden again and cursed silently. It was happening now whenever Brenna touched her. It didn't matter where. Her damn carnal urges were getting as rebellious as her tear ducts.

"You were a bloody idiot today, Jess." Brenna knew what she wanted to say. She'd had half the day and night to gather her thoughts. "You provoked that second stunner hit. Caster was within protocol to order it."

Jess said nothing. Brenna dabbed more cream into her palm.

"What happened afterwards," Brenna's fingers were light on Jess's forearms, "tying you out there all afternoon…I know that was harsh. I'm not disagreeing with Caster, but it was a… very strong intervention." She paused. "I'm sorry I had to hurt you."

Jess's eyes drifted shut under the pleasant stroking. "It wasn't your call, Bren." Her shoulder was killing her, and her side hurt. Even more than strictly merited, she thought, until she remembered who kicked it.

The heat of the sun had been punishing, and so was the abrupt chill that descended with dusk. But the Prison had offered far more torturous responses to insubordination. Stars filled the sky above Jess as night fell, refreshing her spirit as pleasantly as water would have slaked her thirst. Her very skin soaked up the faint starlight, parched after weeks behind stone walls.

Brenna supported Jess's head as she sipped water from the blue decanter. Those same stars look down tonight on Tristaine, she thought, holding the water in her mouth to savor its cool promise. Tears might have come, if she had been alone.

Brenna started to speak, stopped, then asked, "Jesstin, why were you sent to Prison?"

Jess pulled herself from her thoughts with effort. "They don't put that detail in patient charts, then?"

"No. Just a statement regarding the life sentence, but not

what it's for. We're supposed to assume everyone is dangerous."

"According to your Federal Tribunal, you're wise to abide by that assumption, lass. I was convicted of killing two women."

Brenna's hands stilled. "And you didn't do it," she said tonelessly.

Jess was silent for a moment. "I was there when they were shot," she said finally. "And I couldn't stop it. It feels like the same thing."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Jess summoned the last of her energies and ordered her thoughts. She tried not to hope for much. "Your Government considered one of those women a threat, Brenna. Dyan. She sat on Tristaine's high council. So did I. Dyan was the leader of our warriors' guild, our fighting force."

Brenna listened, closing Jess's shirt.

"An Army squad found Dyan on a night patrol, but she wasn't alone. I was with her, and so was a young girl named Lauren. Dyan and Lauren were shot. I was arrested and charged with their murders."

Jess wasn't watching Brenna's eyes anymore. Too many nightmares replayed behind her own. "A Federal tribunal found me guilty in less than an hour."

"So Government troops shot two women on your high council," Brenna repeated slowly, "and framed you for it."

"Lauren wasn't on Tristaine's council." Jess shivered. "She was a kid. She just got in the way that night."

"Jesstin, make sense. Why would they do such a thing?" There was a strained note in Brenna's voice. "How could the Army justify—?"

"Seven of our grandmothers founded Tristaine, Brenna, generations ago. Refugees from the City. Today there are six hundred of us. Your women here are defecting in droves, lass. More come to us every day, from every borough, as rumors of Tristaine spread. And their daughters will find us too, in their time."

"Wait. Just wait. The Army is more than capable of bombing Tristaine to dust, Jesstin. Why would a Government that's trying to preserve your village sink to assassinating children?"

"Think, Brenna." Jess struggled against a rising need to convince this girl. "Your Government isn't interested in protecting Tristaine's heritage. There's only one reason the Army has spared us so far. If they wipe us out, we become legend. We've taken root in the public imagination, lass. Tristaine would be remembered as home to hundreds of martyrs. Movements have been launched on less. Your Government can't abide—"

"It's not my Government," Brenna said evenly. "The Government I know doesn't ambush innocent women in the middle of the night."

"Dyan was dangerous. They were right about that." Jess felt the sludge of hopelessness fill her. Brenna's confusion leaned toward skepticism. It was all over her face. "She was brilliant, and she knew how to fight. She would never have allowed Tristaine to be assimilated. They thought they could kill the snake by cutting off its head."

"Enough, Jess. I shouldn't have asked. Just rest for a moment." Brenna went to the sink and washed her hands, grateful for the distracting sound of the tinny water rushing from the tap. There were reasons medical staff weren't told about a prisoner's criminal record. What had she expected? Candor? An admission of guilt? Why should a dark conspiracy theory surprise her? She turned off the water with a wrench of the spigot.

She busied herself with a tray of medications from the Clinic pharmacy. She didn't see the labels on the small glass bottles until she made herself focus. Then she lifted one and read it, frowning.

"This isn't what I ordered." Brenna turned to see Jess regarding her. "It's an antiseptic for your arm. Your shoulder."

She showed Jess the small bottle. Jess eyed the label politely, then arched one dark brow.

"Sorry." Brenna smiled uneasily. "It's tecathenese. It's

very potent. It'll do the job, I guess, but there's at least a dozen other antiseptics I'd rather use." She paused as a wave of bleak resignation ghosted across Jess's features. "It's going to sting like hell."

Jess sighed. She was sick of being tortured by little girls, even conflicted ones. "Thanks for warning me. It helps, sometimes, if I can brace myself a bit."

"Does it?" Brenna asked softly. "Most people are the exact opposite, I've noticed. You wouldn't think so, but being surprised by pain is actually less traumatic than—" She made herself stop babbling and saturated a sterilized cloth with the astringent liquid.

She bent over Jess, and the dark head jerked infinitesimally away from her hand a fraction of an inch. Brenna accepted the flinch for what it was, without comment, and felt another stone lodge in her belly. She remembered her early days of training, before her transfer to the Federal program, when the guiding principle was to do no harm. She focused on the burns left by the stunner on Jess's shoulder.

They were not especially ugly wounds, but Brenna felt her throat tighten again when she saw the beautiful emblem of Jess's clan obscured by blisters and some bruising in an area about the size of a quarter. The skin around it looked flushed and tender.

"Your type of skin doesn't scar easily, Jess. The design should be clear again when this heals." She folded the dripping cloth in half and laid it on the marks.

Jess's assaulted nerves awoke with a vengeance. True to its reputation, the tecathenese was as scathing as acid. She jerked her head off the padded surface of the chair and clenched her fists in the restraints.

"Hey," Brenna said sharply. She pressed a hand to her waist. "Sorry, you startled me."

"Bracing myself didn't work," Jess gasped.

Brenna waited, wanting a drink so badly she trembled. When her patient's breathing returned to normal, she made herself

take a clinical look at the wound. “I think I got it well covered. We’ll let it air tonight. I’ll bandage it in the morning.”

She pulled the white cotton blanket over Jess’s chest and then clicked off the overhead floodlight. Half-blinded, Brenna made her way around the bed and moved toward the door. The weary voice behind her stopped her, but only briefly.

“Do you know the next protocol, Brenna?”

“No.” Brenna didn’t, and she didn’t want to. The next protocol was where it bloody well belonged, several flasks and dreamless hours away. “Get some sleep, Jesstin.”

Chapter Three

The answering machine was just ending its metallic greeting as Brenna keyed open her door. She wrestled the two slender, brown-bagged bottles to her kitchen counter, but not with any real haste. The skree of the recording signal skewered her aching temples. She took one of the bottles with her and settled on the couch.

"Hey. This is your pregnant sister. I know you're home, you're always home. You need to let me know if you think you'll make it to this barbecue or not. Matt's gonna invite his friend Sheila, but only if you come. She's gorgeous, by the way. I don't want Matthew to risk poisoning her with his toxic chili sauce unless there's a good medic around."

There was a pause, and Brenna rested her head on the back of the couch, rolling the acid flood of vodka over her tongue. Her eyes closed at the wistful note in Samantha's voice.

"Bree, it's been a while. We said nothing would change, right? You know Matt's crazy about you. You can come over anytime. Like, every day would be nice, once this kid is born. We'll always get you home by curfew. Is that what you're worried about?"

"Ah, Sammy," Brenna sighed.

"So pick up a phone already." Her sister's tone lightened. "We owe you a steak for helping us fill out all those pregnancy permits. Hey, you want us to invite your new boss to the barbecue too? We saw a profile of her on the news last week, and she looks really…well, shrewish, frankly, Bree, no offense. We'll give her

extra chili sauce. You haven't told me anything about your new unit. Geez, it's been that long since we—"

The machine's rude screech cut off the sweet music of Samantha's voice and left Brenna in the ticking silence of her small studio.

It was standard Government issue, a well-constructed but strictly functional cubicle. She had made a halfhearted gesture toward decorating when she first moved in, but the laws governing the production of art limited consumers to a depressingly drab roster of generic prints and paintings. Samantha kept bringing her houseplants, but they all gave up the ghost eventually because Brenna forgot to water them.

The wall above her desk, the focus of the room, was adorned only with the neat, framed diplomas and certificates that marked her professional milestones. In contrast to the rest of the studio, which featured a neglectful haze of dust, Brenna's desk was pristine and gleaming.

She let out a shaking breath and sank lower on the couch, willing her shoulders to relax. She passed more of her nights here, now, on the sagging comfort of the sofa and with the numbing solace of liquor, in the six months since her assignment to the Clinic. It didn't look like her first patient in the Military unit would change that pattern much, but she found it difficult to care.

Brenna swirled the drink in its juice glass, then downed it and let her mind drift. She thought of riding, oddly enough. Not riding itself, at first. A City girl, she'd only seen pictures of horses.

A brown mare, nuzzling its spindle-legged foal in the confines of a fenced corral. The warm breath of mother and child puffed twin plumes of steam in the cold morning air. Then the mare heard the trumpeting call of a stallion, and her head rose sharply, ears pricking. She dipped her muzzle to her foal in farewell, then loped across the corral and soared over the splintering four-rail

fence. Her pounding hooves brought her closer to the beautiful black horse, prancing in a distant meadow.

Then Brenna was astride the stallion, riding it, feeling the shimmering power of the beast between her thighs. They flew down the twisting trail of a mountain path, breathing in the clean scent of pine as one creature. Brenna's hands were light on the stallion's pistoning neck, and her heart filled with such alien joy that her eyes, closed against the worn fabric of the couch, brimmed with tears.

The spear came from nowhere, plunging deep into the black horse's massive chest. The beautiful animal stumbled as its heart was impaled by the iron point—and seemingly Brenna's heart as well. She sobbed once, bereft, and then the stallion staggered, pitching her over its head toward the crumbling edge of a stone bluff…

A horrible buzzing woke Brenna. The ringer on her phone was set at high volume, should something happen with a patient in the night. Part of Brenna's sludged mind recognized that night had apparently come and gone, but mostly it focused on silencing the cranium-rattling telephone. She lurched across the studio and snatched the receiver from its cradle.

"Brenna?" It was Charlotte's nasal, faintly disapproving voice. Caster's secretary was all but universally hated, and calls like this were why. "You do realize rounds are half over, don't you? It's almost ten o'clock."

Brenna squinted at the wall clock over the phone. "I meant to call in, Charlotte. Please give my apologies to Caster, but I've been hit with a nightmare virus or something—"

"Just a moment, please." There was the muted tapping of computer keys, and Brenna imagined an alley cat stalking haughtily across her nerve endings. "Brenna? Excuse me, but are you aware that you've used…more than half of your annual leave, in the twenty-six weeks you've been with us? Caster tries to be flexible with her staff, but…"

Brenna felt an unwilling flicker of fear in her gut, as well as irritation. Her absences would be tracked carefully from now on. Her hand drifted to her throat. She remembered the feel of Jess's strong neck cupped in her palm, and she shuddered. She couldn't go in today.

"Brenna?"

"Thank you, Charlotte. I'll keep it in mind." Brenna summoned the wettest, most snot-filled sneeze ever sprayed into any mouthpiece. "Please tell Caster I'll be in tomorrow."

She fumbled the receiver back in its bracket and sank onto the bar stool next to the phone. Her reflection in the side of a silver kettle on the stove was thankfully distorted. Her skin held a gray pallor, and her short hair stood up in haphazard spikes.

Brenna rested her head on her arms as a thumping headache and queasiness asserted themselves. She thought of the medicated patches in the bathroom cabinet. She could stick one on her arm and banish her misery in minutes. She wondered who had bandaged Jesstin's shoulder that morning before she faced another day without painkillers.

She banished the thought quickly and went to hunt through the sofa cushions for her juice glass.

❖

Brenna pushed up the sleeves of her white coat, backed open the door to the detention cell, and came to a startled halt. Jess was sitting upright on the side of the recliner, unrestrained and fully dressed in fresh Prison blacks. Brenna fumbled for the stunner clipped to her belt, then slipped her hand into her coat pocket to disguise the motion.

"Your witch doctor opted to spring me." Jess's low voice was toneless as she shucked up one boot. "She figures you'll use that thing if you have to."

"I will." Among a dozen other emotions, Brenna felt muted relief. "How are you feeling, Jesstin?"

"I'm fine."

And her patient did look all right, physically. The thick layers of Jess's hair were clean and soft against her neck, and the sunburn had gentled to a golden bronze. Her shoulder was neatly bandaged, and she pulled on her other boot with no evident pain. Her angular features were expressionless, but virtually unmarked.

Brenna consciously did not flinch as Jess lifted herself off the restrainer. The Amazon moved slowly, as if to avoid alarming her.

"Caster was just here." Jess flipped her collar up beneath her hair. "We're expected to join her in the arena."

After a moment of silence, during which Brenna made no move toward the door, Jess lifted an eyebrow.

"Jesstin," Brenna began.

Jess waited.

"I'm Clinic staff. All right?" Brenna hadn't realized she would be making this speech, but she let it emerge, speaking slowly and clearly, as if to a dim child. "This is how I make my living. I'm alone. I pay all the bills. I've worked hard for what I have. Placements like this don't come along often, not in this economy."

Jess nodded.

"I'm just saying I'll do what's necessary, Jess." Brenna lowered her voice. "I may not like an order, but I'll carry it out. I don't have a choice."

"No need to apologize."

"This isn't an apology." Brenna furrowed her brow. "I don't owe you an explanation. I just wanted to tell you what to expect, before we go out. And just…that I'm glad you're all right."

"Thank you."

"Okay." She turned toward the door.

"Bren," Jess said softly. "In Tristaine, there are always choices."

Brenna opened the cell door and waited for the prisoner to precede her.

❖

Brenna's nerves tightened again as soon as they entered the arena. Seven rather large men, dressed in fighting gear—helmets and body pads—stood clustered at one end of the workout grounds. They were Clinic orderlies, most of them. Brenna recognized Dugan and a few others from day shift. The rest wore the gray uniforms of the guards in the adjoining Prison.

As soon as Caster saw Brenna and Jess come through the gate, she waved them nearer with her clipboard. "Here they are, at last. Is the camera ready, Stuart?"

"Ready." A bespectacled assistant from Caster's unit squinted into a video camera mounted on a tripod.

"Glad to have you with us again, Brenna. Jesstin, I think you know the drill here." Caster gestured toward the center of the arena. "You're to meet these fighters in hand-to-hand combat, yes?"

"Wait a minute." Brenna looked from Jess to the waiting men. "She's fighting them?"

"She's going to take them all on," Caster confirmed. "One at a time, to begin with. Mr. Jodoch, are you ready?"

The big acne-scarred orderly lifted a hand and trotted forward. He carried a small club studded with spikes.

"Hold it. I don't like this." Brenna put out an arm and stopped Jess. "That guy's armed. Doesn't she get a weapon?"

"No, Brenna. Jesstin's specialty is openhanded fighting." Caster gave her a chiding look. "If you'd been at yesterday's briefing, dear, you'd be on the same page with all this. Just a minute, Jesstin."

Jess had moved past Brenna's arm and started toward the fighting field. She looked back.

"Shirt off, please," Caster called.

A sardonic expression crossed Jess's face, but she seemed neither rattled nor surprised. She unsnapped her shirt and slipped it off her wide shoulders, baring her breasts. Their paleness contrasted vividly with her tanned belly and throat.

"Partial nudity makes female subjects feel more vulnerable," Caster instructed Brenna. "Besides, it's much more authentic for an Amazon, yes?"

One of the orderlies hooted obediently, but Jess ignored him. She tossed her shirt to the grass and walked toward Jodoch again, rolling her injured shoulder to loosen it, apparently relaxed with fighting shirtless.

"I believe we're ready, Stuart!" Caster brushed a leaf from the lapel of her white coat, then gave her sprayed coiffure a careful pat. She cleared her throat and faced the video camera with a tight smile.

"Madam Undersecretary, Dr. Aldin, General Lorber… ladies and gentlemen. Good morning." Caster's dulcet voice was formal as she addressed the lens. "The date you see below this frame marks the opening of clinical trials for Military Research Study T-714, Phase One. Please take a moment to consult our prospectus."

Caster paused, smiling. "As you read along, you will see that Phase One of our study involves establishing a baseline of resistant behavior in our test subject. Jesstin?" Caster gestured toward the center of the arena.

Jess watched the camera pan toward her and understood why she'd been ordered to remove her shirt. A half-naked barbarian was both titillating and easier to objectify. She continued the sequence of breathing rituals that prepared her to fight.

"As you can see, our Tristainian subject projects quite an intimidating presence." Caster tapped Stuart to keep the frame focused on Jess as she continued. "Jesstin is a valued member of Tristaine's elite warrior guild! She is honored among her violent kindred for her fighting prowess and her fearlessness in battle."

Jess wished she could fart loud enough to be heard on the tape. It was what Dyan would do. Dyan would focus on her breathing, Shann's voice corrected her silently.

"For the gentle layfolk on our panel," Caster smiled again, "Phase One of our study will demonstrate that brute force alone is unlikely to compel an Amazon to accept defeat. We will test this hypothesis with a series of trials, and the protocol is simplicity itself. Today, as in all of these sessions, Jesstin can end her punishment at any time, simply by agreeing to sign a statement renouncing Tristaine."

Jess glanced at Brenna, who was skimming forms on the clipboard with an intense frown.

"Please see section A-5 of the prospectus for a copy of the renunciation," Caster added. She raised her voice. "All right, Mr. Jodoch!"

Jess let her attacker advance, studying his body and lumbering gait methodically. As always at the opening of a fight, Dyan's voice guided her. Camryn, Jess remembered randomly, actually nodded in moments like this in drills, agreeing with her mentor's silent instruction. It wasn't a distraction, thinking of Cam and Kyla now, or of Dyan and Shann. Jess was fighting for her adanin, and their faces strengthened her.

Jodoch lost the mace after his first ineffectual swing. He was a powerfully built man, but he was no warrior. Jess's knee in his soft belly slowed him down. The side of her wrist to the back of his neck dropped him. She stood brushing the grass from her hands, breathing easily, as the orderly got to his feet.

Brenna's neck ached with tension as she scribbled a quick summary on the clipboard, not hearing the friendly jeers of the other men as Jodoch limped back to them.

"Well, that was hardly the bloodbath I almost hoped for!" Caster folded her arms and gave Brenna a conspiratorial nudge. "Has your tender care turned our studly Amazon into a pacifist, dear?"

"She's fighting without harm." Brenna shifted away from

Caster. “It’s how we drill. It’s a technique that limits the injury inflicted on an opponent.”

“Ah. Jesstin’s only prudent choice, given her status.”

“Yes.” Brenna knew very well that the men Jess faced fought under no such restraint. The next man, Karney, was just as big as Jodoch, and more experienced. He wielded a dagger. Jess disarmed and pinned him, but he scored a shallow cut across the top of her chest before she did. High whistles rose among the men at this first drawing of blood, and Brenna gripped the clipboard.

“You’ll note that after finishing off one challenger, Jesstin immediately turns to meet the next.” There was a note of pride in Caster’s narration. “Our own fine Clinic staff can’t quite claim that level of endurance.” She called teasingly, “Correct, Mr. Jodoch? I see you’re still a bit winded!”

Brenna’s lips were sore because she kept scrubbing them with her hand—a sign her younger sister would recognize as craving for a drink. She didn’t know the third orderly who jogged out to face Jess. They were becoming interchangeable in their pads and helmets, but he carried a standard issue Prison baton. He connected a few times before Jess took him out, including two solid blows to her lower back.

She’s tiring, Brenna thought, she has to be. The Amazon was an excellent fighter, certainly the best she’d ever seen, but she was not superhuman. It took Jess longer to finish the fourth bout, with a man swinging a vigorous hand scythe.

When he finally limped off the field, Jess used the brief recovery time to store as much oxygen in her blood as possible. As she waited for her fifth opponent to emerge from the trio of padded men by the far wall, she admitted that soon the respites between matches wouldn’t be enough. She didn’t feel the pain of numerous minor strikes yet, but they were adding up. All Dyan would ask is that she fight well, Jess reminded herself, and accept defeat with honor. She could manage that.

“Ladies and gentlemen, difficult as it may be, try not to

get caught up in the excitement, drama, and age-old allure of the arena!" Caster paused while Stuart fumbled to focus the lens on her again. "We'll give Jesstin a moment to recover while we summarize our findings this morning. You'll note that, far from requesting an end to this trial, our warlike subject seems quite at ease in her natural habitat. Well, let's take Jesstin at her word and up the ante, shall we?" Caster turned and waved to the three men still standing. "All three of the rest of you, please!"

"Three at once?" Brenna's tone was sharper than she intended. "Why?"

Caster's sunny smile vanished. "Lower your voice, Brenna. That mike is sensitive." She clasped her arm to steer her away from the camera. "All of this was covered thoroughly in the briefing yesterday, dear, that you were apparently too ill to attend. However, I will repeat, just for you, that this trial is continuing because Jesstin has not yet conceded defeat. Do you have any clinical objections?"

"Well, Caster, yeah." Brenna tried for a light note while she watched the three men surround Jess. "We don't want to kill her, do we? On the first day?"

"Brenna, don't be dramatic." Caster's fingers tightened on her arm, but her voice was only gently chiding. "Clinic orderlies and Prison guards are hardly gladiator material. They won't kill Jesstin today, or even disable her. Phase One consists of at least three trials. Stop fretting, Brenna. Just observe."

The three remaining opponents formed a rough triangle around Jess, who waited, braced, her head turned slightly to detect any warning whisper of boots on grass. Her bare torso gleamed under the sun as she steadied her breathing. Red patches here and there stood out against her tanned skin, marking successful blows from earlier bouts. Blood glistened at the base of her throat from the dagger's cut.

One of the men she faced now held a net ready, another a quarterstaff, and the third, Dugan, a doubled length of thick chain. Jess brushed her sweat-soaked hair out of her eyes, amazed.

These City men fought like children, surrounding her efficiently, but dancing in place, waiting to attack one at a time. She thought, rather sourly, that she should feel gratified that witnessing four previous matches had instilled such caution in her opponents, but she knew their hesitation wouldn't last long. It didn't.

"Full force, please," Caster called. "Avoid the head, Mr. Dugan. I'm watching you!"

Sometime during the next fifteen minutes, Brenna realized that she was probably lucky to be alive. The drills she'd run with Jesstin the previous week had been child's play to the Amazon. Even fighting without harm, she was a blur of whirling kicks and expertly targeted strikes. In spite of Brenna's considerable hand-to-hand skills, Jess could have taken her out, fatally, at almost any time. And regardless of Caster's illusions, Brenna knew that Jesstin of Tristaine could have wiped the field with these men, if she were free to use real force.

The round lasted a long time. Too long. The three men couldn't quite pin Jess, and they couldn't keep her cornered for long, but they could and did overwhelm her whenever possible. Blood made a second appearance after Dugan slapped the chains across her upper back, digging shallow cuts.

Brenna scrubbed her hand across her mouth again, but made herself watch.

Jess found herself deep in the battle haze Dyan described so eloquently around Tristaine's storyfires. She didn't much like it there. She never had. Neither had Dyan, which was one reason she had been loved in Tristaine, as well as respected. The detached fury did feel familiar, though, and Jess was grateful for it now. It kept Kyla and Camryn clearly centered in her mind.

Then the man carrying the staff took a roundhouse swing and batted her in the gut. She grunted and dropped to her knees in the grass.

"Hold it!" Brenna's cry seemed to burst out of her. The men lowered their weapons, panting, and watched her stride toward them. "You three, back off!"

They stepped back obediently, even Dugan. Jess thought that was odd until she caught a glimpse of Brenna's fierce expression. Damned if the girl didn't look like an enraged Shann on the warpath.

Caster rolled her eyes and slapped the clipboard against her thigh, but she didn't stop her. "All right. Cut, Stuart."

Brenna dropped to her knees in front of Jess and eased her back into a sitting position as she pulled air into her lungs.

"Jesstin?" Brenna took her damp face in her hands. "Talk to me."

"Good call," Jess gasped. "I needed the break."

"Lean back. Let me see."

Jess rested back on her extended arms, and Brenna passed her hands carefully over the flat planes of her belly. "Does this hurt? Any tenderness? It looked like you were clubbed right in the liver."

"No, he just winded me."

"Jesstin." Brenna stared at the bleeding cut beneath Jess's throat. "All you have to do to end this is sign a form. Or just go down, but do one or the other!"

"I'll go down soon enough," Jess acknowledged.

Brenna gripped her arm tightly. "I know that," she snapped. "So does Caster! If you know it too, why drag it out?"

"All right, Brenna, please." Caster was tapping her pen against her board. "You—Mr. Jodoch? Are you functional again? And—I'm sorry—Karney? You are too? But Mr. Barbeler is nursing a broken hand. Well, the two of you, please join in again."

"Don't pull that macha Amazon crap now, Jesstin." Brenna's voice was strained. "Go down."

Jess said nothing, but put out an arm.

Brenna swallowed, then helped her to her feet. Then she left the fighting circle, and the five men surrounded the prisoner.

Jess steadied herself, nodded that she was ready, and they attacked. The break had helped her. She fought with a cool

economy again, rationing her strength, keeping a steady eye on her closest opponent. She returned their blows in a controlled and violent dance that held its own alien beauty, and two of her opponents dropped quickly.

But her revival couldn't last, and Brenna knew it, even before Jess took Dugan's roundhouse right to the jaw and fell a second time.

Brenna turned to Caster. "Okay, stop the trial."

"What? Again?" Caster frowned. "Brenna, look, she's getting up."

"It doesn't matter. Stop the trial. Jesstin isn't going to give in today, Caster. They'll just keep beating her until she sustains a serious injury. That becomes more likely as she tires."

"Brenna—"

"I'm her medical advocate. I say she's had enough for today. That's my prerogative, and it's my call. Now stop the trial."

Caster let out a long breath, watching Jess sway on her feet. Karney clubbed her hard across the back, and she fell again.

"Caster!" Brenna's eyes snapped with angry light.

"All right. Stuart? Stop the tape." Caster folded the clipboard in one arm and clapped her hands. "Gentlemen, thank you for your assistance. That will be all for this morning."

Jess's first opponent, Jodoch, extended his large hand to the fallen Amazon. After a moment she accepted it and let him pull her to her feet.

"Brenna, perhaps you're right." Caster appraised her assistant. "It is the medical advocate's responsibility to protect the subject's physical welfare. I don't want you to think I doubt your professional judgment. And actually…this was a fair place to conclude this trial. We can call it a success."

"A success." Brenna watched Jess bend and rest her hands on her knees, her lean sides heaving as she pulled for air.

"Well, we wanted to establish a baseline," Caster explained. "We didn't force Jesstin to fight to complete exhaustion, but that's all right. We've documented her resistance. We know how far we

can push her in one session and still keep her conscious. That's valuable information for future trials."

Brenna felt a cold dread snake through her. "She'll be doing this again?"

"Well, no, not this exact protocol. Really, Brenna, that briefing was important." Caster rummaged in the pocket of her lab coat and checked her pager. "Tsk. Wouldn't you think a man with two doctorates could look after two reasonably responsible youngsters for just one morning without constant guidance? The second trial isn't for a few days, Brenna. We'll give Jesstin adequate time to recuperate."

"Recuperate for what? What's the proto—?"

"Take our mighty warrior over there back to her cell, yes? It's all right to treat her injuries, Brenna, but remember, no analgesics."

Caster raised her voice as she followed the trailing orderlies out of the arena's enclosure. "Mr. Barbeler, I am so sorry about your hand! Let me make a quick call and I'll splint you myself."

The man named Barbeler didn't seem to feel Caster's sympathetic pat as she passed him. He stopped and looked back at Jess. He could have been just a big farm kid before he became a Prison guard. He stared at Jess, cradling his injured wrist in one freckled hand. Then he nodded at her before turning away, an oddly respectful bobbing of the head.

Jess lifted her chin slightly in response. Then she bent, stiffly, and tried to snag her black shirt off the grass with two fingers. Brenna was there in time to hand it to her. Jess blinked the sweat out of her eyes so she could see her. Brenna's lips seemed chafed and raw.

"I need to take a look at you." Brenna hovered as Jess painfully eased the shirt over her bare shoulders, then moved to adjust the fabric around her neck. "Can you make it to the detention wing?"

"I'm on my feet, Brenna," Jess said shortly.

She turned her head and spat red into the grass. When she

turned back, she moved her head too fast and caught a moment of dizziness. Brenna put her hands on her patient's chest to steady her, and their eyes met again.

Jess's awareness spiraled down to Brenna's soft hands bracing her and the shadowed eyes searching her battered face. She groaned inwardly. Amazon lust after battle was such a tired cliché. And she was such a tired Amazon.

It was like bracing a tree, Brenna thought. Winded, bloody and battered, gleaming with sweat, Jess towered over her like a cresting wave. She was stunned by an almost overpowering urge to slide her hands into Jess's open shirt and run her palms over the corded muscles of her back. Not to comfort her patient, but to find protection herself in the strength of those arms. Unsettled, Brenna dropped her hands and stepped back.

Jess started wearily toward the arena exit.

They were halfway across the field when they heard it, a distant, heavy tapping. It sounded like a block of wood hitting plastic, muted, but regular and insistent. Jess turned and looked toward the source of the sound, the Prison next door.

Brenna was focused entirely on getting her patient back to her cell before she had to call for a stretcher, but something in Jess's sudden stillness made her turn too. "What is it?"

She followed Jess's alert gaze toward the looming brick building at the outer perimeter of the Prison's electrified fence. The cinder-block wall was pocked with oblong windows, thick plates of glass laced with iron mesh. At the closest window, Brenna saw the outline of two figures—young women.

One of them, the taller one, raised a fist. The other, Brenna caught a flash of lush red hair, lifted her black prison shirt over her head and began a shimmying dance.

Brenna looked up at Jess and saw her tight smile before she turned and continued toward the exit. Her gaze shot back to the Prison window. The two figures had vanished. Brenna trotted a step to catch up with Jess.

"Brenna—"

"The sun was in my eyes," Brenna said. "I couldn't see through the glare."

Jess allowed herself a moment of relief.

Camryn and Kyla might indeed fail to survive their sojourn in the City, because if Jess ever saw them again, she was going to strangle them herself. She didn't want to hear about how light security was in the mess hall. That stunt had been both dangerous and pointless.

But seeing them again returned the steel to Jess's aching spine, at least until she was sure she had passed out of sight of the Prison wall. She made it back to the detention cell without resorting to the indignity of Brenna's support, but it was a long hike.

❖

Brenna flipped on the arc lamp over the restrainer and began setting out medical supplies. Jess limped to the sink and scrubbed her face and arms with cold water.

The silence was almost comfortable for a moment.

"Do you know if you're allergic to aneascin?" Brenna peered at an amber vial through the light. "I put in an order for some. It's less caustic than the tecathenese." Her tone held an appropriate note of light professional concern.

"Soap and water will do as well." Jess dried her face in a white towel. Most of the marks on her face had stopped bleeding. "You can go home, Brenna, if you want. There's nothing I can't take care of myself."

Brenna took the towel out of Jess's hands and tossed it on the sink. "I don't come and go at your behest, Jesstin. You know that."

She took her arm and drew her beneath the wash of light from the lamp. The bunched muscle beneath her fingers tightened, and Brenna touched the stunner at her belt. The impulse shamed her. Jess stood obediently in front of the restrainer while Brenna tilted her face to see the swelling capping one high cheek.

"That's going to be ugly in the morning," Brenna murmured.

She unsnapped Jess's shirt and spread it open, appalled. Jess's chest and stomach were covered with livid marks, most of them new, emerging bruises, but also some scrapes and cuts that still seeped blood.

Brenna studied the shallow, angry cut just above her collarbone and remembered the sun's flash on Karney's dagger. She touched the enflamed skin around the cut and looked up into Jess's eyes.

Jess entreated Gaia silently. Those accursed eyes were losing their clinical sheen. The girl looked weary and sad and afraid. Jess swallowed, hard. Luckily, a bad twinge of pain from her kidney broke the moment.

"What was that?" Brenna asked sharply as she helped her straighten.

"I think it was the second club strike," Jess stammered, gripping the small of her back.

Brenna began to peel the shirt off Jess's wide shoulders, but changed her mind and slipped her hands beneath it and around her waist instead. "I can tell more about this kind of injury by feel than by sight."

She moved her hands carefully beneath the black shirt and settled them on the warm planes of Jess's lower back. She pressed very gently. "Does this hurt?"

"Not much."

Brenna's hands moved higher. "How about here, does this?"

"No. Pain's fading."

Her hands moved again, and she had to step in closer to Jess to reach higher. She made the mistake of looking up into her eyes again, just as her palms cupped her shoulder blades.

"Does this hurt?" she whispered.

"No." Jess lifted her scratched hand slowly and placed it over Brenna's heart. "Does this hurt?"

Brenna stared at her, and she was lost.

They're going to kill me in the end, anyway, Jess rationalized. Her battered hand left Brenna's breast and rose to her chin. She bent her head and kissed her.

The full lips brushing warmly against Brenna's sent a painfully pleasant tingling through her blood. She leaned against the muscular body as the kiss deepened, and her hands crept up into Jess's hair.

Jess felt Brenna's firm breasts pillow beneath her own naked ones. Her tongue darted between her lips, and Jess sucked her, gently.

Jess had time to lift her head and release her when they heard the cell door open, and Brenna was able to step back out of her arms. That might have been enough. Given Jess's injuries, anyone else might have thought they were interrupting a medical exam. But Caster's eyes focused at once on the color filling her assistant's cheeks and the prisoner's prominent nipples.

"Excuse me, Brenna. I'm sorry to interrupt." Caster smiled, her heels clicking on the concrete floor as she slipped her clipboard onto the side table. "I thought you would have left by now. I came to put some tecathenese on that neck laceration, but I see you have things well in hand. Yes? So it might behoove us if I use this time instead to see if our Jesstin wants one more chance to avoid any further physical unpleasantries."

"Trials are over for the day, Caster." Brenna heard the tremor in her voice.

"Yes, dear, officially. But the quest for knowledge punches no time clock." Caster stood in front of Jess and looked at her body appraisingly. "Let's see, I need some small, insignificant wound…"

Brenna moved silently away from them. She stood near the sink and folded her arms.

Caster took the stunner from the pocket of her lab coat and rested the tip against the bleeding cut at the base of Jess's throat. Brenna wanted to close her eyes.

"Actually, this is too close to the heart to be entirely safe, Jesstin. Even at half intensity. Isn't there something you'd like to say to me?"

"Don't do it."

Caster's penciled eyebrows rose; then she looked back over her shoulder at Brenna and smiled. "You'll note that that was a command, Brenna, not an entreaty. Jesstin is forbidding me to stun her. Typical. Try again, Jesstin."

She tapped the cool steel of the stunner gently against the cut, smearing the shiny metallic surface with old blood.

Jess looked at her silently.

Brenna begged, "Say it, Jess."

"Come on now," Caster coaxed.

Tap, tap, tap.

"Just add that one, all-important word, Jesstin, and your command becomes a request. You know the word I mean. Every City child learns it in kindergarten. Don't do it…what?"

"Don't do it…bitch."

Brenna jerked her head away as the ugly snapping sound filled the cell.

Chapter Four

Brenna? It's me."

She was swaddled in sweatshirts and two blankets, and she still couldn't get warm. Brenna burrowed deeper into the couch, shivering as the knock sounded again.

"I can stand out here all morning," the voice called from the concrete slab that comprised Brenna's front porch. "You know I'm not bragging, right? I'm threatening."

Go away, Sammy, Brenna thought.

"I went through your garbage. If you keep pretending you're not home when I come over, you gotta expect stuff like that." The muted worry in her sister's voice made her sound older than her twenty years. "How many bottles do you go through in a week now, Brenna?"

Must have been old garbage. Brenna had emptied the last bottle the night Jess fought in the arena and hadn't had a drop since. She thought the bouts of chills came from alcohol detox, and she was partially correct.

"Are you really going to make me stand out here on this stupid stoop? Me and your unborn niece or nephew?"

Her feet were the worst. They were ice. She dug them beneath the dusty cushions, hoping for a pocket of warmth. The unit was dark, the blinds closed against the morning sun. They had been closed for three days. Darkness helped her think.

"Bree, open the bloody door already!"

The light skewered Brenna's eyes as she unlatched the screen, and she retreated to the gloom of the studio. She could feel Sammy's eyes, the same shade of green as her own, though

less guarded, burning a hole through the back of her robe. Her younger sister tossed her keys on a side table and made a frowning perusal of the cluttered unit.

"The tacky bitch who answers the phone at the Clinic said you've been out sick since Monday. So how sick?"

"It's just a bug, Sammy." Brenna sank back down into the sofa. "I'm sorry. I must have been dead to the world when you came over before."

"Must have been." Samantha rested her hand on her belly, which was just beginning to show the first sweet swell of growing life. Her fair skin was taking on the luminous quality common to new mothers, and Brenna felt her own face soften.

"You look beautiful, Sam."

"Yeah? You look like you haven't slept in a week."

Brenna had done little else for three days, but she still found it tempting to sink back into blankness now. She closed her eyes and rested her head on the worn cushion. "Sleep's not a problem."

"Well, then tell me the problem, Bree." Sammy perched on the arm of the sofa, her pale brows furrowed. "You don't return my calls. You've been dodging me for months, almost since the wedding. Is it Matt or what? It was just you and me for too many years to pull this kind of crap now, don't you think?"

Brenna regarded her sister for a moment, contrition warring with weariness. "Sam, I'm crazy about Matt. I know I've been scarce…I *am* sorry, kid. It's just this new job. It's pretty demanding."

"How demanding could it be? You work a nine-hour shift at the Clinic. You put in three times that during your internship, and you still managed to catch a burger with me once a week." Sammy's voice gentled, and she nudged Brenna with her knee. "What do they have you doing down there that's taking so much out of you?"

"Sam, you know I can't tell you about Clinic studies. It's Government work. I signed a confidentiality—"

"Yeah, Bree, I know," Samantha cut in, sliding down onto the cushion beside her. "But I also know that being a medic is the first thing in your entire life that's made you happy. You, like, *glowed* every day of that internship! I glowed too. I was so glad you had someone else to practice CPR on, finally."

"And minor surgery, and setting fractures." Brenna touched her sister's knee. "You remember me slathering you with red fingernail polish?"

"So you could practice trauma medicine." A reluctant smile curved Sammy's full lips. "And you stole the paddleboard the Ghoul whomped us all with, to use as a splint. I thought she was gonna kill us both."

"She wanted to."

"You didn't let her though." The love in Sammy's voice was tender and rich. "You told her if she laid one porky finger on me, you'd report her sneaking her scuzzy boyfriend into the girls' dorm at night. You kept them all off me, Bree. For years."

"Well." Brenna lifted her little sister's hand into her lap and played with her fingers. "Medicine's not the first thing in my life that made me happy, Sam."

"Well then, *talk* to me!" Samantha gripped her hand. "There's never been anything we couldn't talk about, Bree. Tell me what's going on at that Clinic that has you downing a fifth of Scotch every—"

"Sammy, not again. Okay?" Brenna pushed herself out of the sunken couch and went to the kitchen. "If it eases your mind, I haven't had a drink in days. You want coffee?"

"Yours?" Samantha shuddered. "Look, don't yell, but we've never run a genetic trace on our parents. We have no idea how deep problems with booze might run in our family. I just don't want to see you turn into one of those people who smuggle gin to work in a thermos someday."

"Samantha!" Brenna lowered her voice. "Listen. You were right to worry about the liquor, okay? I agree with that. I was hitting it way too heavy. But I can't drink now. My head needs to

stay clear. Honest, Sammy. If I can't stay away from it now, I'll worry about me, too."

Samantha's face darkened. "Bree, what kind of trouble are you in?"

"I'm fine." Brenna didn't hesitate. "I'm just a little crazy trying to adjust to this new unit. Give me some time, honey. Please don't worry."

Samantha studied her silently for several seconds. "Okay. I'll trust you. I'll try not to worry. If you'll try to pick up your fucking phone once in a blue moon."

"Deal." Brenna smiled wearily. "Hey. Did you want me to look at that day-care permit? Did you bring the application?"

"I didn't come about the application." Sammy got up and lifted her keys from the side table. "I can't be late to work. I need a glowing reference from my boss if we want day care, period, City-sponsored or not."

"You've never had less. Give Matt my love." Brenna swallowed. "Thanks for coming, kid."

Samantha smiled, but her eyes were still troubled. She went to the door. "I hope you decide to talk to me soon about whatever the hell is eating you, Bree. You've never shut me out before. I just don't think sisters should treat each other like this."

The screen door latched quietly behind her. Brenna waited until the rumbling of Samantha's decrepit coupe receded down the street, and then she sank back down on the sofa. She wouldn't hear her sister's voice again for a very long time, but her last words would stay with her.

The liquor had backfired on Brenna four nights ago. Her dreams were cacophonous nightmares of drumming hooves, dying stallions, and crumbling cliffs. Sobriety didn't keep the dreams entirely at bay, but if she didn't drink, she could usually wake herself up before the spear was cast.

She stared through her tangled bangs at the dust motes dancing in a narrow beam of sunlight on the carpet. Jess was right. She did have choices. She could try to talk Caster out of

terminating her placement for allowing a patient inappropriate contact. That seemed unlikely. Or she could resign voluntarily.

She had circled these fates endlessly, like a frozen buzzard waiting for the clean surge of relief that would mark the decision made.

She couldn't stop what was happening to Jess. No entry-level medic had that power. The clinical trials would continue with or without Brenna. And without the little protection she might once have afforded her patient. Her role as a medical advocate had been compromised. She saw again Caster's leering eagerness in the doorway of the detention cell, studying her with interest as she stepped back out of Jess's arms…

There was a side to Brenna that was almost ruthless, and she needed it now. A healthy instinct for self-preservation had delivered her, and Samantha as well, through almost ten years of Government foster care.

She was slipping badly, and Caster knew it. It was time to cut her losses.

Brenna struggled out of the sofa. She could be in and out of the Clinic an hour before Caster's second trial began. There would be no need to see Jess again.

❖

Sunglasses hid the worst of the wreckage the past days had made of Brenna's face. She peered at her wan reflection in the bulletproof glass of the Clinic's front entrance, then slid her ID badge through the scanner. She glanced at the security camera over the door, waiting. Charlotte took her sweet tacky-bitch time buzzing her in.

Caster's secretary regarded Brenna narrowly from her immaculate desk, her lacquered nails tapping an ominous cadence. "Don't bother with the charts, Brenna. Caster is waiting. She's in the gymnasium."

"Thanks, Charlotte."

"Brenna? I said don't bother with the charts. The gymnasium is that way—"

"Staff lockers are this way."

Charlotte's droning protest faded behind Brenna as she moved through the antiseptic chill of the Military Research unit. She wanted to remove the silver flask from her locker and dispose of it before she met with Caster. When Government employees were terminated, they weren't allowed to clear out their belongings without a security escort. Brenna didn't want a charge of drinking on duty to shatter what was left of her career.

She turned a corner and all but collided with Dugan in the doorway of the staff lounge.

"Whoa, Miss Brenna!" Dugan kept his hands on her arms. She noted absently that his face still carried the bruises Jess gave him in the arena. "Missus Mad Scientist herself directed me to escort you to the gym, stat, if I ran into you. Or you into me."

"I know where we're setting up, Dugan. Thanks. I'll be there." Brenna tried to brush past, but the big man's grip on her arms tightened, turning her away from the lounge.

"Sorry, baby doc. You might get some charge out of bucking Caster, but this boy plans to keep his job, even after that little mountain village up there is vulture fodder."

Brenna let herself be walked back toward the reception area, numbed by the same odd detachment that got her off the sofa. She knew she should be at least faintly alarmed by this forceful summons, but time was her main focus now. She glanced at the wire-meshed clock high on the wall over Charlotte's desk as they passed it. Jess would be taken from her detention cell in less than an hour. The confrontation with Caster would have to be brief.

Then the most logical reason for Caster's urgency made it through Brenna's haze, and she wrested her elbow from Dugan's grip. "Has something happened to my patient?"

Dugan seemed startled by her sudden energy.

"Um, is there a problem?" Charlotte leaned far over her desk to watch them, obviously hoping so. "Should I call Security?"

"I *am* Security, Charlotte," Dugan barked. "I think I can handle one woman all by myself."

"That's what you thought in the arena, Dugan." Brenna spun and walked toward the gymnasium. Jess should have been allowed to rest and heal the past three days. Surely Caster would have paged her at home if anything had happened. Brenna didn't see the brick red flush of anger filling Dugan's face as he followed.

❖

Gymnasium was a misnomer. That was what Clinic staff called the echoing chamber that served as the facility's indoor arena. It was used in foul weather or for any clinical or chemical trials deemed too sensitive for the eyes of general staff. The Tristaine study had been reclassified.

Brenna muscled open the heavy steel doors, and she saw Jess at once.

She stood beside Caster in the center of the hardwood floor, arms folded, her eyes darkening as they locked on Brenna's. The open collar of her black shirt framed the ugly stunner burn at the base of her throat. Fading bruises on her tense arms were still apparent as well. But Jess was whole and on her feet. Brenna felt suddenly lightheaded with relief.

Jess felt sucker punched. The memory of the soft warmth of Brenna's lips filled her, as it had relentlessly, for days. She had prayed to the goddesses guiding Tristaine that Brenna would never set foot in the Clinic again, for her own sake. This couldn't end well for either of them.

"Thank you, Mr. Dugan." Caster's tailored white coat glowed in the overhead fluorescents. She had just slipped a blood pressure cuff off the prisoner's upper arm and was recording figures on her omnipresent clipboard. "Welcome back, dear. You're nice and prompt."

Brenna forced her focus away from Jess to her supervisor's smiling face. The friendliness of the greeting threw her. She

registered the presence of Karney, cradling two rifles, and Stuart, watching her avidly from his stool next to the video camera. Behind her, Dugan closed the doors to the gym and locked them, and Karney tossed him one of the rifles.

"Caster, I'm not staying." Brenna's voice echoed in the cavernous space as she closed the distance separating her from the scientist. Caster kept her position beside the prisoner, so Jess would hear. Brenna couldn't help that. "I came in to file my resignation from Military Research. I've decided to leave the Clinic."

"I see." A line appeared between Caster's neatly plucked brows, and her lips pursed unhappily as she studied Brenna. She turned to the table beside her, opened a medical kit, and took out a small vial and a square of gauze. "Brenna, I honestly don't know what to say. Can you tell me why?"

Brenna couldn't look at Jess. "This project…isn't a good match for me."

"But you're so highly skilled!" Caster dabbed some of the liquid onto the gauze. "And you must know the Clinic is the crème de la crème of Federal research facilities."

"I've lost my taste for Government work." Brenna didn't know why Caster was doing this, but she couldn't prolong this discussion. The silent Amazon was taking up all the air in this massive room, and she had to get out of there. "My decision is final, Caster. I'll leave the forms on your desk."

Run like hell, *Brenna*, Jess thought.

"Really, dear. All this, just because you allowed your patient to seduce you?"

Brenna stopped.

Dugan hooted softly and nudged Karney, who looked away.

"I suppose it does complicate things, dear, but perhaps it's all for the best." Caster poured more liquid onto the gauze pad. "If Jesstin is truly drawn to you, as opposed to simply using you, we can exploit that. You're all the more valuable to us because

Jesstin will be especially impacted by any punishment you administer. It might make an interesting sidebar to our journal article someday."

"You don't understand," Brenna said tonelessly. "I'm out of here. I didn't become a medic to…Caster, I'm not coming back."

"I'm sorry, Brenna, but I can't allow that." Caster regarded her seriously. "It's very important to me that this project succeed, dear. It could form the cornerstone of my career. Of all our careers. Losing a medical technician at this stage would be disastrous, at least on paper. Something like that might even be enough to hurt our funding."

Brenna felt sweat bead on her forehead. "You don't listen very well, lady. I've had it with this place and with you." She turned and started toward the doors to the gym.

Caster's voice rang sweetly to the steel rafters. "Do you have any idea how long you'll spend in Prison, Brenna? For stealing narcotics from the Clinic dispensary?"

Brenna turned and stared at her.

Jess's concern for Brenna cranked up another notch. She doubted Brenna had ever encountered Caster's blend of genteel amorality and ambition. She could only hope she had the sense to fear it.

"I asked Mr. Dugan here to break into your locker yesterday, Brenna. He slipped about five thousand dollars' worth of morphia capsules in there. I reported them missing from the dispensary this morning. There's a shiny new lock on your locker now, and I have the only key."

Brenna's hands filled with a tingling numbness.

"Sweet little flask, dear. A gift from your sister?"

"This girl's no threat to you, Caster." Jess's voice was filled with gravel. She hadn't spoken in three days. "Leave her alone."

Brenna saw Dugan shift the rifle in his arms. Caster turned to Jess with arched brows.

"Oh, come, Jesstin." Caster moved closer to her and patted

the soaked gauze tenderly over the stunner burn at the base of her throat. “You can’t hope to distract me from the fate of this pretty little slattern by so overtly drawing my fire.”

Jess stiffened and closed her eyes. Brenna realized the solution Caster was using on the burn was tecathenase, or something equally caustic.

Caster turned to Brenna with the patient air of one summing up the obvious. “Sexual contact with a prisoner is grounds for dismissal, Brenna. That, and drinking on the job, will ensure that you never work in a medical setting again, not in this City. But you may not require employment, because you could be sitting next door in our cozy Prison, for ten to fifteen years.” She smiled. “Jesstin, tell us how long petite young blondes last among violent inverts—”

Jess’s hand shot out and caught Caster’s slender wrist. “You sick City harpy—”

“Jesstin, don’t!” Brenna cried.

Caster shrieked and Dugan bellowed. Karney was closer to Jess and reached her first, jamming the end of his rifle into her neck. Dugan wrenched her arms behind her. Stuart rose from his stool but quickly sat back down. He had watched the tape of the Amazon in the arena three times.

Jess thought for a moment Karney would fire, out of sheer rattled nerves. She allowed Caster to yank her arm free.

Caster’s jeweled wristwatch fell with a glassy clatter to the hardwood floor. “Dugan,” she gasped, holding her wrist tightly between her white-coated breasts. “Get this fucking savage away from me!” She whirled on Brenna, a strand of her silver hair dangling over one cheek. “Make your decision, girl. Prison, or your worthless name on a prestigious Government study?”

Brenna closed her eyes for a moment, but she had no gods to pray to. She walked toward Jess, not hearing the hollow echo of her steps on the floor. She looked up at Dugan. “Let go of her.”

Amused, Dugan backed off, raising a hand in mock obedience.

Karney lowered his rifle. “Brenna, this sucks.” He glanced at Caster, his voice low. “But I have a family.”

Brenna didn’t hear him either. She spoke to Jess quietly. “I don’t have a choice in this.”

“There are always choices.”

“I can’t go to Prison.”

“Then that’s your choice, Bren.”

“Remove the prisoner’s shirt, please, Brenna.” Caster was recovering her poise.

Brenna’s hands were steady as she tugged the snaps of Jess’s black shirt apart, then reached up to slide it down her arms. She folded it neatly.

“Let’s begin.” Caster patted her silver hair in place. “Jesstin, I’ve devised a protocol for our second trial that fairly reeks with Amazonian authenticity. Mr. Dugan, Mr. Karney? Please bind our subject between those two uprights there at the far wall. Stuart, go with them and set up the camera.”

She bent beneath the table and withdrew a coiled whip, shining and rough as a black rawhide snake. “Brenna, you’re to flog Jesstin until she either passes out or agrees to sign the renunciation. Be careful now. It took me months to master this thing. It’s tricky. You’d best take a few practice strikes before we roll tape.”

Brenna watched Jess walk toward the far wall of the gym. Dugan and Karney kept their distance on either side of her. She felt Caster’s arm slide gently across her shoulders, and her throat filled with a burning thirst for vodka.

“I know this will be difficult for you, dear. But try to keep in mind that our ultimate goal is the salvation of Jesstin’s mountain village. If we’re able to make the women of Tristaine law-abiding Government citizens, we’ll actually save their lives! Without us, they’ll die in a bloody, explosive war they have no hope of winning.”

Brenna watched as the two men leaned their rifles against the far wall, then took Jess’s arms and stretched them between the

two standing poles. Her bare back gleamed under the gymnasium's harsh light. Dugan said something to Karney and laughed. Karney just fumbled with the cuffs, trying to find the release.

"And if we can break Jesstin's spirit before we break her body," Caster continued, "then she'll live too. There could be no greater justification for your participation in this study, yes?"

She offered Brenna the bullwhip. Brenna looked at it dully, then reached for the leather grip.

"Hey!"

"Fuck, Kar—"

Jess took Karney out neatly with a spinning kick to the crotch, then Dugan with a heel to the kidneys. Stuart promptly dropped both chair and camera with a crash and bolted toward the alarm lever on the opposite wall. Jess let him go.

She targeted the two women across the length of the long gymnasium and ran.

Caster screamed in genuine terror. She jerked Brenna around in front of her to use her body as a shield. She fumbled with the stunner in her coat pocket, then saw the insanity in the sprinting prisoner's face, and she froze. The stunner was a toy in the face of such rage.

She heaved Brenna forward, a sacrificial offering to slow the demon down, and bolted for the back door. She almost fell, looking back to see how far the rabid Amazon had to run before she was disemboweled by her teeth. She staggered to a halt, astonished. The madwoman wasn't coming after her. She was targeted on the insipid young medic!

Jess vaulted to the table and used it to launch a soaring dive. At that moment the air split apart as Stuart yanked on the alarm lever, filling the gym with a screaming siren.

Brenna waited, watching Jess's blazing fury descend toward her. She felt both fear and relief. She could have run, but she didn't.

"Bloody traitor!" Jess screamed.

Her body crashed into Brenna and carried them both to

the floor. Brenna fell hard and then slid a good three yards on the polished wood, Jess's weight crushing the air from her lungs. She heard the siren, the yells of the men, Caster's strident commands. Strong hands encircled her throat.

Jess snarled loudly, then bent over Brenna and pressed her lips to her ear. "I'm choking you. Fight me. Listen. This won't save you, Brenna. She's got you now."

Jess raised her head, filled her lungs, and emitted a blood-chilling howl. Her arms locked, shaking, but her grip around Brenna's throat remained loose and relaxed.

"Dugan, Karney, no!" Caster sounded frantic as she snatched up the bullwhip. "You can't shoot her from there, you cretins. You might kill her! Run, run!"

"Listen to me," Jess spat. "Get out of here, Brenna, out of the City. She has her hooks in you, and she'll never let go."

Brenna finally pulled breath back into her lungs. She heard thunderclapping footsteps and saw Caster loom above them. They were out of time.

"Leave her!" Caster shouted at Dugan as he and Karney reached them. She snapped out the bullwhip. "This protocol will be followed, Jesstin, one way or another."

"There are always choices," Jesstin whispered to Brenna, and then Caster's whip cracked across her bare back like a gunshot. She gasped raggedly.

"Caster!" Brenna was frozen, half-pinned under Jess's long body as the lash descended again. The oiled tip of the bullwhip struck Jess's upper shoulder, inches from Brenna's eyes.

"Get out of there, Brenna," Caster snapped. "Assist her, Mr. Dugan! Jesstin, are you quite sure you don't want to put a stop to this?"

Jess made no reply, and Brenna twisted out from under her. She didn't think. She just sprawled across her patient to shield her. Caster couldn't stop the lash's trajectory in time, and it snapped hard across Brenna's stomach. She felt the strike through her shirt, and she almost fainted.

"Idiot," Jess panted. It was all she had breath for.

Dugan grabbed Brenna roughly and hauled her to her feet, and Caster resumed the beating.

Jess stayed down, braced by her forearms on the gymnasium floor. She shuddered under the repeated cracks of the whip across her back, but she didn't cry out. Brenna's gesture made Amazon macha important again, somehow. She felt blood trickle from one of the welts, wending down to her waist, but she remained silent.

Brenna forced herself to stand still between Dugan and Karney and watch the scourging numbly. She could almost feel the color drain from her face. Her eyes remained tearless and fixed.

Finally Caster coiled the whip, her smooth face glistening. "My, that's quite a workout! I'm afraid my arm gave out before our stubborn subject did." She patted her wrist to her forehead. "It's unfortunate that your display of temper prevented proper filming of this trial, Jesstin. We'll have to come up with something truly cinematic for your next session. Mr. Karney, escort the prisoner back to her cell, please."

Brenna watched numbly as Karney pulled Jess to her feet. She was conscious, but only technically, and she couldn't stand without the burly orderly's support. Brenna looked up at Dugan silently until he released her with a mocking grin. Then she addressed Caster. "You have to let me treat her back."

"Certainly, dear, if you're willing. She's quite subdued now." A pretty flush of exertion tinged Caster's cheeks, and she smoothed her silver cloud of hair carefully. "Use the tecathenase."

"Caster." Brenna discovered she was willing to beg.

"Tecathenase or nothing," Caster said firmly. "And we won't be able to give Jesstin as much recovery time from now on, Brenna. Her clinicals continue tomorrow. I'm sorry, dear, but that's what the whittling process is all about."

❖

Jess heard Brenna's voice first, which was fortunate. The rest of her awakening was distinctly less pleasant. She lay face down on the restrainer, which had been adjusted to lie flat. Her shirt was still off. Her back felt wrapped in sheets of flame.

The soothing voice above her fell silent, and she felt cold fingers on her arm.

"Can you tell me how bad it is, Jess?"

"How do you do that?" Jess mumbled.

"What?"

"Know when I'm awake." Jess opened her eyes in stages. "I just found out myself."

"Your body tenses up. Whoa, yeah, like that." Brenna put her arm across her hips as Jess's nerve endings awoke in full. "Yell if you need to, Jess. It's okay."

"I can't. Too macha." The nausea receded, and Jess craned her neck to see Brenna. "You all right?"

"I'm fine." Brenna smiled wanly, because she knew how *fine* she looked. "I'm going to finish washing your back. It's just water. It's all I can do, but it's better than nothing. I'm not putting that tecathenase acid on this."

Jess rested her chin on her crossed hands. She could feel the warmth from the arc lamp on her flayed shoulders, and she tried to quell the fine trembling in her gut. "How much time do I have?"

Brenna shook back the white sleeve of her lab coat and checked her watch. "It's evening. Maybe fourteen hours." The strain was back in her voice. "You can't take another session like this tomorrow, Jess. I doubt if you'll be able to walk by then."

"I'll walk." Jess closed her eyes.

Brenna paused. "That stunt you pulled, jumping me like that."

"Didn't work, did it?" Jess sighed. "If Caster let you in here alone with me, she doesn't believe I'm going to tear out your aorta. I wanted to stop her from using you against me."

"I know. But you did it for me, too, didn't you? So I wouldn't have to…"

"Not all for you, Bren. Caster's right. It would have been worse for me if you'd held the whip."

Brenna stared at her. She continued sponging her back, and for a while there was only the sound of water being rinsed from the cloth.

Jess felt tears rising and made no effort to stop them.

"Jesstin?"

Jess scrubbed her face on her forearm. "Just homesick."

Brenna rinsed the cloth in the basin again and watched the water swirl with red. "You were out of it for a while, Jess. You said a few things. Names. Like Kyla, and Shann, some others I didn't catch."

It didn't matter, Jess told herself. The Military had had files on Shann for years. She hadn't revealed anything vital. But if she was spouting off like that in her sleep, then she was losing control, and that worried her.

"Was anyone else around?" Jess's breath caught as the new tension in her shoulders started an unfortunate chain reaction, locking her muscles again.

"No, we were alone. Will you settle down, please?" When Jess was able to relax again on the chair's padded surface, Brenna rested her hand on the thick hair at the base of her neck. "Jess, just lie there for a second. Don't go on until you feel better."

Jess complied. Her breathing steadied. "I feel better," she mumbled.

Brenna laid the wet cloth against a welt high on her shoulder. "Camryn and Kyla, they're your friends in the Prison. Right? And they're both like you, they're Amazons?"

"We're from Tristaine." Jess's brogue was subdued. "Long story. 'Amazons' will do. We use the word ourselves. Cam and Ky were arrested soon after I was. For trying to spring me, as Camryn put it. The little saps."

"Spring you?"

"Well, they're Amazons."

"Spring you from a Federal lockup?"

"They're adolescent Amazons." Jess made the effort to smile. "And they came pretty close to pulling it off." She tightened for a moment, as Brenna patted the cloth across her raw shoulder blade.

"Kyla and Camryn." Brenna repeated the names. "They knew your friend Dyan, too? And the girl who was with her, Laurel?"

"Lauren," Jess corrected. "Lauren was Camryn's younger sister, by blood. Dyan was Kyla's older one."

Brenna exhaled sharply. "Lord, Jess."

"They're my adanin, so they came after me. They should have waited for Shann." She closed her eyes. "This hurts like a bitch, Bren."

"I know it does. Stay with me. You're doing great."

Jess's back and shoulders were striped with lash marks of no discernible pattern. The whip had cut deeply enough into her tanned skin to draw blood several times. Brenna felt again the shocking, fiery sting of the single stroke she'd taken. She tried to multiply that by thirty.

Her fingers tightened on the cloth. Inexorably but gently, she kept it moving. Her other hand still rested in Jess's hair, scratching her head lightly. "I don't know why you're not screaming. Anyone else would be."

"What are you going to do about Caster, Brenna?"

Brenna stilled her fingers. "Don't worry about that now. I can take care of myself."

"You haven't done very well so far."

"Pardon me, here." She slid her fingers out of Jess's hair. "I got by for twenty-three years before either you or Caster showed up. And my life hasn't been the fun little potluck you seem to think it has." She made sure none of her annoyance showed in her hands. Her touch on Jess's back remained light and careful.

"I don't doubt that, lass. I'm sitting up."

"No, you're not. Jesstin, damn it!"

Brenna argued while Jess pushed herself up on her arms, then shifted, very carefully, until her legs dangled over the side of the recliner. She rested her hands on the leather surface, sat up straight, and took a deep breath, waiting for the cell to settle again. She looked at Brenna. "Have you been crying?"

Brenna's professional appearance had been partially restored by the white lab coat, but she was almost as pale as Jess felt, and her eyes were bleak with recent tears. "I do this all the time. It's just nerves." Brenna scrubbed the back of one hand across her face. "Am I going to have to tie you down to get you to hold still?"

"I won't obey you anymore, Bren."

Brenna blinked.

Jess let that news flash sink in. "Do you believe me, about the murders?"

A dozen replies occurred to Brenna, but when her mouth opened, only the truth emerged. "I don't know what to believe, anymore."

Jess accepted that. Twenty years under this regime was a heavy load to shake off in one week. "I hope you're as strong as I think you are." She lifted her chin toward the door. "You need to get home."

"What?"

"You should have left at least an hour ago. You're being blackmailed. It's best to keep up appearances until you know what to do. Right?"

"Right." Brenna walked around the restrainer and tossed the folded cloth in the sink. "Listen. Two things." She rested her hand on the porcelain and turned to Jess. "I've decided…I do want to help you, if I can. I feel some responsibility in this. But I've got to protect myself, too, Jesstin. To do that, I have to at least pretend to cooperate with Caster."

"Agreed." Jess leaned forward and rested her elbows gingerly on her knees. "Second?"

"Second." Brenna's throat moved as she swallowed. "I don't want you to touch me again, without my permission."

The light in Jess's eyes dimmed. "All right, Bren."

Brenna looked at her. Jess's face glistened with sweat, and she was trembling. Then Jess smiled at her reassuringly, and Brenna felt tears threaten again.

"Go home," Jess said gently. "And don't drink, Brenna."

She said nothing for a moment, then went back to the restrainer. "Will you be able to sleep?"

"Sure." Jess made a deliberate effort to relax her shoulders.

"Lie down first, please." Brenna smiled crookedly. "That's not an order, but it's sound medical advice." Her hand hovered above Jess's forearm. "Try to rest, Jesstin."

"You too."

Brenna clicked off the overhead light and felt her way to the door of the cell. Then she went through it and locked the prisoner in for the night.

Chapter Five

The cold of the cell's cement floor bled through Jess's black linen trousers. She sat with her long legs crossed, braced against the cinder block. She rested her back against the wall briefly, then winced and lifted it. The meager breakfast tray had come and gone an hour ago. They would come for her soon.

She had prayed, on and off, since dawn. Or as best as she could gauge sunrise behind stone walls. Cold concrete was a poor substitute for the mountain meadows Jess preferred for prayer, but the floor was better than the restraining chair. Its padded length might be more comfortable, but she couldn't speak to her goddesses on a device used to confine her.

Jess figured Gaia wasn't particular about posture anyway. She'd never seen Shann kneel when she prayed. Shann tended to wave her arms around and yell a lot when she communed with her Mothers, stalking up and down the rows of Tristaine's gardens, her preferred chapel. Jess had always taken a similar conversational approach with her own deities.

This young woman was raised in the bleak void of the City, she reminded them. *Please, my Mothers, give her the courage to escape these spiritual butchers with her soul intact. She touches me…don't let me be the reason she loses her way. And your daughters, Camryn and Kyla. Keep them safe too. If you ask me, you owe Tristaine. For Dyan and for Lauren. Cherish your children now.*

Jess heard the electronic hum that released the lock of her cell door, and she battled a brief wave of dizziness as she got to

her feet. She closed her eyes again for a last petition.

Guide us home by your path, and make us strong.

❖

"Stuart, roll film!"

Jess was blinded at first by the stage lighting Stuart had erected to shine on the entrance to the gymnasium. She walked into a silver glare and immediately loosened her body until her eyes adjusted. Anything could fly straight at her and she wouldn't see it. She had to be ready to move.

Her vision cleared soon enough. Though Stuart's camera was pointed toward Jess, fully half of the echoing gym had been brightened by floodlights. She saw Caster regarding her from a far wall, smiling, her hands folded over her clipboard. Her slender wrist bore a shiny new watch. She stood next to the two upright posts.

Brenna stood between them, her spread arms cuffed high enough to stretch her to full height. She was naked to the waist. Fear emanated from her in waves, but her voice was clear and sharp.

"Don't move, Jesstin. You stay there. Are you listening to me?"

"Keep filming, Stuart," Caster urged. She watched Jess with bright interest.

Jess walked past Dugan, the only Clinic staff in the gymnasium besides Stuart and Caster, as if his rifle didn't exist. Part of her registered that Karney was not present. Perhaps he felt Caster's bonus wasn't sweet enough to cover this.

After that first sickening blast of adrenaline, Jess was calm, and her body reflected it. She stopped when Caster indicated, by clearing her throat, that she'd come as close to Brenna as would be allowed.

"Caster." Brenna spoke without deference or pleading. "Let me talk to her. Privately."

Caster pursed her lips, looking from Jess to Brenna. She

did toss a quick glance at Dugan to make sure the big orderly and his rifle were close, then returned to savoring her reply to Brenna's request.

"I don't think so, Brenna. Not right now. All Jesstin needs to hear, at this juncture, is that your participation in today's protocol is not entirely coerced."

Jess was careful to show no reaction, but her stomach clenched. She stood twenty feet from the bound woman, studied her eyes, and knew Caster was telling the truth. Brenna had agreed to this.

"Why?" she asked her.

The merciless light on her exposed breasts was an inescapable horror, but Brenna's voice was level. "All right. I'm thinking two things. First, you can't take any more of this, Jess. You've had enough. You've been beaten for weeks."

"Second?"

"Stuart? You can cut for now." Caster strolled in front of Brenna, flicking another glance at Dugan's rifle for reassurance. "Please, ladies, there's no need to string this out. Allow me to summarize."

Caster nodded. "Brenna and I struck a deal this morning, Jesstin, before you joined us. Brenna has agreed to participate in today's new protocol. And after today, she walks. She'll be allowed to resign. She can limp off quietly and work in some destitute ghetto infirmary somewhere, with my blessings. Are you following so far?"

As far as Jess was concerned, she and Brenna were alone in the gym. "Tell me your second thought, Bren."

"Second." Brenna's hands gripped the narrow chains binding them to the posts. "Second is, I'm not willing to go to Prison. But I'm not willing to hurt you any more either, Jess. I'm a medic. I…that's all I ever wanted to be."

Now Brenna did plead and she saw Jess's gaze soften. "So just do it. Whatever you have to do, whatever she says. If we can get through this, she'll let me resign, and you won't be hurt again.

I made her promise that. Jesstin, a few days of pain are worth it to me."

She searched Jess's face, the tension in her arms matching the strain on her frayed nerves. A shield had dropped across Jess's features. She couldn't read her now.

"I'm supposed to whip you, then?" Jess asked Brenna, pleasantly.

"That's right," Caster confirmed. "Jesstin, I'm going to move to the table over there, to get you your whip. Please mind Mr. Dugan's rifle, yes?"

Jess stood still as Caster stepped gingerly past her. Her thought process was poleaxed. She prayed it would cough up a clue soon, and hoped her relaxed facade was convincing, because she was stumped. She had no idea what to do.

Caster retrieved the bullwhip from the box beneath the table. "You Amazons are probably adept with these things. Jesstin, would you join me, please?" She caressed the coils of the whip affectionately. "This tape will probably be the one featured in the documentary, so look lively, please."

Dugan trained his scope briefly on the swell of Brenna's left thigh. He squinted to the side to check Jess as she moved toward the table, then focused on the cuffed blonde again. He could do it, he decided. He could pull the trigger. On either of them.

Caster waited until Jess reached her, then handed her the bullwhip. Then she bent beneath the table again and pulled out a cylinder the size of a cheap flashlight. She switched it on, and the device engaged with a muted buzzing sound.

She looked up at Stuart. "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen." Her clarion tones rang sweetly through the gym.

"This date marks the opening of the second clinical trial of Study T-714, already referenced in the previous clip. Please consult my addendum to our prospectus, faxed to each of you this date. As I summarized therein, we have already established in our first trial that our subject, Jesstin of Tristaine, will not capitulate under sustained physical duress."

Jess studied the coiled whip in her hands, then studied Brenna through the glaring light. She stood quietly between the uprights with her head lowered, but she wasn't trembling now. Jess noticed Brenna's breathing, its deliberate pace and slow rhythm. She followed her example and began to prepare herself.

"Several days ago, I instructed my associate, our study's medical advocate, to initiate a sexual relationship with our subject, here." Caster smiled, as if to accommodate the expected gasps of her audience. "All right, true. Unconventional means! But that's why you contracted with the Clinic, yes? For the creative, cutting edge only we can bring to Military research?"

She nodded at Stuart, who panned back to include Brenna, suspended between the two posts, in his viewfinder. Stuart focused carefully. He wasn't looking forward to this trial, but he could still enjoy the image in the frame. He had long nursed a massive crush on Caster's assistant.

Caster paused again, politely, to allow any renewed furor in her audience to subside. "I'll not be so crass as to tell you this is your tax dollars at work, ladies and gentlemen, but please, don't be concerned. Brenna is fully compliant with our protocol and is being well compensated for her participation."

She gestured to Jess with the crackling cylinder. "Jesstin here has developed quite an interpersonal bond with young Brenna. And today, as per my addendum, she will be required to inflict rather severe physical pain on the woman she loves, until she agrees to renounce Tristaine."

"Caster." Jess ignored the camera, and she'd grown accustomed to the stage lighting. She spoke to the other woman intimately, with genuine curiosity. "You know I'll refuse."

The smile remained on Caster's unlined face. "Well, Jesstin. If you refuse to flog Brenna, I'm afraid I'll have to ask Mr. Dugan here to trade his rifle for this little toy." She lifted the buzzing cylinder. "And use it on your amorata, yonder, as he sees fit. It carries rather more of a wallop than our staff's tame stunners."

Jess eyed the device dispassionately.

Caster switched off the electric prod with a smart click. "Both you and poor Brenna can avoid all this unpleasantness, of course, if you'll sign this document now."

She turned toward Stuart and showed her clipboard to the camera. "A simple statement, ladies and gentlemen. Jesstin's signature will affirm that she will pay our fair City taxes. Obey City laws. And, in return, receive the bounty of the City's amenities, as one of its citizens."

Brenna strained to hear her response. Caster's camera-ready words reached her clearly, but she still had no clue as to what Jess was thinking. The white static of fear kept filling her mind.

Jess nodded, slowly studying the document. "And what will you do with it? This statement."

"It's the act of signing itself that's the point of the trial, Jesstin." Caster lowered the clipboard, eager to move on. "It's symbolic. Now, if you've reached a decision—"

"Yeah, I understand that," Jess interrupted. "But your goal is to incorporate all of Tristaine, right? Not just recruit me." She lifted her chin at Dugan. "Is your poodle over there going to fly a helicopter over my village and drop copies of my surrender? Something like that?"

"Amazon bitch." Dugan pointed his rifle toward Jess's heart, then lowered it in frustration. The rifle was partly a bluff, and the prisoner knew it. He would lose his job if he killed her. Caster had instructed him to aim for the legs, and then only if she attacked staff again.

"Be very careful, Jesstin." Caster spoke quietly, but the sides of her nostrils flared white. "I would be fully justified in applying this prod to your belly right now."

Jess thought about it. "I have to speak to Brenna before I do this."

Caster narrowed her eyes. She balanced her desire to proceed with the sheer havoc this big hoodlum could create if

this simple request was denied. “Very well, Jesstin. Quickly, please.”

For a moment, Brenna was dazzled by the sheer theatricality of the backlit image moving across the gym toward her. Jess stopped immediately in front of her, her face shielded with the shadow created by her wide shoulders.

Jess’s voice was low. “Are you all right, Bren?”

“I will be.” Brenna’s teeth were chattering. “Jesstin, what are you doing?”

“Don’t talk, please. Listen to me. Brenna, she’s lying to you. This won’t end until Tristaine is taken. You have to get out of the City.”

“Jess, you just heard—”

“Shut up,” Jess said quietly. “You’ll bleed for nothing. She won’t let you resign. This isn’t your fight, Brenna. I can’t let you do this.”

Brenna started to speak, and Jess lifted a subtle hand to silence her. “Just make me one promise. I have friends on the inside. They’ll come to you. Help them get Kyla and Camryn out. I’m counting on you, Bren.”

“Who do you think you are, a bloody burning bush?” Nameless panic sluiced through Brenna. “Don’t just spit out orders at me without—Jesstin! Jess!”

Brenna clenched her teeth. If she hissed any louder, Caster would hear her, and Jess didn’t stop. Her relaxed stride carried her back to the table, the whip coiled easily in one hand.

Jess focused on Caster’s face as it emerged through the glare of the flood lamps. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the hooded lens of the camera swing slowly, following her progress. She noted Dugan had targeted the big muscle in her right calf.

“General Lorber, Dr. Aldin, Madam Undersecretary, I think we’re ready to begin.” Caster straightened, imagining the music the public documentarians would use to underscore this delicious tension. She held the electric prod where Jess could see it.

“Jesstin, you have endured weeks of physical punishment.”

Caster was careful to sound somewhat compassionate. "And if my hypothesis is correct, you face even greater anguish today, if you choose to use this whip on one of your…adanin. Will you put an end to this now and sign the statement? Or will you administer the first ten lashes?"

Not without relish, Jess raised her hand and shot a stinging slap across Caster's scented cheek. Caster gasped harshly and would have fallen, but Jess hauled her upright and used her to block Dugan's rifle.

Dugan cursed and fired a round into the gym's rafters. The bullet's progress echoed crazily among the steel beams.

"Change in protocol." Jess smiled into Caster's white face.

Caster cried out as the silver rod was twisted inexorably out of her grasp. Jess turned the prod into the open collar of her own shirt and pressed it to her chest.

"Your granddaughters will mock your grave, Caster."

"Jesstin," Brenna screamed.

Jess flicked the rod's switch. She wouldn't let go of it, and Caster wasn't strong enough to break her grip, so the current shot through Jess's heart muscle in successive bursts.

Caster screamed for Dugan, who sent one of the floodlights crashing as he launched himself at Jess. He had his rifle twisted through her arms in seconds, and the sparking prod fell with a plank-denting clatter to the floor. Jess fell more slowly.

Brenna went witless with shock as she saw Jess's knees buckle. The broken hood of the floodlight rocked crazily, sending twisted shadows over the cavernous room. Her mind had switched to surreal, and the eerie light show made the scene before Brenna even less credible until she heard the flat crack of Jess's head hitting the hardwood floor.

Caster regained her composure and barked out orders like Uzi fire. "Stuart, camera off! This tape goes nowhere but in my safe! *Stuart*! Got that? Dugan, get Brenna down. I need her! Stuart, get a crash cart. Stat, stat!"

Caster knelt beside the motionless prisoner and heaved her onto her back. Jess's body turned bonelessly. Caster tore her black shirt open. The deep burn covering Jess's upper chest was ugly, but her utter stillness frightened Brenna far more.

"Dugan?" Brenna's mind mercifully switched channels again, searching the band until it found medic. She watched the big orderly run toward her, his keys jangling, his face brick red. "Dugan, you get here now. Get me out of these. Right now, Dugan." Her voice was perfectly calm.

"No respiration, no pulse," Caster called. She opened Jess's mouth and bent over her.

"It's that key. No, Dugan, the one you just tried. Hurry."

Brenna forced herself to stand still until both of her hands were released from the cuffs. She couldn't help her patient with a broken wrist. Then she ran, shaking her hands hard to restore circulation.

Caster finished the series of rescue breaths just as Brenna reached Jess and levered one leg over her waist to straddle her. She positioned her numb hands on her chest, locked her wrists, and began cardiac compressions, numbering them aloud automatically.

Brenna had narrowed most of her focus to carrying out this single, lifesaving function, and she worked efficiently, rocking with the compressions, not shedding a tear. The small part of her mind not thus occupied was filling again with static. Brenna was terrified.

"She can't do this to us." Caster bent for another round of rescue breaths. She looked haggard, and strands of silver hair wisped around her head as she blew into Jess's mouth, then straightened again.

Brenna sat back on Jess's waist, panting, staring at her unresponsive face. "Jess, come on now." Her voice was almost conversational, then it rose.

"Do you hear me? Jess? Open your eyes, Jesstin!" She pounded the reddened valley between Jess's breasts with her fist.

Jess's dark eyelashes fluttered against her pale cheek, and then her long body convulsed. She came to with a heaving gasp, and Brenna lunged across her to keep her flat.

Caster hovered, as if not willing to believe her good luck. Then she pulled herself to her feet and shook off Dugan's assistance. "Dugan, take this Amazon bitch and her half-naked little puta and toss them in a dark closet somewhere! I don't want to look at them again today! Brenna, you'd best talk this freakish invert out of her cretinous death wish by tomorrow morning!"

Caster spun on her heel and stalked toward the gymnasium doors. "Be convincing, young lady. Remember how easily I can still arrange your incarceration in adjoining cells on a more lasting basis."

❖

Jess remained conscious, but disturbingly passive. Dugan carried her out of the gym, and her stillness in the big orderly's arms told Brenna how dangerously weak she was.

Dugan took Caster's orders literally. He didn't let Brenna retrieve her shirt, and he didn't return them to the detention cell. He found a large, empty storeroom in B-wing instead and set Jess down, none too gently, on the concrete floor. Brenna went to her immediately.

"Hey, Miss Brenna." Dugan paused in the doorway, backlit by the light from the corridor, jiggling keys in his pocket. "You want me to call someone for you? Wait, you live alone. That's in your file, along with you being inverted. I got keys to every filing cabinet in the joint."

Brenna measured Jess's pulse at the throat. Still thready, but stronger than it had been in the gym.

Dugan sighed and kicked the doorjamb. "Hey, Brenna, I'm sorry about all this shit. But I've got to tell you, if you'd been a little more friendly around here, less stuck up, maybe you'd have more buddies now when you need 'em. You're in deep shit, girl."

Brenna didn't respond.

"Better you than me, I guess." Dugan shrugged. "You two sleep tight now. And don't let that Amazon do anything you wouldn't let me do. Which Caster will probably let me do to both of you eventually anyway. Night." He locked the storeroom door securely behind him, leaving them in darkness.

Brenna could see nothing until her eyes adjusted. The only light came from a shuttered window high on the opposite wall. She lifted Jess's head carefully into her lap, then leaned back against the swirled plaster wall, cringing a little at its cold roughness on her bare shoulders. She let out a shaking breath.

Her hand remained lightly on Jess's chest to monitor the even rise and fall of her breathing. Brenna closed her eyes, her fingers sifting through Jess's hair in instinctive comfort. She seemed to be sleeping rather than comatose, her respiration slow and deep.

I'll never sleep again, Brenna decided. It was the only concrete resolution she could make at the moment. Sleep was a waste of time, and she desperately needed time to think.

They had a brief respite. The Clinic's swing shift was just coming on. They had several hours before they would be returned to the gymnasium. *Before we will be returned*. Brenna tasted the word in her mouth. She and Jess had become "we."

Having time to think was no guarantee of clarity. Brenna's thoughts were too snarled in shock and dread and the warmth of the injured prisoner in her lap. She pictured the flask in her locker.

The trials would begin again in the morning. With the same protocol, or one very like it. Jess moaned softly in her sleep. Brenna bent over her, hesitated, then rested her lips briefly on her forehead.

The strange woman she held would never hurt her. Brenna knew that in her gut. Jess might even risk death again before allowing anyone else to harm her. Who was she to this Amazon? What could she have possibly done to merit that sacrifice?

Caster won't let you go. Brenna heard the certainty in Jess's voice again and shivered. She couldn't go to her sister for help. Samantha and Matthew lived in another part of the City, and Sammy was as protective of her as a bulldog. She couldn't endanger them. But Sam was the only person who would even feel her absence. She had no one else.

There were other Cities, in other Counties. But relocation required several permits, a financial audit, a medical screening, and multiple interviews with Immigration. It often took months, and Caster could derail that process at any stage if she wished. Brenna could just bolt, try to set up a false identity in another City, but that took money. She didn't have enough saved for phony ID, let alone the bribes that were probably necessary for illegal flight.

Flight.

❖

The magnificent horse gathered itself beneath her and glided over a yawning crevice in the rocky mountain path. It landed easily, and she with it, two creatures of blended spirit. Then the whickering sound of the spear, and the gut-punching cry of grief in her heart as the black stallion staggered and fell.

Brenna plummeted through empty space, screaming, twisting in helpless terror. Then she was brought up short with a jarring yank, caught by her wrists and ankles. She lifted her head, dazed, and found herself chained to a splintered wooden X-frame, her nude body spread beneath the brilliant flood lamps of the Clinic gymnasium. She pulled at her bonds in a nameless panic, but they held her fast.

A tall figure walked toward her, outlined by a nimbus of light, a whip coiled easily at her side. Brenna tossed her damp hair out of her eyes as Jess emerged from the glare, and her heated gaze held her riveted. She stopped inches from Brenna's suspended body, and her large hand rose and cupped her face. Brenna closed her eyes, savoring the rough touch of her palm.

She felt her nipples rise and harden, and her back arched slightly, offering her breasts, her breathing growing more rapid with her rising need. The coiled whip brushed lightly against the red-gold fur of her mound, and a soft moan escaped Brenna.

Jess slid the bunched leather across the flat planes of her belly. Her lips fastened on the taut skin of Brenna's throat, sucking gently, her warm breath sending cascading shudders through her bound limbs. The coiled whip tickled the lower swells of her breasts, then rasped against her aching nipples. Jess's head lowered, and her mouth fastened around one protruding bud. Her tongue swirled against it, and Brenna arched again, crying out softly.

The gymnasium dissolved around them, and in the way of dreams, Brenna found they were standing in the crystalline waters of a rushing river, the air around them fresh and sweet with birdsong. No longer chained, her hands found the tumbled wildness of Jess's hair and twined in it, moaning as her lips moved to Brenna's other breast and began a light, sucking caress.

Jess flinched, and Brenna awoke instantly. Her hand had brushed the burn at the base of her throat. She lifted it quickly, with a hiss of contrition.

"Have you been awake long?" Brenna straightened against the plaster wall, blinking hard to banish the fading disorientation of the dream. It was too dark to see anything but vague shapes. "How are you?"

"Is this a cell?" Jess muttered.

"We're in a storeroom. Are you in pain, Jess?"

"You should have let me go, Bren." Jess's soft brogue was hoarse.

"That's a bloody stupid thing to say. What were you thinking of, Jesstin? If Amazons really believe it's courageous to kill themselves every time they're under a little pressure, I understand why there are so few of you left! Is it…here, this is hurting your back. Turn on your side."

She helped Jess move to a less painful position and waited until her head settled on her thigh. When she spoke again, she softened her tone. “Does Amazon pride really mean so much to you that you’d throw away your life for it?”

“It’s not that simple.” Jess’s eyes closed as Brenna’s fingers drifted through her hair. “If my choices are betraying my family, torturing a friend, or escaping on my terms…” She sighed. “It’s complicated, Bren.”

“How do you feel?”

“Like I died and someone jumped up and down on my chest.”

They rested in the cool, shadowed room.

Brenna felt oddly peaceful. Jess’s hair warmed her belly, and the darkness made her near-nakedness easier to forget. As for Jess, resting on Brenna’s muscular thigh seemed to lessen her pain.

“Caster was positive you’d sign the renunciation today.” Brenna was exhausted. “If not right away, then after Dugan used that electric prod…”

Jess clenched her hands. She couldn’t have watched that.

Brenna was silent for a while. “She wouldn’t have let me leave, would she?” she said finally. “Even if you had signed. The study would just move to the next phase. A new medic might object to Caster’s protocols as much as I do, and she wouldn’t take that chance. Not when she has me, someone she can control.”

“Caster’s a monster, lass. To her, we’re two lab rats. She said whatever she had to so she could get you into those cuffs.”

“She told me you’d be safe.” Brenna moved her fingers through the thick softness of Jess’s hair. Her eyelashes brushed like feathers against Brenna’s skin. “She promised me no one would hurt you again.”

They heard the distant banging of a door. Early evening dinner trays were being distributed. This storeroom would not be on the meal cart’s delivery schedule.

She studied Jess's aquiline profile by the faint light from the high window. Jess's features carried a simple, almost feral beauty that registered in Brenna's mind with insistent clarity now, whenever she saw her. She needed to hear Jess's rich voice again. To monitor her alertness, she told herself. "Jess, tell me about your village."

"Tristaine?" Jess smiled drowsily. "Tristaine has lots of sky."

"What else?"

"It has a river and a meeting hall. There's a trading post, and cabins, and hundreds of gardens. No computers or televisions. Lots of campfires, though, and fir trees, and vision quests, and stubborn women who can't wake up in the morning without debating it for six hours."

"There really aren't any men in Tristaine?"

"They come and go." Jess was finding it hard to concentrate. The storeroom kept fading in and out. "What are you going to do about Caster, Brenna?"

"I don't know."

Jess lifted her head, listening intently.

"What?"

"Get me up."

Brenna helped Jess sit erect just as a key turned in the lock. Light spilled in from the corridor, and for a moment they were blinded.

"Cybele weeps!" a male voice said. The door closed and darkness fell again. "What in blue hippie hell happened to you two?"

"And you are?" To Brenna's own ears, she sounded absurdly like Charlotte.

"Today, I'm an Amazon's son." The man turned his flashlight on his own face.

It was a stirring gesture, but a mistake. Jodoch's features were pitted and scarred, and they made for a ghoulish image. Brenna slapped a hand to her heart before she recognized the

orderly. At the same time she noticed that the beam momentarily illuminated her breasts and that Jodoch averted the light quickly.

"Jode, are they all right?" Jess sounded tense.

"The girls are fine." The big man moved farther into the room and dropped a bulky nylon duffle to the floor. He was younger than Brenna thought at first, close to her own age. She still covered her breasts with one arm, but her pulse was back to normal.

"Camryn wants me to bring her your ear or something, to prove you're still alive. Lordy, Jesstin!" Jodoch pointed the beam briefly on Jess's face again before clicking it off. "I didn't think you could look any worse than you did after the arena."

"Where I handily tromped your butt."

"Pardon me," Brenna said loudly, then leaned closer to Jess. "This is the guy you've got watching out for your friends in the Prison? He's on our day shift, Jesstin!"

"Jode was born in Tristaine." Jess closed her eyes against a wave of dizziness and leaned her shoulder against the wall beside Brenna. "He applied for Clinic staff after I was arrest—"

"Yeah, I'm a plant," Jodoch cut in happily. "Jode the superspy. Pamela says I'm an incredible stud these days, too. Pam's my lucky wife, Brenna."

His shadowed bulk crouched in front of them. They heard him unzip the duffle and rummage inside it. There was a light metallic scraping sound. "Here, Jess, give her this. Pam sent proof that I have Tristainian genes."

A whiff of aromatic steam reached Brenna, and she wrinkled her nose in surprise. "Is that coffee?"

Jess closed her eyes and inhaled with something like reverence. "Not the City swill you call coffee."

"Tristaine's home blend." Jodoch fit Jess's hand around the thermos. "Pam's addicted to it too, now."

Jess swirled the rich brew in her mouth, and its potent richness was more evocative of Tristaine than any photograph. She closed her eyes and felt Dyan's arm against her own as they

sat on the wooden steps of the cabin she shared with Shann, drinking coffee and breathing fresh pine air as they watched the sun rise over the far ridge.

"Hey," Brenna said softly.

Jess opened her eyes and passed the thermos to Brenna, the fog beginning to clear from her aching head. "What are you doing here?" she asked Jode. "It's risky enough for—"

"Yeah, and it's getting riskier fast." Jode settled his bulk onto the concrete floor. "Listen, Jess. My new best buddy, Dugan the dick, was crowing like the cock he is at shift change earlier." His brows lowered, making him look like a worried bear. "We're supposed to set up Caster's gym for some kind of marathon clinical test in the morning. And he's all jacked up about…sorry, but he's jacked up because he gets to be the one to hurt Brenna next time. I don't know details, Jesstin, but the two of you are going to get bloody tomorrow. Mostly her. Do you still want to take her with us?"

Brenna's pulse spiked again.

"Are we set at the Prison?" Jess asked.

"Yeah." Jode nodded. "We can get Camryn and Kyla out in six hours, quick and sweet."

Jess sat very still, obviously measuring his words. Jode's large eyes were trusting as he watched her. He seemed to defer to Jess as a matter of course. It was clearly her call.

"Did he say take me with you?" Brenna echoed faintly.

Jess put a hand on Brenna's knee. "How do you know we have enough to bribe Cam and Ky off the cell block?" she asked Jode.

"Barbeler—he's the night guard at the Prison's communal unit—big, quiet kid." Jodoch grinned. "Remember him from the arena? You broke his hand."

Jess groaned. "I broke the hand of the one guard we need to pay off?"

"It's cool, Jess. He's okay with the money we've got so far." Now Jodoch sounded like a teenager trying to convince his big

sister. “I think he wants to help. He almost seemed jazzed about this. Barbeler and Pam can get the girls out right after midnight check. Just as soon as we see them safely outta there and headed for the hills, I’ll come for you. You can meet Kyla and Camryn at the river well before sunrise.”

Brenna was startled. “Jess, you’re going to the mountains?”

“Getting Cam and Ky out comes first,” Jess said quietly. “Jode. We’re a good week early.”

“Pam and I are as ready as we would be a week from now!” Jode’s voice had risen to a tense squeak. He cleared his throat. “We can get word to Shann. Look, if we don’t go with Barbeler now, we might draw someone a lot less cool next week. And Pam and I think it’s got to be tonight. By the looks of you two, neither of you can wait three days, let alone a week.”

Jess felt Brenna’s hand on her arm, and she knew it was true.

“Jess, I’ll help you if I can.” Brenna pressed Jess’s wrist. “Tell me what to do.”

“Come with us,” Jess said.

Brenna was silent.

“I don’t know what kind of life you had in the City, Brenna, but it’s gone now.” Jess tried to sound reasonable. An Amazon didn’t beg. “If we pull this off, you would be the only one left to take the heat. Without Camryn and Kyla and me, Caster’s project will be dead in the water. And she’ll have a lot to answer for. And a lot of rage. Do you still believe she’ll let you quietly resign?”

“No,” Brenna said. “Do you believe you can escape up a mountain in six hours? Your heart stopped, Jesstin.”

“I can do it.” Jess nodded. “With enough decent coffee. And I can do it without you if I have to, but it wouldn’t hurt any of us to have a good healer along.”

The title registered with Brenna, even through the turmoil of her thoughts.

Jess waited, and so did Jode, through the interminable silence that followed.

Brenna didn't know her decision until she heard herself speak. "I'll go with you."

"We're on. This is great!" Jode slapped his thigh. "Jesstin, you be sure my mother, Jocelyn the Amazon, knows that her son, Jodoch the Man, was the one who rescued you guys. No fair telling Tristaine that Pammy did it all."

"You'll be our hero, Jodey." Jess was almost shivering with relief. She'd thought her heart was going to stop again while she waited for Brenna's answer.

"Great," Jode repeated. He rummaged in the bag. "Pam threw together some warm clothes. I'm no help with sizes. I just told her Brenna's short and you're a tree. We've had the backpacks and camping supplies ready for weeks. Hey." Jode looked up, his flushed face curious. "Hey, Jesstin, if Brenna had said no, would you have bonked her over the head and carried her out of here over your shoulder like a sack of wheat?"

"No, of course not," Jess replied. "Brenna's not a child. She makes her own decisions. But so do I, and if she'd chosen to stay, I wouldn't go either." She felt Brenna's hand on her arm tighten.

"Get out of here, laddy-buck." Jess nudged Jode. "You're late for your shift. We'll see you after midnight. Whoa. Leave the coffee."

Chapter Six

In Amazon lore, taking captives was sometimes a matter of survival. Their modern counterparts had to keep prisoners too, occasionally. While more harmonious than the City, Tristaine wasn't immune to the random criminal impulse.

But when Amazons take prisoners, Jess thought, we not only treat them well—they certainly get better coffee—we also manage to guard them properly, most of the time. In her opinion, the Clinic's lack of visible armed security at night bordered on the absurd.

She paused at an intersection of corridors and slid her hand back, waiting until she felt Brenna's cold fingers brush across her wrist. She then peered carefully around the corner. At the far end of the hall, a lone orderly sat at a battered steel desk, clicking slowly away at a keyboard. A rifle rested against the wall behind his folding chair. Four feet to his right stood the doors that led outside to the Clinic's parking bay. Beyond the doors, Jode's battered van idled in the shadows.

Jess crouched, wincing, and then braced three fingers on the floor until the dizziness lifted. She heard nothing more menacing in the dark hall than the droning hum of the cooling system in the vents above them.

Brenna and Jode crouched behind her. Brenna snugged the collar of her lab coat around her neck. The coat wasn't actually hers, not that hers ever fit, anyway. Jode had found it in the lounge and brought it to her in the hope that anyone who saw them would not immediately remember her fall from Caster's grace.

Jess swiveled and rested her back against the cool plaster. Jode shifted to ease his hips, and his tennis shoe squealed across the tile. Jess lifted an eyebrow at him, but the rattling of the cooler above them would cover the lapse and their muted voices.

"Twenty-five convicted criminals in this facility," Jess murmured, "and only three armed staff at night, covering three widely distant exits?"

"Well, twenty-four of those criminals don't have two gullible Clinic staff willing to unlock their cells," Brenna pointed out. Her teeth were chattering.

"Hey, remember, Cam and Kyla almost caught an entire Prison flat-footed when they tried to bust you out." Jode grunted softly. He was not built for sustained crouching. "City lockups haven't had to cope with anything as mean as Amazons for decades. What now, warrior queen?"

Jess considered. "It's a long walk from here to that desk. We don't need to seem harmless long, but long enough to close the distance."

"Then I suggest we make a harmless *run*, from here to that desk," Brenna whispered.

"Nothing that swashbuckling, sorry." Jess smirked at Brenna. "You'd best enjoy this, lass. You'll never get to do it again."

❖

Swing shift was not so damn hectic that its staff had no time to enter chart notes. Even if the pricks over in Military Research thought they were too holy to do such scut work, there were still half a dozen Civilian orderlies who could type this crap in the afternoons. Grave staff was not being paid enough to go blind doing data entry all blessed night. Swing shift had access to the huge bright monitors at the staff desk.

Malcolm broke off his internal litany and looked up, frowning. He heard the door leading from D wing close, then

footsteps. He craned his stiff neck to see the clock on the wall behind him through its wire cage. There was no mention of a one a.m. discharge on his roster.

A large orderly sauntered down the hall, followed by a tall female prisoner with her hands bound behind her. An attractive blond medical tech walked at her side, holding a stunner on the dark woman.

"Yo." The big guy jutted his chin at Malcolm when they were halfway down the corridor. He was swinging a tangle of keys, the possession of which, in Malcolm's view, made Military Research orderlies imagine themselves hefty of penis. "Got a late transfer tonight, compadre."

"First I've heard of it." Malcolm's hand moved to the box on his desk, and Brenna nearly freaked where she stood. One flicked switch would summon two other armed staff.

Jode paused, and for a moment Brenna thought he was frozen. Then he proved himself the son of an Amazon again. "Great. That's great. Another admin fuckup," he grumbled. "Hey, go ahead and call the desk for me, would ya? Have them wake up one of the brass?"

He started walking again, and so did Brenna, nudging Jess along sternly like a good Clinic medic.

"Tell them to call Lorber at home." Jode nodded at Malcolm's hand on the alarm. "Or is there somebody still here this late who can authorize this?"

Malcolm hesitated. Hitting any alarm meant filling out a dozen triplicate forms, even if it turned out there was no real security breach. Mighty Penis here didn't have to assume his glitch was worth that much sweat. He stood, pushing back the folding chair with his thighs and wincing as his spine crackled, and came around the side of the desk.

"You don't have any paperwork? Not any?"

Please don't make us kill him, Brenna thought. She didn't realize she was praying. Let this work. All I want is to get us out of

here without anyone getting hurt. But the man's eyes had focused on Jess's face and narrowed. Her status as a Clinic celebrity was proving a definite disadvantage.

"Hey, that's Caster's Amazon." Malcolm's gaze darted to Brenna. "And what's she doing here? That's—"

"Stay low, Bren," Jess whispered.

Malcolm bolted for the rifle, and so did Jess.

Brenna leaped to the right, clearing Jess's path to the desk, and she saw Jode lunge after her. She raced to the desk alarm and cut its power quickly, ensuring that no signal reached the Clinic's other sentries. She whirled as a crash of bodies hit the far wall.

❖

Brenna's teeth were chattering so hard now she could hear them over the rumbling of the van's engine. She helped Jess stretch out on the padded back bench, then squeezed into the cramped floor space behind the driver's seat. She wrapped her arms around her knees to contain her shivering and hoped there were dentists in Tristaine.

Jode bent into the cab of the van and billowed a green canvas tarp over their heads. He had tossed enough painting supplies around to make the back of the van look comfortably messy and nondescript. The musty plastic of the tarp tented neatly above them, an unbroken ceiling stretching from the driver's seat to the van's back doors. Brenna felt a lurch as the big man climbed behind the wheel.

"Can you hear me, Jode?"

The tarp made Jess's voice resonate beside her. Brenna could barely see her in the green shadows, but she could feel her warmth. Her own trembling began to ease.

"Yo." Jode's muffled voice drifted to them. "You two all right back there?"

"Dandy," Jess sighed.

Jode's scarred face had been pale as he eased the tarp over them, but his driving was calm and smooth as the van coasted

out of the bay and into the brightly lit lot. "Jesstin?" he rumbled. "Dropping that guy yourself was completely uncalled for, especially seeing as how you were dead just a few hours ago."

"I'm fine, bro."

Fine was a relative term, Brenna thought, trying to see Jess's features through the green gloom. They had left the orderly hog-tied with his own belt in a utility closet, basically whole and safely muzzled. But the diversion had been expensive in terms of Jess's energy.

"I could have taken that guy out, though," Jode asserted.

"I know, Jodey. I got nervous. I'm sorry." Jess lowered her voice, and Brenna leaned in to hear her. "A hundred years, and we're still pampering male egos."

"A hundred years, and butches are still condescending as hell," Brenna replied at normal volume, and Jess winced. "I could have handled him more easily than either of you, Jesstin. And Amazon butches, pardon me, are macha to the point of idiocy—"

"You two lay low," Jode cut in. "Last station coming up."

The tires made a regular thrumming sound as they passed over the succession of steel grids that led to the exit of the Clinic lot, and the final net stretched in their path. The gatekeeper's station housed an armed sentry at all hours.

Brenna rocked against the seat as Jode pulled the lumbering van to a stop, and she steadied Jess on the padded bench.

"Cybele weeps," Jode whispered suddenly.

Ice water deluged Brenna's nerves again, and she gripped Jess's arm. They heard Jode scroll down his side window.

"Nice night," he said to the guard.

"If you're wing nut enough to be awake," Karney replied from the high stool in the gatekeeper's booth.

"Thought you worked day shift, Karney." Jode's mouth was audibly dry.

"Yeah, thought you did, too. Pushing curfew a bit, aren't you?"

Jess closed her eyes. Tristaine still couldn't catch a break. Karney knew very well Jode had no business here this time of night. At the very least he would ask to search the van. She thought they might have to make a run for it, and she wrapped Brenna's arm in one hand to brace them both. She could almost feel Karney's eyes move over the van's dark interior.

"Caster decided a transfer to night watchdog was in order," Karney's sullen voice continued, "after I called in with the flu before her sacred trial this morning. Did Lady Brass Balls kick your schedule to shit, too?"

"And lopped five percent off my pay," Jode improvised. "Grave shift's a bitch and so is she."

Jess smiled at Brenna in the darkness, proud of her brother.

Karney leaned out the window of his booth and spat the last mouthful of dreadful coffee onto the asphalt. "You know Caster's going to crack your nuts, Jodoch, for springing those two."

Gun it, Jess thought, he's calling it in as we sit here. Beside her, Brenna's breath stopped.

"That makes you awful dense," Karney said. "But if anybody thinks every human being with a prick actually is one, they're pretty thick too."

They heard Karney slide his window shut.

A moment later, the van lurched slightly as Jode pulled out of the Clinic's lot and headed north.

Brenna fingered the edge of the tarp aside and watched the spikes of the electrified fence surrounding the Prison tick across the curved window. She shivered again with a relief she knew was not fully warranted yet.

Rain began a tinny patter against the roof of the van. The drizzle would turn the City's streets shining and black. Streets Brenna wouldn't be walking again anytime soon. Her home for all her twenty-odd years. She tried to discern Jess's features more clearly through the murk.

"Jode, what about you and Pam?" Jess shifted stiffly. "You know they'll send Feds to your unit."

"We're not going back." Jode's voice drifted to them. "We'll lie low with one of Pam's buddies until we can bribe up some false papers. We figure Caster's not going to be so hot for our hides that we can't start over eventually."

"Jode." There was real grief in Jess's voice. "You were almost through school."

"So? Show me a Tristainian who needs City schooling to be a good carpenter."

"You were studying electronics, bro, and you loved it."

"Wellup, I love my mama more." Jode's tone was rough with affection. "And Jocelyn of Tristaine would have snatched her baby boy baldheaded if he hadn't helped rescue Shann's little chicks. Don't worry about us, sis."

"On behalf of Tristaine," Jess said, "the chick reference was uncalled for."

Jode snorted cheerfully.

Jess sighed, then her brogue gentled when she spoke to Brenna. "How are you holding up, lass?"

"I'm fine." Brenna hunched her shoulders to try to release the crick in her upper back. The starched stiffness of the lab coat irked her. "I wish I was real drunk."

"You know she'll come after us, Bren."

"Yes, I do."

"Macha to the point of idiocy." Jode chuckled suddenly from the front seat. "I gotta tell Pammy what you said about Amazon butches, Brenna. You two would be best friends. She argues with my mom all the time about stuff like that."

"Tell Pam she *is* an Amazon butch." Jess closed her eyes. Her head was starting to pound again. "Genes have nothing to do with it."

"You better get used to talking genes and politics, Brenna." Jode's grin was in his voice. "They do it all day in Tristaine. Day

in. Day out. Day in. That's how Amazons have fun. Weeks at a time. You've been warned."

"As long as they have more of that coffee." Brenna sighed and rested her forehead on her knees.

The steady thrum of the worn tires on the roadway lulled her. She couldn't possibly sleep, but at least the vein-popping tension of the escape was draining away. Brenna lifted her head and focused on the silent woman on the seat above her. "Hey?"

"Hey."

"Your turn. Status report."

"I'm okay." Jess shifted again, trying to find anything resembling comfort on the padded bench. "Well, everything hurts, but I'm functional."

Brenna had to settle for that. "Where are we going, exactly? I mean tonight. Can we get close to Tristaine?"

"Not tonight." Jess rubbed her own shoulder absently. "Tristaine's deep in the mountains, a good week from the City road on foot, even this time of year. We're going to have to hike most of it. Luckily, Kyla and Camryn and I know these hills pretty well."

"Yay," Brenna cheered faintly.

Jess looked down at Brenna, and her rough palm found the back of Brenna's neck and rested there. "You've got to be spooked, lass. This played out much faster than I'd planned. There was no time for much warning."

"I'll be fine." Brenna kept her eyes lowered as if in thought. She tried to quell a new bout of trembling that had risen at the light touch of Jess's hand on her skin.

"Jode will drop us close to a river that the girls know as a meeting place." Jess, as soothed by the thrumming vibrations as Brenna, felt her eyes drift shut. "We'll need to cover some ground before we rest, at least make some inroads up through the foothills."

"You're planning on scaling cliffs? Tonight?" Brenna reached up and rested her fingers against Jess's face. She'd been

running a low-grade fever for hours. "You're not getting any cooler, Jess."

"We're under a tarp."

"Jesstin." Brenna's hand found Jess's thigh. "Do you really think you can do this?"

Jess didn't answer for a moment. "I don't know. I can still function, Bren, but I'm pretty rocky. What if I can't?"

Brenna paused. She stroked Jess's leg thoughtfully and then spoke to her as a healer and a friend. "If you can't, I'll help you. We'll get everybody home safe, okay?" She patted her knee in a way that was almost maternal. "Close your eyes, Jess. Get some rest while you can."

The van took the on-ramp for the interstate and moved toward the dark hills.

❖

Jess dozed in a mildly feverish, not-unpleasant haze. Occasionally a jab of pain would surface through it, but mostly she was aware only of cool fingers on her brow, or a light breath stirring her hair. Any images dancing in her mind were softened by Brenna's touch.

Shann bending over her, after her first battle. Jess had not been badly hurt. The only emotion she remembered feeling was a vague relief that the shock of combat hadn't reduced her to tears in front of Tristaine's queen. And the sweetness of seeing Shann's face again, her wise, tender eyes.

Jess awoke to the slow scrunch of tires on sand.

The van rolled to a stop on a rather precarious turnout at the base of the mountains, its fender inches away from a sandy ledge. Below the wash of the van's headlights, the hill sloped steeply until it hit a line of trees, thick ones, difficult to see through at high noon, much less at three a.m. Jess accepted the forearm

Brenna offered to help her rise from the bench and managed to do so without any undignified grunting.

Brenna was carrying more than a woman her size should have been able to lift. The rudimentary aluminum camping frame strapped to her back held blankets, two lanterns, her bag, and enough dried fruit and meat to feed a small family for a week.

She finished tightening a shoulder buckle, then swept her gaze over the van's interior to be sure they had extracted everything Jode had packed for their use. She considered the lab coat, neatly folded on the padded bench. She reached in and laid her hand on its starched whiteness for a moment, but left it behind, a completely impractical garment for a refugee hiking through mountains. The backs of her eyes prickled with tears as she slid the van's door shut.

They would be in Tristaine, in another life, in a week. If Jess's strength held out, Brenna amended, buckling the canvas belt of the pack around her waist. If they weren't caught. If Jess could convince the other two Amazons not to slit her throat for a spy…

"We may not see you again, Jode." Jess clasped the big man's forearm and held it. "Tristaine owes you a lot."

"De nada." Jode grinned. "By the way, I made a lousy orderly, but I was great at filching drug samples. Here." He folded a packet into Jess's hand. "Two tabs of morphia. It was all I could get, so you can't get hurt again."

Jess nodded thanks and slipped them into the breast pocket of her black shirt. "Give our love to Pamela, Jodey."

"Take care, Jesstin."

Jode kissed Jess soundly on her unbruised cheek, then turned and almost walked into Brenna. He squeaked and laid his big hands gently on her shoulders to steady her. "Hey, Brenna. Be careful, and keep my tall friend over there healthy, okay?"

"Thank you, Jode." Brenna rose on her toes and kissed Jode's cheek, surprising him into speechlessness. She smiled up

at him crookedly through her spiked bangs, and Jode fell a little in love. “I will. I’ll do my best.”

The van’s headlights illuminated the treacherous slope before them. Jess glanced down the hill, shifting the coils of nylon rope over her shoulder, all Brenna and Jode would let her carry. She raised her head and drank in the spangled expanse of the velvet sky and filled her lungs with chilled mountain air. The urgency of flight gave way, if only briefly, to the euphoria of freedom.

“Have you hiked much, Bren?”

“What other recreation is there on a medic’s pay?” Brenna grumbled, adjusting the straps of her heavy backframe. She thought she sounded perfectly collected.

Jess grinned at her, her teeth flashing a ghostly white in the glare of the headlamps. “Then you know to compensate for the weight of your pack when you descend, so you’re not thrown off balance, right?”

Jode’s duffle bag had provided heavy sweaters and jeans for them both. Brenna worried about Jess’s feet. The thin soles of Prison-issue canvas shoes offered little traction over craggy rock. She saw her wince as she drew her arm through the sleeve of one of the windbreakers Pam had packed, and she helped her pull it up over her shoulders.

Jess took Brenna’s hand, who let her keep it. She tossed a nod of farewell back to the invisible Jode and sidestepped off the ridge. Brenna followed.

Jess was able to let go of Brenna halfway down. She’d guessed she would be steady on her feet. Above them, they heard the sandy grinding of the van turning back toward the road, and the illumination from its headlights winked out. After their eyes adjusted, the blue moonlight overhead proved an adequate guide.

Jess hesitated as the last sounds of the receding van faded in the cool air. She closed her eyes and drew the sweet spice of pine back into her blood. Even the foothills carried enough remembrance of home to tighten her throat for a moment.

"You okay, Jesstin?" Brenna asked softly.

"Yeah. It's just been a while."

Brenna trusted Jess knew where they were going. Partly because she had no choice, she just concentrated on keeping her balance in the deep sand. The slope leveled off into a grassy area that led into the trees, and Brenna followed Jess silently. They walked side by side, weaving through clumps of freckled aspen. Brenna adjusted to the weight of her pack once they were on even ground.

Brenna threw guarded looks at Jess. She walked a bit stiffly but showed no other outward sign of distress. She tried to keep her mind from listing again the minor injuries Jess had taken in past weeks, in addition to the major traumas.

"We can take a rest stop anytime," she reminded Jess.

Jess gave her a puzzled look. "If we need one. I'd rather wait till we're well off the County road."

Brenna already felt leagues from any tame territory maintained by County Parks, though they had probably covered less than a mile. City hikers were restricted to carefully monitored trails on the outskirts of the foothills, and the forestland they traversed now seemed wild by comparison.

And wildly beautiful. Brenna pulled a deep rush of cool air into her lungs. The shadowed hush that signals predawn filled the fragrant trees around them, and she felt her spirit expanding a little, outside the confines of the City.

Brenna stopped, lifting her head like a young deer scenting the air. "Is that water?"

"Do you hear it, or smell it?" Jess asked her.

Brenna closed her eyes. "Both." She wouldn't have thought she knew what a clean river smelled like, but that faint, tinny scent seemed connected.

"Good, Bren. Your radar's on." Jess continued through the trees. "Watch your footing."

Brenna focused on the root-strewn soil beneath her sneakered feet and on not bonking her head on tree limbs.

She heard the subdued roar of the river long before she saw it. Finally, flecks of white through distant trees registered in her eyes, water moving swiftly over stone. The broad stream emerged as a dark snake cutting through the forest floor in front of them.

"It's all right," Jess called suddenly behind her. "This is Brenna."

Brenna turned, startled, but Jess was studying the surrounding trees, closing the V-neck of her sweater around her throat.

"Who are you?" Brenna faltered. "You mean they're—?"

But Jess was looking over Brenna's shoulder and grinning, so she turned just in time to be spun back around when her shoulder was smacked by a body hurtling past her.

"Hello, Jesstin!"

Brenna's eyes caught a flash of blue cloth as a small woman took a running leap into the arms Jess held open, and she gave a half-grunt, half-laugh as she caught her.

"Good morning, little sister." Jess grinned down at the redhead in her arms. "I missed you too."

Brenna took a step back and walked up against a slender tree. The tree coughed and excused itself, and Brenna whirled.

"Camryn," the tree said.

"Brenna," she stammered, her hand on her breast.

The young Amazon nodded gravely.

Camryn and Kyla were dressed in the same makeshift arrangement of warm clothing that Pam had hastily assembled for them. The green long-sleeved sweater Camryn wore made her look like an earnest young surgeon. She wasn't as broad-shouldered as Jess, but she stood nearly as tall.

Cam's gray eyes moved to Jess. "You're okay?"

"Hello, Camryn." Jess was still grinning as she set Kyla gently on her feet. She was trying not to make a teary spectacle of this reunion. "It looks like you two took good care of each—"

"Uh, no, she's not okay, Cam." Kyla stood on her toes and

cupped Jess's chin, turning her face to try to see her more clearly in the moonlight. "She's not at all. Look at her! What the hell did they do to you back there, Jesstin?"

Kyla pulled down the V-neck of Jess's sweater, revealing the ugly burn at the base of her throat. "Sweet Artemis, adanin."

Cam saw the burn and her mouth fell open. She turned abruptly on Brenna and slapped her, hard.

Brenna's vision exploded in sparks. The blow across her cheek was so unexpected it carried as much impact as a roundhouse right. The backpack threw her off balance, and she dropped heavily to the ground.

Jess moved quickly. She seized Camryn's wrist with steely fingers, and her brogue was deep and cold.

"Is that the ethic Dyan taught, Camryn? To strike a woman down without warning?"

Brenna stared up at Jess, astonished by her fierce eyes, an arctic blue in the moonlight.

Cam stood very still in Jess's grasp. "By the looks of you, Jesstin, I struck an enemy."

"Shann's warned you more than once, little sister, about letting passion cloud your judgment. It's that kind of stupidity that almost earned you and Kyla a life sentence down there."

"Jess," Brenna said.

"You don't know this girl, Camryn, or what's happened between us."

Camryn blinked, and even half-dazed, Brenna could see the muted pain in her eyes.

"Well, we can both see you've been tortured." Kyla's voice shook, but the look she gave Brenna almost flash-fried her where she sat. "She's a Clinic medic, Jesstin. Are you saying she defended you?"

"Kyla, she has a name." Jess released Cam's wrist and extended her hand to Brenna, who took it, and let her pull her to her feet. "Brenna did work at the Clinic. She also saved my life there."

Kyla folded her arms and studied Jess. The low rippling of river over rocks was the only sound for a while. Jess drew in a breath, and Brenna saw her suppress a wince.

"Listen," Jess said quietly, resting her hands on her hips. "I don't care if the three of you are never friends, but we travel together from here on. Kyla, Camryn, you treat Brenna like adanin, because that's what she is to me. Are we clear on that?"

Brenna saw fresh surprise in Cam's expression. "Yes, Jesstin."

Kyla's eyebrows rose, and she looked at Brenna with more curiosity than hostility. She nodded agreement.

Brenna nodded too, then dropped her gaze. The side of her face throbbed hotly. If Cam had led with her fist instead of her open hand, she would probably still be stretched out on the grass.

Camryn and Kyla were close enough to Jess to be sisters. If Samantha had been hurt, Brenna thought, and she believed she was facing the person responsible, she would have used her fist.

"I have something for you, Cam." Jess pulled a small square of plastic-sheathed paper out of her breast pocket. "Jodoch broke into your file and swiped this back. Thank him for it someday."

Cam blinked. She was smiling even before she tilted the small photograph to see its image in the moonlight. She lifted it toward Jess, nodded, and then snapped the picture carefully into her breast pocket.

"Uh, look." Brenna cleared her throat. "Jess, they deserve to know what happened…let's just get this over with."

Jess nodded. "Sure."

"I did work at the Clinic." Brenna met Camryn's eyes. "Jess was my only patient. She was—I allowed her to be hurt there. And I hurt her myself, because I was ordered to. I'm not real proud of that."

Both of the younger Amazons stared at her.

"I don't blame either of you if you don't trust me. I don't much trust me, either. I keep making decisions for the strangest…

anyway." Brenna struggled to focus. "If I travel with you, I'll try not to bring you trouble. And I promise I'll carry my own weight."

Kyla started to speak, but Jess put out a hand and hushed her, studying the sky. Dawn was still an hour away, but a dark blue light had begun to fill the heavens.

"Plane?" Cam asked doubtfully, looking at the rugged terrain around them.

"Helicopter, I think," Jess murmured. That brought their eyes up, but they could see nothing yet.

Brenna could hear it now, a far-off intermittent buzzing, and like the two younger Amazons, she looked automatically at Jess.

Jess's tone was grim. "We've got to find better cover, folks."

❖

All traces of weariness vanished.

Brenna felt adrenaline pump through her legs as they churned up the tree-studded hillside in a widening parallel to the river. They ran in close formation, alert to each other and listening hard for the rotary blade of the chopper.

The burring chatter grew louder, but the strong searchlight beaming down from the mechanical wasp never came near them. They ran under the cover of the trees.

Jesstin signaled a halt half a mile in. Her chest burning, Brenna thought, not just in—up. She stood with the others with her hands on her knees, pulling for breath. The pack on her back hung awkwardly, its weight seemingly doubled in the last stretch.

Jess straightened and listened, her hands on Cam's back and Brenna's. She was as breathless as any of them, but her face alone was streaked with sweat in the predawn air, and Brenna saw her grimace as she straightened. There was no sound except their gasping and the natural cracklings of an awakening forest.

"We need to get under cover before the sun rises," Jess

panted, scanning the sky. "Cam, Dyan always said you could find shelter in a desert salt flat. Take off."

Camryn turned to head up the rocky hillside. Kyla followed her, her smaller form almost visible now in the gray light. She caught up to Cam and pulled her to a stop. She rose on her toes, wrapped her arms around Camryn's neck, and drew her into a passionate kiss.

"Hey," Jess called, and the two young women turned to look back at her.

"Oh. We're bonded, Jess," Kyla called. She smiled, displaying the dimples her big sister Dyan must have teased her about unmercifully. "This might be a chance for a quick make out session or something. Don't tell Shann about us, though. We'll break it to her eventually."

Camryn blushed to the roots of her hair and tugged Kyla gently up the path.

Brenna noted Jess's openmouthed stare. "Wait. Bonded? Does that mean they're—?"

"Hitched." Jess's brows were still arched as she watched the two figures retreat around the bend. "Camryn and Kyla, they're hitched now. And I'm not supposed to tell Shann."

"Shann," Brenna repeated. "Your leader, right?"

"Right. Shann of Tristaine. She who sees and knows all." Jess sighed. "Artemis, take me now."

Brenna smiled, then studied Jess's gleaming face. "How are you?"

Jess scrubbed her hand across her eyes. "We can make some kind of camp by sunrise."

"That's not what I asked." Brenna reached for Jess's forehead, but she tapped her hand away lightly.

"I can make it for another hour, thanks," Jess said. "Stop hovering, Bren."

"Jesstin." Brenna sighed in frustration. "I liked you better when I could tie you down."

Jess grinned.

Chapter Seven

Camryn found them a broad shelf of sandstone, well protected by trees and shrubbery. It felt safe enough to Brenna, for now. At least Jess had deemed it so, and at the moment she felt almost blindly willing to follow her instinct.

She tried to help gather fuel for a fire, but Jess declined her first armload as a kind of wood that gave off too much smoke. She fared better assisting Camryn with what Jess called a perimeter search, but the Amazons declined wearily when she offered further assistance in setting up camp. Brenna didn't protest much. She was spent.

She lowered herself to the ground and eased back against a slab of rock. Its cool base pillowed the persistent ache in the small of her back as she watched the sun complete its slow push over the eastern ridge. Finding reassurance in night's end was primitive superstition, but Brenna took her comfort in any form she found it, and she relished the dawn.

She studied the three Tristainians as they finished laying out their gear. There was affection in the easy way the women touched in passing, the same kind of physical grace notes she had always shared with her sister, and no one else. *Sammy*, Brenna thought. She closed her eyes.

"Jess is probably going to send us off in a minute."

Brenna lifted her head as Kyla settled cross-legged beside her. "What's that?"

"Jess. She's going to banish us again." Kyla's tone was confiding and friendly. She had the fresh, clear face of a young

woman just leaving childhood behind, but Brenna noted the fine lines around her eyes, and she was entirely too thin. This girl had lost a sister and spent weeks in a Federal Prison. Both experiences had aged Kyla beyond her years.

"Personally, I think it's because Jess wants to be alone with you," Kyla suggested. "But Cam says it's because Jess doesn't want to watch us make out. Actually, I think Cam's sort of uncomfortable kissing me in front of Jess. What do you think?"

"Well, let's see." Brenna watched Jess break kindling over her knee, wincing at the same time she did. "I think she's still trying to cope with the fact that you two are together, period. That you've blended?"

"Bonded." Kyla snickered, and so did Brenna.

"Bonded, right. She seemed surprised to hear it."

"Well, we weren't when they transferred Jess to the Clinic." Kyla looked at Camryn with dreaming eyes. "Cam and I have been adanin since we were kids. We were going to be adonai eventually, no matter what. But once they took Jess, and we were alone together…we were scared most of the time."

Brenna said nothing. She was surprised by a hand covering her own.

"I wasn't jabbing you, Brenna. You weren't the one calling the shots back in that place. I know that."

Brenna nodded.

"Jess called you adanin," Kyla said. She smiled tentatively. "Do you know what that means?"

"I was kind of surprised when she said it. I thought it only applied to women from Tristaine."

"It means sister." Kyla nudged her with her shoulder. "Like with a capital S. It's not a word we apply to every woman, not even every woman in Tristaine. And very few outside it. Adonai is a whole other word, by the way. That's what Cam and I are now."

Brenna nodded again. "And what do you think I'll be to you, Ky? Friend or foe?"

Kyla appraised her frankly. “I don’t know yet,” she said finally. “Cam still doesn’t trust you. I think she’s sorry she hit you, but she’s not going to apologize for it anytime soon.”

“Okay.” Brenna turned her head against the rock to look at her. “That’s Camryn. What do you think?”

“I think that, except for Jess, you must feel all alone out here, and that’s got to be hard.” Kyla’s eyes were compassionate as well as keen, and Brenna felt an odd tightness in her throat.

“We won’t let anything happen to you, Brenna. Okay? Please don’t worry. Even Cam, she’ll fight anybody for you, now that Jess has named you adanin. That makes you our sister in a way, too.”

Brenna smiled thanks, then glanced down at the ill-fitting clothes they both wore. “Does this mean I can borrow your outfits?”

Kyla let out a bark of infectious laughter.

They sat in companionable silence watching the sun crest the ridge.

“We have to find something besides dehydrated bacon fat for breakfast.” Jess sighed, slinging down a last stack of kindling. “Camryn, Ky, see what you can dig up.”

“See, make out opportunity,” Kyla murmured to Brenna as she pushed herself to her feet.

Brenna noted that Camryn didn’t look at her as she took Kyla’s hand.

“Remember, we’ve lost the cover of night,” Jess called after them, straightening slowly from her crouch by the firepot. “Keep under cover, and stay within whistle call.”

“We hear and obey, oh liege.” Kyla waved.

Jess waited until their soft footfalls faded in the morning air, then walked to the neat stack of backpacks and removed an armload of blankets. She reached for the canteen in Camryn’s frame, but Brenna’s hand darted in ahead of hers and lifted it out.

“Is there some reason you don’t want those two to know you’re out on your feet?” Brenna sounded annoyed, which

concealed her worry. She twisted the cap off the canteen and handed it to Jess.

Jess swirled the cool water on her tongue. "Don't exaggerate, Brenna."

"All right, I won't exaggerate if you won't be a macha butch idiot," Brenna said politely.

She led Jess over to a protected corner of the rock shelf and snapped one of the blankets out over the shaded stone. Jess lowered herself onto it stiffly and rested her stinging back gingerly against the rock. Brenna rummaged through her own pack until she found her medical kit.

Jess eyed the small black case warily. "You brought needles out here?"

"Just the big, thick, dull ones." Brenna slipped a thermostrip from its packet and tapped it on Jess's lower lip until she accepted it glumly.

Jess's face was haggard, the cobalt blue of her eyes muted to the stormy indigo of the sea. Brenna didn't need the strip to know the fever had returned. The brush of her fingers down the side of Jess's face told her that much. She measured her pulse at the throat.

Funny how you could feel defenses lowering, Jess thought, like a fence of shields around you dropping one by one. Brenna's cool fingers on her skin ushered a pleasant tingle through Jess's chest. Her breath was soft and warm on her throat.

Brenna checked the thermostrip to confirm the verdict. "You're heating up again. Why don't you crash for a while? We'll wake you when breakfast is ready."

"Someone needs to stand watch," Jess mumbled.

"I will, until the kids get back." Brenna smiled and shook her head. "Listen to me. I sound like a mother."

"Shann says that's what being adanin does to you."

"Do you want one of those painkillers?"

Jess shook her head, eyes closed. "Probably need it more tonight, before we move."

"Jesstin." Brenna hesitated. "Why did you tell Kyla and Camryn that I saved your life? Did you mean the CPR, after you—?"

"You wouldn't let me die. You called me back."

Brenna had no response to that. She checked the healing burn at the base of Jess's throat, then opened her shirt to examine her bruised ribs. Her cool hands moved carefully over her tender side, then slipped the shirt down one of Jess's muscular arms. "Here, lean. Best let me check your back while we have some privacy."

"It's better. Just don't poke anything."

"No poking," Brenna promised. The welts and whip cuts striping Jess's back were less livid but still warm and tender to the touch. She applied a mild salve with careful fingers, then eased the cloth back in place.

"I was wrong, Jess."

Jess blinked and focused on Brenna's still face. "About what?"

"I hadn't admitted that yet. Out loud or to you. I've been saying it in my head for weeks." Brenna stared out over the sandstone shelf. "I was wrong to believe Caster. I closed off all my instincts…what I knew was right, for way too long. I let her convince me that what was happening to you was necessary, that I had to let you be hurt. Surviving was everything to me, Jess. And I am so…bloody sorry."

"I am too. Sorry we both had to go through it." Jess's voice was gentle. "That part's over now, Bren."

Brenna nodded and played with the trailing edge of Jess's shirttail. "Do you think we'll ever get past it?"

"Do you think you'll ever allow my touch?"

Brenna's eyes rose to her face, filled with such lost sadness Jess felt every shield she'd ever forged topple like dominoes.

"How can you want me." The way Brenna said it, it wasn't a question. "I'm pure City, Jesstin. I was born there. I've lived there all my life."

"And I was born in Tristaine." Jess winced and eased herself higher against the stone. "I've had the blessings of choice, and I've chosen you. You were never the City's, Bren. You wouldn't be here now if you were."

Jess took her hand, and Brenna felt a quiver of subterranean thirst.

It had been there between them, since the first night in the Clinic's detention cell, this odd quickening in the blood. At first it had been possible for Brenna to ignore it in the haze created by duty and anguish and alcohol. But the Clinic and its white lab coats were far away from this morning's shaded ledge.

She felt her body relaxing against Jess's warm side. The strength left her arms as she leaned into her and rested her head carefully on her bare breast.

Jess swallowed and heard the dry crackling in her throat in spite of the water she drank minutes before. She stared down into the soft hair at her throat, Brenna's sweet weight keeping her safely anchored to the rock. She felt the light brush of eyelashes on her breast as Brenna closed her eyes, and she let out a shaking sigh.

Brenna rested. She felt the cadence of her own pulse slow and settle into the gentle, steady rhythm throbbing beneath her cheek. The beat was still there, still strong. They all were, in spite of Caster's worst.

❖

"I miss storyfires." Kyla smiled dreamily, staring into crackling flames in the center of their circle. "Also that wine Constance makes from our vineyard."

"Jocelyn's bread." Camryn was stretched out on her back, her long fingers twined beneath her head. "Night hunts."

"Real coffee," Jess added.

"My dogs." Kyla peered at her hand, frowning. "You know there's not a single dog in the City? And they call us barbarians."

"Rae's mutton stew." Camryn's voice was reverent.

"Morning swims in the lake," Kyla said.

"Real coffee," Jess sighed.

Kyla snorted and slapped Jess's thigh.

Kyla was more demonstrative than either of Tristaine's warriors, Brenna noted, but all three Amazons clearly relished being within hand's reach again. Kyla and Camryn were hungry for Jess and she for them. They needed to hear each other's voices and share laughter again and breathe the same free air.

A visible weight had lifted from Jess's shoulders, and the eyes that had been so guarded behind Clinic walls sparked with life in her sisters' company. Those eyes still held a glassy sheen, but the food seemed to have beaten back Jess's fever for now.

They were finishing a light meal of the dried jerky Jodoch supplied and the fresh berries Cam and Kyla found by the river. Brenna had to resist urging more on the two youngest in their party. Camryn was as painfully thin as Kyla after weeks on Prison rations. There had been little talk of their time there, or of Jess's tenure in the Clinic, for which Brenna was grateful.

"What else?" Even sitting in this close circle, Brenna was keenly aware of her outsider status, but these memories of Tristaine called to her nonetheless.

"Archery tournaments," Jess offered. "Creaming Camryn at archery tournaments."

"Racing horses." Camryn grinned. "Watching Jess get dumped racing horses. Kyla, will you stop messing with that?"

"Can't help it." Kyla was scowling at her palm again.

"Here, you're just making it worse." Cam pulled Kyla's hand to her knee, but she snatched it back.

"You can't get it, Cam. You don't have any fingernails left after clearing fields for—"

"I'm just looking at it."

"That's not looking, that's squeezing. Camryn, *ow*, dang it!"

"You two sounded exactly like this when you were five," Jess complained. "What's the problem?"

"Oh, brains here," Camryn jutted her chin at Kyla, "grabbed hold of a thorn bush to pull herself out of a ditch, and now she's got this big bloody spike in her hand."

"Spike," Kyla groaned. "Camryn, it's a sticker. I have a sticker in my hand," she told Jess.

"Want me to take a look?" Brenna asked Kyla. "I'm pretty good with spikes."

"We can manage," Cam said. "Thanks."

"It's up to you, adanin," Jess told them. "But I'd think if you could manage, it would be out by now."

Brenna shifted over to sit closer to Kyla. "I promise not to cut it off."

"Yeah, I guess we better." Kyla shook out her stinging hand. "Thanks, Bren."

Camryn moved a few inches to make room for Brenna, her eyes downcast.

"Let's see." Brenna lifted the girl's hand into her lap and tilted her palm toward the light. The embedded thorn was an angry darkness in the pad at the base of her thumb. "Uh, Camryn's right. That's a spike."

Kyla groaned again.

"Maybe you should just put something on it." Cam peered over Kyla's shoulder. "Leave it for Shann to dig out."

"Good idea," Kyla said quickly.

"We won't see Shann for days, Ky," Jess reminded them. "Maybe weeks."

"This really should come out now." Brenna tipped Kyla's hand to see the reddened area more clearly. "Camryn, would you bring me my kit? It's in the blue pack."

Cam unwound her long limbs reluctantly and got to her feet.

"Shann would probably just put a poultice on it," Kyla said feebly.

"Shann would go after you with her rusty dagger," Jess

corrected. “Have courage, lass. Brenna’s got a skilled and tender touch.”

Brenna accepted her kit from Camryn with a smile of thanks and began arranging her supplies. After sterilizing a needle and tweezers, she dabbed a mild cleanser onto a folded cloth and patted it gently across the pad. The girl’s hands could have belonged to a dishwasher twice her age, Brenna noted. Exposure to the harsh detergents of the Prison’s kitchen had left them blanched and rough.

Kyla was emitting a series of sighs, her eyes fixed on the distant horizon in preparation for the agony to come. Jess curbed a smile, but Camryn shifted closer to her lover and clasped her other hand tightly.

“I hate needles,” Kyla explained to Brenna. “Also pain of any kind.”

“Runs in the family.” Jess linked her long fingers around one raised knee and grinned at Kyla. “Remember when Dyan fell butt first into that rosebush last spring?”

Camryn’s face lit up. “Man, I didn’t think that many thorns could stick in one human ass! She bellowed like a speared boar.”

“Shann had to chase her around their cabin three times, waving her pliers,” Kyla added, and she was grinning too. Their laughter was healing.

Brenna patted Kyla’s wrist. “You all right?”

“Oh, sure.” Kyla dried her eyes with the back of her free hand. “Just memories, you know. It’s okay, Brenna, I’m ready. Go ahead.”

“I’m done.” Brenna patted Kyla’s palm with the cleanser. “Your spike came out around the time Dyan fell into the bush.”

“Get *out*!” Kyla stared at her hand, pop-eyed, then showed it to Camryn. “Brenna, you’re a genius!”

Camryn’s eyebrows arched.

“Let me slap on a Band-Aid. You’ll want to keep it clean.” Brenna smoothed the small bandage in place deftly. “I trust all

Amazons don't make their medics psychotic, like your strange friend over there."

The fond light in Jess's gaze warmed Brenna better than the weak rays of the sun, but her increasing pallor was a reminder of how long it had been since any of them had any real sleep.

Jess seemed to read her mind and climbed painfully to her feet. "We've got ground to cover tonight. Let's get some rest."

"I don't want to close my eyes on you." Kyla slipped her arms around Jess's waist and pulled her close. "I'm afraid you'll disappear again."

"I'll be here when you wake, adanin." Jess winced as Kyla's arms tightened, but she rested her lips in the girl's hair. "I'll take first watch, Camryn, if you'll spell me after—"

"I'll take first, Jess." Camryn shook out another blanket over the shaded rock to form a pallet for her and Kyla. "Old women need their sleep."

Jess groaned, but didn't protest.

"You can tap me next," Brenna offered. "If standing watch just means screaming my head off if I see anything, I can do that."

Camryn glanced at Jess, who nodded.

Their packs held only so much room for blankets. It was share them or sleep on dusty stone. Brenna surreptitiously helped Jess settle on the second pallet, then lowered herself next to her, trembling with fatigue. She suppressed a moan as she stretched out, trying to find a position her aching muscles would tolerate.

"This is like trying to sleep on a riverbank beside a flopping trout," Jess griped.

"Well, now I know how one feels," Brenna muttered. She rolled over carefully and blinked with surprise to see Cam's sneaker an inch from her nose. She craned her neck to see the serious face above them.

"Jesstin, I found a ledge with good sightlines above that brush there. You can crash. Nothing's getting within a mile of us without being seen."

"Tristaine has no sharper eyes," Jess said. "I'll sleep well, Cam."

"Good. Uh, thanks, Brenna," Camryn mumbled. "For Ky's hand."

Brenna smiled. "Sure, Camryn. Glad I could help."

She was asleep before Camryn mounted the ledge.

❖

Sometime after the sun crested noon and began its journey west, Jess moaned in her sleep.

Cam frowned and lifted herself from the stone lip of the shelf where she stood watch, then saw that the woman sleeping beside Jess had awakened at the low sound.

Camryn watched Brenna feel her sister's face, then her hands. Jess lay on her side, gripped by such vicious chills Cam could see her shaking from the ledge. Brenna pushed down the blanket, then opened Jess's shirt. She unbuttoned her own green sweater and lay down again, resting her bare breasts against Jess's to warm her. She slipped a supporting arm around her shoulders as she pulled up the blanket to cover them both. Brenna rested her head on Jess's shoulder.

Camryn watched them silently for a while, then returned to her watch.

❖

The two stallions charged each other, trumpeting screams of rage that sounded almost human. They met in a terrible crash of flashing teeth and powerful, churning kicks, shattering the peace of the pasture with the fury of their battle. Around them, the herd milled in fearful chaos, raising clouds of dust as their bodies thudded together, their hooves trampling the sparse grass in panic.

Brenna awoke instantly, every vestige of sleep banished in one quick, shivering burst of alarm. Her hand reached immediately

for Jess, but swept across an empty blanket.

"Jesstin's gone, Brenna." Camryn pushed herself away from the rock wall and went to her, puzzled by her expression.

"W-where is she?"

"Don't freak. I don't mean gone gone." Camryn glanced over her shoulder at Kyla, still sleeping yards away. She turned back to Brenna, then averted her gaze. "I thought I heard something. Some kind of motor. I woke Jess, and she went to check it out."

"I'd better check *her* out." Brenna realized the young Amazon was studiously avoiding looking at her bare breasts, and she blushed slightly as she pulled down her shirt to cover them.

"No need, Brenna. Jess is pretty careful."

"Yeah, I know. But she's been through a lot." She groped for her shoes beneath the blankets, then climbed to her feet.

And sat down again with an ungainly thump. Every muscle in Brenna's body screamed regret for last night's uphill flight with a full pack. She was certain for a moment that she would throw up, but the nausea receded as quickly as it hit. Chills racked her, and her hands shook. The back of her throat was raw and ached for the sharp bite of whiskey.

"Hey. You all right?" Cam frowned, her hand almost touching Brenna's head before she folded her arms. "You look worse than Jess did, and that was pretty bad."

"Just waking up," Brenna managed. "This is me in the morning." She laced her shoes, shaking the last of the dream from her mind. "Which way did she go?"

"The sound came from the north." Cam nodded toward the trees. "Uh, don't get lost out there, all right? If you don't find her fast, come back and we'll regroup."

They had laid camp that morning barely out of the foothills, not far west of the river that had been their rendezvous point. To reach the rock shelf, they'd had to travel a long stretch through open land, and Brenna looked back over that vista now. She scanned the sunlit reaches of the foothills, searching, the crisp air

clearing the fog from her head. She heard a splashing sound and turned quickly, then plowed through a barrier of hedge brush.

The distant figure was kneeling in the frigid current of the stream, which swirled and tumbled around her thighs. Jess had obviously immersed herself fully more than once, and her hair hung in soaked strands around her face and throat. Brenna stared at her from the riverbank, appalled.

Her fever must have rocketed while they slept, Brenna thought. There was no telling how rational Jess's thinking had been when she sought out the icy water. She was trying to cool her body fast, a primitive and dangerous instinct. She was apparently unconcerned that she was subjecting her weakened system to a horrendous shock, and completely in the open beneath a cloudless blue sky.

"Jesstin!" Brenna gave the empty heavens a fast search, and then she jumped off the shallow bank and into the river. She staggered when her sneakered feet hit the smooth rocks of the riverbed, but her athlete's reflexes steadied her. Her ankles went numb with the immediate, stinging cold of the water, small waves slapping up to her knees.

"Jess!" Brenna slogged through the gentle current, alarmed that Jess didn't seem to hear her. "Hey, look at me!"

Jess leaned forward to lower her head completely beneath the chilled, dancing water again. Brenna reached her while her head was still submerged, and at first she thought Jess was merely startled.

Her reaction to the touch of Brenna's hands on her back was galvanic. She reared up on her knees like a branded stallion, slinging jets of water from her black hair, and there was nothing sane in her face.

"Jess, it's me!" Brenna gasped. She fell to her knees in the water and gripped Jess's arms. "You idiot! I don't care how strong you are, your heart can't take—"

Jess shook off her hands effortlessly and clasped her wrists.

With both of them kneeling, she towered over Brenna. A greedy light ignited her features.

"Every time you touched me." Jess's brogue was soft. "Whenever I felt your fingers on my skin, sweet Brenna, I felt my mouth on you."

"Jesstin, make sense." Brenna pulled one hand free and cupped the back of Jess's neck. "That fever might—"

Jess lunged to her feet, carrying Brenna with her. Pure instinct reigned then, on both sides. Brenna fought to free herself, and Jess fought to carry her to the bank. Jess was bigger, but it took all of her strength to haul Brenna out of the river and up the muddy bank.

Jess had been away far too long. She was going home.

She threw Brenna's struggling body down in the grass and stood over her, one foot on either side of her waist. "I'll not break my word, Brenna. If you still refuse my touch, say so now."

The rational tone seemed to belong to a different woman. The one standing over Brenna knelt in the grass by her side and began to strip her. She bared the gold mound between her thighs first. Then she snatched her sweater open, baring her full breasts.

"I felt it the first time you touched me, and so did you." Jess pushed Brenna's knees apart with gentle, but inexorable strength. "Your touch was as welcome and dear to me as sunlight, Brenna."

Jess stared down at her soft, exposed center. Brenna moaned and turned her head on the grass, feeling that gaze on her labia as palpably as heat. Abruptly, Jess snugged her cold, wet palm against her quivering cleft, and the moan ended in a cry of shock. But Brenna made no move to cover herself.

Brenna had never traveled here. She hadn't known this place existed. She didn't know herself here, but she wasn't afraid. She couldn't take her eyes off the austere beauty of Jess's face.

"I've come for you, lass." The brogue rendered Jess's voice as soft as moss. "I'm taking you home."

Jess's gaze fastened for a long moment on Brenna's shuddering breasts, then moved lower. Her long fingers began stroking her wetness.

"Jess," Brenna gasped. The fingers dancing slowly in her cleft hesitated, but when Brenna said nothing more, they continued their languorous twirling.

Jess entered Brenna carefully, slowly, unaware of the tears blurring her vision. That she was capable of such self-restraint was testament to Dyan's rigorous insistence on self-discipline. Like all Tristaine's warriors, Jesstin had had her moments of youthful rebellion against such restrictions. Now, she used that inner strength to protect her lover against her own raging blood. She took her time, working Brenna gently, allowing small muscles to relax, listening to her hitching breathing to gauge her rising desire, then moving deeper.

Brenna lifted herself briefly on her heels as Jess sank in fully, the dark, swirling pleasure spiking so quickly she couldn't suppress her reaction in spite of her efforts. "Damn you, Jesstin," she whispered.

"I wanted you, every time you looked at me." Jess's voice grew more even as she settled into a rhythm, her thumb circling gently over Brenna's tight center, her long fingers delving in and out in skilled cadence.

Brenna moaned softly, and Jess's eyes moved to her flushed face. "In the storeroom. When I saw your face above me. I wanted you even then, adanin, and your eyes held the same light."

Brenna emitted another sound, more like a groan, and Jess's words cut off as her own arousal coursed higher. She had to lower her head to Brenna's stomach for a moment, but her fingers never stopped their gentle, relentless attack.

Brenna's belly flooded with heat, and a fiery pleasure coursed through her nipples and returned to simmer in her loins. She tried again to moan out a protest, but all that emerged this time was Jess's name. Brenna knew her movements were changing; she had begun undulating beneath the tall form pinning

her. When Jess raised her head, she saw that Brenna's lidded eyes were filling with need.

"You've only known me powerless, Bren. Don't make the mistake of believing me so now."

She covered Brenna's mouth with her free hand. Then she bent, fastened her lips around her protruding clitoris, and nibbled it gently.

Climax hit Brenna so fast and fiercely she convulsed with it. Her hoarse scream was drowned by Jess's hand over her mouth, but her lips opened against her palm as she screamed again.

The spasms in Brenna's center began to subside, and Jess released her. After a moment, she worked her fingers slowly and gently from between Brenna's splayed legs, leaving her emptied.

Jess climbed to her feet in stages. She looked down at Brenna silently, her hair and black clothing still dripping with river water. She didn't move to help her stand, and Brenna did not ask her assistance.

Brenna adjusted her clothing slowly and got to her feet. They studied each other in the birdsong silence. Jess regarded her calmly, and her expressive features held no regret.

And Brenna discovered she felt none. Against all logic, she was filled with a shimmering peace. She wondered again if she was losing her sanity.

Jess's head lifted imperceptibly when Cam's whistle reached them from the other side of the trees. The low, musical note held apprehension, and Jess answered at once, with a trilling whistle of assurance. A moment later, a third whistle acknowledged her.

Jess looked back at Brenna and then at the open land around them. Her expression changed, her eyes growing dark. "I could have brought a search party down on all of us."

"It was the fever," Brenna said gently. She was still trembling. "You've been…out of your head, Jess."

Jess stared at her.

"You didn't hurt me," Brenna added.

"I know that."

"Jess, you were delirious."

"No, I wasn't. Not then. My fever broke in the stream, Brenna." She nodded toward the trees. "Let's get under cover."

Brenna followed her into a sparse copse of aspen. Jess walked soundlessly over the leaf-strewn ground, and Brenna tried to step in her footprints, to achieve equal stealth. Soon she was hopping from print to print, and annoyance burgeoned in her chest.

"Slow down, Jesstin."

Jess ignored her.

"Hey." Brenna trotted a few steps and caught her arm. "Walking, at any speed, is not particularly comfortable for me at this time. You're being rude, Jess."

That seemed to sting. Jess turned back and rested her hands on her hips.

"Look, I haven't mastered the whole Amazon-stoic thing, just yet." Brenna folded her arms, shivering with the chill the mountain breeze sent through her damp clothes. "You just blew the top of my head off back there, Jesstin. A moment to collect my thoughts is not too much to ask."

"Can't you collect while we—?"

"No. Listen, you had plenty to say a few minutes ago, and I heard you out. Now it's my turn." Brenna stepped closer to Jess, searching her face. "You were right. You weren't alone down there, in what you were feeling. I've dreamed about you every night since we met. I saw your face every time I closed my eyes. You haunted me, Jess."

Jess closed the distance between them, until Brenna's breasts nestled beneath her own. She warmed Brenna's arms with her hands until she stopped shivering.

"And we still have some unfinished business." Brenna curled a hand beneath Jess's hair and cupped her neck. "Now, when we're both more or less sane. We were rudely interrupted the first time."

Jess bent her head and then hesitated, her lips a mere inch from Brenna's. Brenna rose on her toes and met her, and their mouths blended in a rush of exhaled sighs. Their heat was more tender than passionate now, a glowing ember rather than flame. Brenna trailed her fingers down the side of Jess's face in something like wonder.

Camryn's second whistle parted them.

Jess lifted her head, her eyes filled with bemused regret. "We'll have time," she promised. "We've got to find safety first."

Brenna nodded. Jess offered her hand, and she took it. They walked together deeper into the trees.

❖

Jess stalked silently into the camp, past the worried scrutiny of Camryn and Kyla, and on to their packs. She rummaged in Brenna's kit and withdrew a small packet.

Kyla glanced at Brenna's damp jeans as she joined them and put a questioning hand on her wrist. Brenna shook her head and nodded toward Jess. They watched her dry-swallow a capsule, then pull some folded clothing from the pack.

Jess went to Brenna and handed her a stack of dry clothes. Her step on the sandstone wasn't quite steady. The abrupt retreat of the fever left her feeling temporarily as weak as a pup. And cold. And disoriented. In addition to all the other things Jess was feeling, none of which she had time for now.

"All right." Jess rested her hands on her hips and regarded Kyla and Camryn. "Physically, I'm rockier than I let on. I'm going to be fine, but I'm not at my best. Okay?"

"Okay." Kyla nodded.

"Right now I can travel well enough, and fight if necessary. But if the fever kicks in again, I might get spacey." Jess appraised them for a moment. "The three of you can take me if you have to. Act fast if need be, Cam. Don't fuck around."

Cam swallowed visibly. “Okay, Jesstin.”

Kyla nudged Brenna and lifted her eyebrows. Brenna shrugged and nodded.

They struck camp at sunset.

Chapter Eight

They hiked through a misting rain for the first two hours. The terrain was rocky forestland in the middle of the wet season, and slogging through mud puddles became routine. The clouds began to disperse an hour after dark fell in full, and lacework glimpses of stars appeared overhead.

"I'll show you in the morning. Moonlight's lousy for this." Kyla was holding up the tail of her shirt for Brenna, who was squinting at the intricate design etched into the skin of her belly. "It's just my guild's crest and the symbol for Tristaine. Pretty, though, huh?"

"It's amazing." Brenna straightened, and she and Ky trotted a few steps to catch up to Jess and Camryn. "Jess's glyph's on her shoulder, but yours…"

"Yeah, they can be anywhere. You should see Cam's, Brenna. It's really gorgeous."

"Pass," Camryn said stolidly, skirting a snarl of roots in their path.

Kyla snickered. "She won't show you because she put hers smack between her two warriorly breasts. But Cam's glyph has the warrior's arrow, just like you've seen on Jess's shoulder, and Tristaine's stars, which all of us have."

Brenna remembered the scattering of lights across Jess's design. "Are Tristaine's stars up there tonight?"

"Should be." Kyla trotted a few yards up a hill and spun in a slow circle, her eyes trained on the sky. "Come on. Gaia knows I've waited long enough for a sky fix," she muttered. She began

walking backwards as the others reached her, squinting at the heavens.

"A wise warrior," Jess lectured Camryn, "is never distracted. She keeps her eyes level, her senses focused on her surroundings."

"Well, I'm not a warrior." Kyla laughed, catching herself lightly on Brenna's shoulder as she stumbled. "And I've been shut in too dang long, so leave me alone."

The star field opened gradually above them, swatches of cloud drifting to reveal brilliant pinpricks of light.

"There's Anath," Kyla said, pointing for Brenna, who turned to look too. "Bloody war goddess, Brenna. She's great! And that cluster over there, they're the Ghost Dancers, spirits of the first Amazon clan in the Far East."

Jess and Camryn both gave in to temptation, and the four women stood in a close group, searching the skies. Jess wrapped her long arm around Brenna's waist as naturally as the cool night air brushed her skin, and she found herself relaxing against her.

"Where'd they go?" Camryn was scowling as she craned her neck. "Shouldn't they be right there?"

"They are," Kyla said. "There's just still cloud cover over—no, look. There they are!"

Brenna followed her pointing finger and saw one of the few constellations she recognized. Astronomy wasn't a State-sanctioned science. The City's light made much of the night sky unreadable, but tonight the star cluster known as Caesar sparkled brilliantly against a bed of ebony. The seven stars composing the Roman dictator's reclining figure could be seen even through the City's murky haze most of the year.

"Those Seven Sisters are the Adanin, Brenna." Kyla's face was luminous in the moonlight. "They're the Amazons who founded Tristaine. When the last of them lay dying, she wept at the thought of leaving our village without the wise guidance of the original seven. So Artemis set Kimba and her sisters in the sky, so they could counsel us forever."

"Kimba, Julia, Jade, Beatrice, Killian…" Camryn's bony finger moved. "Wai Yau, and Constance."

"That's Beatrice," Jess corrected. "That's Constance."

"Don't think so." Camryn shook her head. "I've got the sharpest eyes in Tristaine."

"They're beautiful," Brenna said. "I've never seen them before."

"Every woman in Tristaine chooses one of the seven Adanin as her personal guardian." Jess stroked Brenna's hair. "She becomes one of her Mothers, the goddesses she prays to."

"How do you choose one?" Brenna fixed on the small star glittering on the western edge of the cluster. "I mean, is there some system?"

"The Adanin counsel our seven guilds." Kyla leaned back into Camryn. "Wai Yau guides our mothers, Kimba, our warriors and hunters. Our gardeners choose Beatrice, artists have Jade, and weavers and other tradeswomen follow Constance."

"You would be Killian's, Bren." Jess showed Brenna the shining star near the center of the cluster. "She watches over Shann's guild, Tristaine's healers."

Brenna smiled, but her eyes lingered on the isolated spark of light in the west. "Who in Tristaine follows Julia?"

"Julia," Kyla repeated, grinning. "Isn't she gorgeous? As far as we know, her line has completely died out, but she was Tristaine's first great spiritual guide. She counsels our historians and seers."

"Seers." Brenna felt deflated. "You mean psychics?"

Camryn tittered. "Yeah, Julia must be kind of lonely up there. Tristaine's never had one."

"Shann says that some women are chosen by their Adanin." Jess's breath stirred Brenna's hair. "That's not always lucky, according to our legends, but it's always an honor."

Then Brenna felt Jess go still behind her. She looked up at her questioningly.

"Did you hear that?" Kyla asked quietly.

Then Brenna heard it too, an odd, muted crackling sound far in the distance.

"North or east?" Camryn's eyes darted across the horizon.

"North. Listen." Jess put a quieting hand on Kyla's shoulder, and Brenna strained her ears, but heard only the chirping of crickets. Apparently the others detected nothing else that might prove more menacing, because after a moment Jess relaxed.

"I'd feel better if we checked it out." Jess took the rope from Camryn and secured it over her shoulder. "I'll take Kyla and try for a higher vantage point. You two, keep to the route. We'll meet you at the north end of the valley. Camryn, you know the rock formations in the clearing on the north side?"

Camryn nodded. "About a mile, maybe less."

"Look for us there." Jess looked at Brenna and smiled reassurance. "Keep a sharp eye. It was probably an animal, but we need to be sure."

"Yeah, it's a harmless grizzly or something," Brenna suggested faintly.

Jess grinned. "We'll be careful."

"Bye." Kyla stood on her toes and gave Camryn's cheek a smacking kiss. "Come on, Jesstin. A warrior doesn't sit on her butt when there's varmints to track."

❖

Brenna and Camryn hiked side by side in a courteous but strained silence. Cam did crack a smile when Kyla unleashed an especially elaborate "all's well" whistle, so they shared that moment.

Brenna found herself talking to Samantha again, in her mind. Something about Kyla seemed to keep her sister just beneath the surface of her awareness. She tried to explain things to Sam and say good-bye.

She was startled by the white, neatly folded handkerchief that appeared before her. Brenna smiled reluctantly, snatched it, and blew her nose.

"You can keep that," Cam said gravely.

"Thanks, I will." Brenna folded the kerchief into the pocket of her jacket. They walked silently for a while. "I was missing my younger sister," she said finally.

Camryn nodded. She stopped, took a small picture out of the breast pocket of her green shirt, and handed it to Brenna.

Brenna tried to tilt the glossy photo to see the image in the moonlight. She made out the young girl's face—smiling, a little homely, a little plump, beautiful. Brenna turned the picture over. On the back, in careful printing, were the words "Lauren" and "Twelve."

"This is your sister." Brenna looked up at Cam. "She died with your friend, Dyan?"

"They were murdered." Cam studied the picture over Brenna's shoulder soberly. "Shann thinks they only meant to get Dyan. They wanted to take one Amazon alive, to experiment on, so they took Jess. But Dyan they just wanted to kill. And Lauren…Lauren kind of hero-worshipped Dyan. She followed her around all the time. So she got hit too."

Brenna handed the photo back to Camryn, who returned it carefully to her pocket. They walked on. The rainwashed mountain air was sweet and still.

"So what's your little sister's name?" Camryn asked.

"Samantha. I call her Sam. She's not so little, though. She's going to have a baby."

"Yeah?" Camryn's quick grin held genuine delight.

"Yeah. I'm going to be an aunt."

Brenna allowed her shoulder to brush Cam's arm once as they crested a low rise. They looked at the moonlight shining on the sparse grass at their feet brightly enough to illuminate a pair of shadows they both found familiar. Their shared silence was still silence, but it was easier.

❖

Jess didn't even see Kyla fall. Much as she would curse herself for it later, it wouldn't have mattered if she had.

Kyla's feet shot out from under her so abruptly, she was sliding down the steep, muddy bank before she could even scream.

Jess's immediate whickering whistle snapped Camryn's head up. "Bloody hell," Camryn spat. "Brenna, go east!"

And she was gone. All gangliness fled Cam's body as she flew through the brush at a western angle, in a flexible, cat-like crouch.

"Camryn," Brenna yelled, and then ducked and looked around, furious with herself for the strident noise. "Camryn," she whispered fiercely.

When there was no reply, Brenna hesitated, then ducked into the brush and began her own angle east.

Jess snugged the knot around her waist, yanked the rope to test its hold, and stepped back into open air.

The first drop was only ten feet or so, and the ledge was well padded with mud, but Jess could imagine that, at best, it had knocked the breath from Kyla. Even braced for it and securely roped, her entire abused body jerked when her boots hit the ledge.

The slope itself was so slick with mud, she would be flailing helplessly without the rope to anchor her. Kyla couldn't have hoped to catch herself, or even slow her plummeting slide, for the first hundred yards.

Jess bit back the urge to call out and descended as fast as the wet muck would allow. Her mind was white noise. This was Dyan's blood-sister, Camryn's adonai. *Artemis, guide my hand.*

Jess caught herself halfway down, her scratched hands clenching around the rope. She crouched on her perch, panting, listening with all her strength. She recognized a voice.

❖

Kyla came to rest on her back at the bottom of the muddy hill with her shirt and light jacket racked up almost to her neck and an absolutely miserable wedgie. She stared stupidly up at the blanket of stars above her, her heart pounding in queasy surges.

Her trembling hands moved over her sides. She tried flexing each leg, without any killing pain. She was intact, she decided, just bruised and breathless. Jess would come for her, Kyla was sure of that. Then Camryn would bark her face off. She tried to lie still and let the rest of her wits catch up with her.

The silhouette of a silver-haired woman was haloed against the full moon as she loomed over Kyla, who shrank back instinctively.

"We haven't met, Kyla." The woman's voice was cultured, friendly. "My name is Caster."

❖

"Jesstin?" Caster's amplified voice clanged against the dark hills, jarring the night's silence. "You're aware that one of your little Amazonlettes has joined us, yes?"

There was a pause. Jess waited. And her hands clenched again on the rope, because she knew what was probably happening to Kyla.

Whatever form the pain took—an arm wrenched behind her back or her hair twisted around a fist—Kyla used its energy to broadcast her message with maximum venom. "Fuck this banshee, Jess! Get out of here!"

Jess closed her eyes as a thump sounded. Her knees bent as she felt the blow in her own solar plexus. Jess straightened and made herself focus. She reviewed her options, and then she moved.

❖

Brenna crouched behind a bank of boulders, still shivering with the adrenaline rush, trying to spot Jess somewhere on the

hillside in front of her. She couldn't see Kyla among the dense trees at the bottom of the hill, and she couldn't see Cam, who should be coming around the slope across from—

Brenna felt the cool hand slide around her face and clamp over her mouth, and she threw herself backwards, sirens going off in her skull.

Someone caught her thrashing body easily and held her still.

"I don't know you." The musical voice was calm. The hand lifted slightly.

"I'm Brenna," Brenna gasped.

The woman released her. Brenna spun and found herself swimming in a pair of extraordinary gray eyes.

"Hello, Brenna. My name is Shann."

❖

"Of course, I'm no military strategist," Caster told Kyla, "but I assume your compatriots have scattered hither and yon by now, in the surrounding hills?"

"They're digging up our stockpile of machine guns," Kyla panted. She was still breathless from the blow to her stomach, and Dugan and Stuart had to struggle to get her arms and wrists pinned to the grass at Caster's sturdily booted feet.

Kyla assumed the other two orderlies standing watch were Clinic staff. The greasy jerk tying her ankles looked almost spastic with nervousness, but the big guy's greedy gaze on her body chilled her.

"A pity I don't have the manpower for a proper night search in rugged terrain." Caster watched Kyla fight the ropes for a moment. "But perhaps that's fortunate for you, dear, in more ways than one. You'll have only four men to satisfy while we wait for your sisters to join us."

"Five of you, four of us." Kyla tried to snarl, but sweet Gaia, she was scared. "Rifles or not, your odds suck, lady."

"On the contrary, little Amazon, I would say luck has

definitely sided with the interests of science tonight." Caster studied her prisoner. In this moonlight, the girl could be clearly seen from the watching hills. "I'm afraid your matriarchal deities have failed you rather miserably, Kyla. Perhaps you should learn to question goddesses whose benevolence delivers you virtually into the lap of your enemies."

"I'd hold off on gloating, if I were you," Kyla snapped, loathing for this Clinic scientist overcoming her fear. "Jess is not just going to come strolling in here—"

"Of course she is, dear, and we both know it." Caster smiled. "I knew once I had one of you, recapturing the others would be fairly straightforward. You're bait, little Kyla. You'll help me reel the others in. I finally have a use for this adanin-fixation you Amazons share." She reached for the girl's soft hair again and narrowly missed having her fingers bitten off.

"In some ways you're not unlike that coarse medic you've befriended, girl. She, too, snapped at the hand that fed her. She's no Amazon, of course." Caster's voice grew flinty. "Brenna is a traitorous little sheep led about by her vapid young vulva."

Jesstin, Kyla thought. *Please, adanin, run.*

❖

Jess knew two things as the rope ran out and she sidestepped freestyle down the slope. She knew Caster would hurt Kyla if she didn't surrender as ordered. And she knew that together, she and Kyla had to buy Cam and Brenna time to maneuver.

Jess straightened at the base of the hill and caught her breath. She held her arms slightly away from her sides as the two men on watch spotted her and yelled, snapping their rifles up to cover her.

Kyla moaned and turned her head in the grass when she saw Jess emerge from the trees.

Jess's eyes went flat when she saw Kyla's body, helplessly spread beneath the eyes of several men. She stopped at the entrance to the enclosure.

Then Caster nodded at Stuart, and the carefully scripted capture began.

It didn't go at all as Caster intended. Stuart was supposed to start stripping the girl on the ground, for one thing. Ripping her shirt open would surely cause Jesstin to make a rash move, but the cretin chose that crucial moment to go clumsy. He knelt and fumbled with Kyla's shirt, his hands shaking.

Caster had wanted Dugan to do the stripping, but the burly guard had refused in favor of subduing Jesstin. Some macho resentment of her Amazonian prowess, apparently. He and the two other orderlies waited until Jess broke and dived for Kyla, which was the second thing that went wrong. They should have moved much sooner.

Jess broke Stuart's neck with her heel as she flew over Kyla's pinned body, then flipped once in a tight arc. She landed well but staggered, the ache in her lower back sudden and immense. The injury she'd received days ago in the Clinic's arena awoke with a snarling burst of pain.

Kyla yelled, pistoning her knees as much as the ropes would allow, trying to shift Stuart's slumping bulk off of her as Dugan and the others finally took Jess down.

Caster picked up the megaphone again and crouched beside Kyla. She wrapped her hand around the girl's throat and held her as the men beat Jess. After a minute or so, Caster raised the megaphone. "Camryn, dear? Are you watching?"

❖

Brenna was never clear how they found Camryn. She concentrated on following Shann's cloaked figure, dodging slapping branches as they twisted through trees and skirting exposed areas of rock as they moved steadily west. When Caster's call reached them, Brenna froze in place, her mind going blank with shock.

"You know that voice?" Shann was short of breath, but her words were low and calm.

Brenna managed to nod. “It’s Caster. She’s a scientist at the Clinic. She heads the Tristaine study.”

“All right, tell me more later.” Shann’s warm hand clasped Brenna’s arm. She noticed the intertwining lines of color adorning the older woman’s wrist as she adjusted the heavy pack she carried. Then Shann looked up sharply, and at the same moment, Brenna heard the snapping of brush ahead of them.

Camryn was running blind, covering ground in great ragged leaps. She raced through the trees to their left, and even Shann’s low, urgent whistle didn’t slow her down.

“Brenna, stop her!”

Brenna was running before Shann’s words were out, and unlike her quarry, she wasn’t weakened by Prison field work and poor rations. She caught Camryn after a rough sprint and snatched the back of her shirt, but when she twisted free, Brenna simply threw herself at her.

Camryn’s flailing elbow punched into Brenna’s stomach, and breath gushed out of her lungs as they rolled on the marshy ground. Somehow she managed to hold on to the thrashing girl.

When Shann reached them, she laid a hand on Camryn’s back. “Be still, little sister.”

Brenna felt the wave of recognition move through Cam’s body, and she let go of her in stages, both of them gasping for breath.

“Shann.” Cam got to her knees and grabbed Shann’s hands. “Lady, it’s a City patrol. They have Jesstin and Kyla.”

“I feared as much.” Shann knelt, too, and looked up into Cam’s face. “Are you all right, Camryn?”

“Yeah, and so is Ky, but Jesstin’s taken some bad hits. Shann, we have to move!”

“Not yet, adanin. We can’t help them by racing into an open trap.”

To Brenna’s astonishment, Camryn made no attempt to refute her leader. She stared at Shann mutely and then sat slowly back on her heels, still pulling for breath.

Shann motioned Brenna closer, and their small circle closed, shutting out the suddenly menacing darkness.

Camryn peered over Shann's shoulder. "Where are the others, lady?"

"I've come alone."

"What?"

"I have much to tell you, and more to ask. Let's find a base to monitor Caster's camp and then hold council." Shann's tone gentled. "Take a moment and rest with me, little sister. I haven't seen your face in far too long."

Some of the fierceness drained out of Camryn's body, and she sighed. She surprised Brenna a second time by leaning into Shann and resting her head in her lap, then wrapping her wiry arms around her waist. Shann stroked her back and kept a careful watch on the silent hill.

For a moment, Brenna had an irrational desire to take Cam's place. Jess's absence was an aching void in her heart, and her hands were cold with fear.

They were in position an hour later and ready by sunrise.

❖

Dawn.

Jess hadn't been sure she'd live to see it, and she wasn't sure she appreciated having done so. She stood, after a fashion, close to Kyla, her wrists tied tightly between two trees. Even when her knees buckled, as they did frequently, the pull on her arms kept her stiffly erect.

The savage beating had continued until Jess passed out. Her kidneys were still intact, she thought, feeling the first warm rays of the sun touch her battered face. No bones were broken, but she was probably a sight to frighten young children. When they'd strung her up, Kyla had wept just seeing her face by firelight.

"Jesstin?"

Jess heard the anxiety and exhaustion in her younger

sister's voice, and she forced her eyes open again. She and Kyla had talked in the last hours, briefly and quietly, whenever Jess was conscious.

"How are you doing?" Worry was obviously winning over weariness.

"I'm upright," Jess croaked.

"Jess." Kyla was silent for a moment. "She'd get rid of Brenna, wouldn't she?"

"What?"

"I've been thinking." Still lying staked to the dew-soaked grass, Kyla was shivering, and not entirely from cold. "I know this fancy doctor bitch wants the three of us back. But she wouldn't have any use for Brenna. Right? If Brenna's captured too, would she—?"

"Probably."

The "p" sound hurt her split lip. Jess didn't think Caster would have much use for her, either, if she had Camryn. All the Clinic needed was a new matched pair to resume the study with the current protocol, but Kyla didn't need to know that yet.

"What would we do, you and me?" Kyla's voice was soft. "If it were Cam and Brenna here, and us out there? I've been trying to imagine what Dyan would say. What would she tell us to—"

"Not this," Jess hissed, and she straightened abruptly.

Kyla turned her head on the grass to see Brenna, in full view, stepping out of the trees and into the camp.

❖

Given a choice between vomiting and her knees giving out, Brenna thought she would rather not throw up. She hoped neither would happen, and she'd just keep making her way over the uneven grass toward Jess and Kyla until someone spotted her.

She caught Jess's eye and quickly learned that was a mistake, so she concentrated on Kyla instead. An unexpected

burst of anger swept Brenna when she saw Kyla's convulsive shivering. She spotted a folded blanket abandoned on the grass nearby and made a side trip to pick it up.

She took the opportunity to survey the rest of Caster's camp behind the two captives. Three pup tents, stacks of supplies. Nothing human stirred. Then she saw an orderly, a bearded face she vaguely remembered from the Clinic, rifle folded in his arms, supposedly keeping watch, but he wasn't looking toward them.

Brenna knelt beside Kyla in the wet grass.

"What the bloody hell do you think you're doing?" Kyla growled.

Brenna put a calming hand on the girl's side. She could feel Jess's glare burning a hole in the top of her head. "Drawing attention. If the damn guard ever wakes up."

She shook the army blanket out and spread it over Kyla. "Did they hurt you, Ky?"

Kyla's eyes closed as Brenna's hands smoothed the soft warmth around her. "You better have a bomb taped to your chest."

"Answer me, Kyla. Are you injured?"

"I'm fine. Just shook. You mother me worse than Shann. You better look at Jess." Kyla shivered again. "You and Cam do have some kind of plan, right?"

Brenna glanced up at Jess. "As a matter of fact, Shann's here. She had to come alone, but she's—"

"About bloody time," Jess snapped above them. She kept her voice low and craned her neck painfully to see the arena around them.

"You knew she was coming?" Kyla's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Do you think you might have mentioned that, Jesstin, some time in the last two days?"

"No, I didn't know Shann was coming, but it makes sense," Jess replied. "It's what Dyan would do."

Still no movement anywhere in the camp. The orderly on

watch actually seemed to be dozing. The corner of Jess's mouth lifted mirthlessly. Caster's goons wouldn't last ten seconds against Amazons if it weren't for the rifles.

Brenna made herself stand and face Jess. She looked fully into her bruised face. "Well, I knew you'd look something like this," she said, and then burst into tears, which startled them both.

"Get a grip, Bren," Jess said quietly.

"I am." Brenna shook her head once. "It's just nerves. I told you that." She rested her hands on Jess's sides, blinking until she could see again.

"Turn so I block the guard's view," Jess whispered, but Brenna shook her head.

"No, he's supposed to see me," Brenna said, wincing at the tightness of the rope cutting into Jess's wrists. "Shann wants a general shift of attention toward this side of the camp, around us."

"How are you with knots?"

"Slow down." Brenna opened Jess's black shirt, which was hanging in dusty tatters. "This is as close as I'll ever come to having you tied up and at my mercy again, Jesstin, so I'm going to take advantage of it while I can."

"Brenna—"

"There's nothing we can do until Shann and Camryn move, Jess. Stop snarling at me and let me look at you."

"Yep, she's Shann all over again," Kyla observed from the grass.

Jess sighed as Brenna curled her hands around her back. Great, she thought. Brenna would probably probe areas that were so tender Jess might yell out loud, in front of Kyla.

Brenna numbly closed Jess's shirt. Last night's damage, added to the punishment she'd already taken, made her wonder how Jess was conscious at all.

Brenna looked up into her eyes again, and again. That was

their mutual undoing. Jess's stern gaze softened, and Brenna released a long breath and sank against her. She slid her arms around Jess's waist and rested her forehead carefully against the hard swell of her shoulder.

"Do you realize we've had the worst fucking courtship in history?" Brenna asked finally.

Jess arched an eyebrow and Kyla chuckled. "Bren…adanin. I'm afraid we don't have time for—"

"It's going to be our last chance, for a while." Brenna sniffed and lifted her head. "Camryn and Shann will kick it off pretty soon. Kyla, both of you, just be ready."

"And just what are they kicking?" Jess asked hollowly. "Two unarmed Amazons against three men, five rifles, and one mad-banshee scientist?"

"Shann says to remember Dyan's last training." Brenna lifted her brows, hoping this made sense. "She told me to remind you that Dyan's last order was still in stock."

"In stock?" Kyla looked puzzled. "You mean in effect?"

"No, in stock," Jess said, suddenly looking healthier than she had moments before. "Not Dyan's last order, the last ordnance in stock. The last supplies she ordered."

Brenna nodded.

"Of what, already?" Kyla pleaded.

"It was a training in explosives, Ky, remember?" Jess explained. "Shann brought dyna—"

That's when the other end of the camp blew up.

Chapter Nine

The sudden blast shattered the dawn stillness, and even Brenna, who'd been braced for it, started hard and gripped Jess's waist with icy fingers. It was only two sticks, thrown from strategic positions above Caster's camp, but in the sleeping silence their sharp concussion carried as much shock value as an A-bomb.

The orderly assigned to sentry duty came awake with a startled yell, firing twice into the air before he was fully on his feet. That's all Brenna saw before she focused on freeing Jess and Kyla.

She had, in fact, sequestered something in the most convenient hiding place available, her cleavage. Not a bomb, but a small utility knife. Jess's eyes widened a little when Brenna retrieved it, but she seemed to appreciate the blade's efficiency in cutting through the ropes holding her erect.

Brenna helped Kyla stand, and the two of them were able to support Jess, but they were a swaying, clutching group for the first disorienting moments of the fight.

There was shouting now, male voices as well as Amazon war cries, and the dirt thrown by the TNT thickened the mountain air, transforming the enclosed camp into a hazy battlefield. The dynamite itself had not injured anyone, and Brenna guessed Shann and Camryn had placed it carefully with that intent. Amazons tried not to kill unless necessary, the guiding premise of Tristaine's warrior women, according to Shann.

Caster's orderlies put up a respectable fight once roused. Any resolve to preserve the lives of potential study subjects

quickly dissolved. Tent flaps opened, and dark muzzles emerged to spit barks of thunder and snaps of red fire through the haze.

Jess had one arm around Brenna's neck and the other around Kyla's. The strength was returning to her legs, and walking was possible now. They were headed back toward the trees Brenna had emerged from only minutes before, but Jess hesitated, craning her head back to assess the fight behind them. She stopped abruptly and lifted her arms from the shoulders of the smaller women.

"Go on," Jess said.

"Hey!" Brenna caught Jess's hand. "Shann said to wait for her at the top of—"

"Good idea," Jess said, still trying to see her other sisters through the dust and confusion of running bodies, shouts, and rifle fire. She pulled her hand from Brenna's grip. "See you there."

"Jesstin, you are not—"

But Jess was gone, moving stiffly but gaining speed as she disappeared into the hanging cloud of dust enveloping the camp.

"Brenna?" Kyla touched Brenna's shoulder. "You might need to understand Jesstin a little better. Amazons can't just—"

"Kyla," Brenna interrupted, "maybe you, and Jess, and every other Amazon in punching distance needs to start understanding *me* a little better!"

And she was gone too, yelling curses at Jess. Kyla threw a look to the heavens and followed her sisters into battle.

Without the unlamented Stuart, Caster's forces consisted of Dugan, two other men, and five rifles. Brenna coughed and squinted in time to catch a fleeting impression of the status of the clash.

Shann was stronger than her slenderness implied, but she struggled with an orderly easily twice her size. She used his bulk against him to good effect, but she was no warrior, and the rifle clenched between the combatants could still be won by either.

Brenna's stomach gave a nasty clench when she saw Jess

tackle the burly man who grappled with Shann, but her attention was riveted by Caster standing ten yards to her right, swinging up a rifle at some target behind her and taking careful aim.

Brenna started for the scientist before the rifle discharged, knowing only that the bullet was intended for an Amazon. She heard a cry of pain—Kyla, Camryn, she wasn't sure who'd been hit—and then she leaped on Caster, hard enough to knock them both breathless, and carried her to the ground. The rifle flew from Caster's hands as she fell, and she gave an unladylike grunt as her body smacked the earth.

Brenna rolled with her, filling with a bone-deep fury she should have expected, with the Clinic incarnate flailing beneath her. Then she chanced a look toward the far tents and froze in dismay.

Camryn lay curled on her side in the grass, clutching her lower leg, her face locked in a grimace of pain. Kyla crouched over her, her own features pale as chalk, scanning the arena for any new threat. The second orderly lay sprawled unconscious on the grass nearby. One of the young Amazons must have dropped him before Cam was felled by Caster's bullet. That still left Dugan.

Caster flung a handful of dirt and grass into Brenna's face like a veteran of such cowardly ploys, and Brenna instinctively ground her fists into her eyes to clear them. Caster had just enough time to club Brenna soundly in the stomach with her fists, and then Dugan was on them, wrenching Brenna up off the gasping Caster.

"Hey! Hey, Brenna!" Dugan roared. "Don't you fight me now, pretty lady." He pinned Brenna's arms to her sides and pressed her against his chest, dancing to avoid her vicious kicks.

Vicious, but not random. Brenna knew human anatomy well, and she'd been kickboxing long enough to aim for truly vulnerable areas. Brenna didn't connect squarely. Her gouging knee only sideswept Dugan's crotch, but it was enough to make him stagger and bellow with surprise.

But not enough to release her. Instead, Dugan dropped where he stood, pulling Brenna down with him, until he straddled her supine body in the grass, one knee on either side of her. His face was distorted with both rage and pain, and he slapped her, hard. Brenna groped for the exquisitely tender soft spots between the jaw and the ear, but Dugan trapped her wrists in one hand and flattened himself over her.

"I told you to try to be friendlier," he breathed in Brenna's ear as she struggled beneath him. "Parading down the hall by me a dozen times a day."

Jesstin's boot rocketed into Dugan's ribs, knocking him off Brenna and onto his side. She lifted herself on her hands and skittered backwards, clawing the grass to put distance between them.

Brenna stared up at Jess, appalled. She had finally reached the end of her formidable strength. The powerful kick had apparently drained the last of Jess's energy, and she crumpled when Dugan grabbed her legs.

Dugan pulled Jess down beneath him and fastened his hairy hands around her throat. He hissed at her and his spittle hit her cheek, but Jess couldn't even turn her head to avoid it. She had little hope of breaking his pinkie fingers, and no hope whatever of dislodging his weight. She saw Dugan's broad shoulders above her, and the sunlight outlining them began to darken to red in her vision as his large hands choked off her breathing.

Vaguely, Jess heard Brenna cry out somewhere close by, and Kyla scream Shann's name. Then nothing for a few seconds, except pressure and pain and the desperate hunger for air. Jess's senses had started to fade when she heard the muted crack from Shann's rifle.

The big man stiffened over Jess, his hands jerking away from her throat. Gasping, Jess made a huge effort and managed to twist out from under Dugan before he fell, his skull shattered. She came to rest on her back, staring up at the morning sky

brightening through the smoke and dust, and then both sound and light faded.

❖

When her vision cleared, Jess was lying with her head pillowed in Brenna's soft lap. Her head pounded sickly, only the most insistent of the aches awaiting her return to awareness, but fear filled her more urgently than pain.

"Where's Shann?" Jess began to sit up, but Brenna gently pressed her shoulders flat.

"Shann's all right, Jess." Brenna's teeth were chattering as if she were freezing. "Kyla is too. So am I. Camryn…Cam's been shot, but it's superficial."

A muffled exclamation escaped Jess and she tried to sit up again, but only until the pounding in her head hit a huge bass note.

"Jesstin, lie still!" Brenna pushed her back down, too easily, her own eyes filling with tears she was too distracted to notice. "It's over. We're okay! Shann's got them covered. Don't sit up. Just look there."

Brenna supported Jess's head so she could focus on the odd tableau at the other end of the camp. Shann, looking dusty and disheveled, but reasonably composed, was holding one of the rifles on the only orderly still functional enough to walk. He had just finished dumping the last of three male bodies into the Clinic jeep—one unconscious, two corpses—and now, under Shann's silent gaze, he was escorting Caster to the waiting vehicle.

Caster was limping, her clothing was torn, and she didn't spare Brenna or Jess a glance. She paused as she reached Shann, and the two women regarded each other for a long moment.

"It's a pity we have no historians present to record this auspicious moment, Shann of Tristaine." Caster's rasping words reached them faintly. "The meeting of two great adversaries—the leader of a doomed band of renegade women and the scientist who will one day preside over her dissection."

"We might meet again, Caster." They had to strain to hear Shann's low voice. "But the women of Tristaine will thrive for centuries after we're both dust."

"Poetic, your highness, but delusional." Caster's bitter gaze moved past the silent Amazon and focused on Jess and Brenna. "You'll see me again too, ladies," she called. "Brenna, I've found a lovely slave camp for you in one of the outer boroughs. You'll help me mount Jesstin's head over my mantle, dear, before I have you branded and shipped."

Then Caster lifted herself into the front of the jeep, her clothing tattered, a bleeding scratch on her throat, and her hair a snarled cap around her head, but her poise fully restored. She folded her hands serenely in her lap while the orderly keyed the ignition.

Shann kept the rifle trained on the hulking black transport as it lumbered out of the camp and down a dry riverbed toward the base of the foothills. She waited until the sound of its powerful engine faded, then rested the empty rifle against a stump. "Brenna? Do you need me?"

"We're all right, Shann," Brenna called. Their voices sounded unnaturally loud in the renewed stillness of the mountain air. "Jess is stable for now. See about Camryn."

Shann nodded and went to Cam, who sat with her back against a tree as Kyla bound her bleeding leg.

Jess shifted in Brenna's arms and lifted herself on one elbow. "Hey!" Jess barked at Camryn, almost accusingly.

"She'll be okay, Jesstin," Kyla called over her shoulder, never taking her eyes from her work. Shann knelt beside her and checked her younger sister for signs of shock, taking her pulse, feeling her hands.

"I got shot," Camryn informed Jess. She sounded surprised, and she was ashen, but she didn't seem particularly dismayed.

"You should have ducked," Jess snapped.

"Jess, she had a rifle," Camryn protested.

"You should have ducked," Shann and Jess said together,

and Kyla snorted laughter and hugged Shann, though she herself was crying, now that they were safe.

Jess rolled back into Brenna's lap with a muffled groan. "Dyan's response to every injury in the ranks," she explained to Brenna.

"Thank you. I wondered." Brenna smiled. Her pulse was slowing to a bearable cadence again, and she cradled Jess's face in her hands. "Jesstin, when you stand up, how many parts of you are going to drop off?"

"I hope my head does." Jess shivered once, hard.

"Shann, can you bring us a—" Brenna stopped speaking as she looked up to see Shann kneeling beside them, already snapping out an army blanket. "Thanks," she said instead, and helped Shann tuck it around Jess's shaking body.

"How good are you at extracting bullets?" Shann asked Brenna quietly.

"I've done it on corpses." Brenna swallowed. "But I know we don't have the right instruments. All we have is a first aid kit. I don't suppose there's any way we could get Cam down to the City?" Her voice trailed off. She didn't need either of the Amazons to answer that. "Shann, please tell me you packed antibiotics as well as dynamite."

"Some." Shann nodded. "I did bring medical supplies, and I've seen some herbs we can use nearby."

"Herbs," Brenna repeated politely.

Shann smiled down at Jess, who was gazing at her blearily. "Hello, Jesstin." She leaned over and rested her lips against Jess's forehead for a long moment, then straightened. "I'll wait until Brenna gets you back on your feet, adanin, and then I intend to knock you senseless myself."

"Hey, I did everything right." Jess was puzzled. The warmth of the blanket and their hands was reaching her now, and she was able to relax a bit. "We had to move earlier than we thought, but we got everyone out." Her expressive brows furrowed. "You mean the route? The path we took through the

foothills? Shann, that was the shortest, easiest way. It was dumb luck that Caster—"

"I mean drop-kicking a two hundred-pound man hours after a bad beating," Shann interrupted calmly. "The latest in a series of them, from the looks of you. How is she, Brenna?"

"Not good." Brenna brushed Jess's hair back. She was measuring her warmth, but she also wanted Jess to feel her touch. "She's got a nasty fever that comes and goes, and it's rising again. I haven't had a chance to examine her thoroughly, but I don't think anything's broken. There's no sign of internal bleeding, but she's exhausted, just worn out."

Jess thought of refuting this clinical assessment, but she was too tired to care. Brenna's lap was too soft and the blanket too warm. She heard Shann's worried voice faintly, far above her.

"Is she unconscious?"

"Asleep." Brenna's smile was evident in her tone. "Listen."

Jess was snoring softly, secure in the certainty that her sisters were safe.

❖

They had the rifles, and they had the dry riverbank. Both advantages allowed them to take over Caster's abandoned camp temporarily, rather than drag their injured sisters farther into the hills. A view of the riverbed below would give them a little warning if Clinic forces returned, and the rifles would provide a quick defense if needed.

Brenna helped Jess as far as an old stump near the tents, where they were setting up a makeshift infirmary. Jess rested her tender back carefully against the gnarled wood and waited until Camryn settled on the grass in front of her.

"You're all right with this?" Jess asked Camryn quietly. "I trust Brenna's skill, Cam, but this is the first time you've taken a strike in battle. You know you can ask for Shann."

"'Sokay." Camryn's face was ashen as Kyla helped her ease back into Jess's arms. "If that blondie can dig thorns out of Kyla without a lot of screaming, this'll be a cinch."

Jess rested her chin in Camryn's hair and returned Kyla's wan smile. She pressed her younger sister's freckled shoulders once in thanks.

"Even if Cam didn't need to be restrained for this, she'd want Jess to brace her." Shann helped Brenna carry their assembled supplies to the stump. "Camryn and Jesstin are the only two warriors among us. If an Amazon is injured in battle, she often chooses a warrior to see her through the first healing, so she can absorb her strength."

"What strength?" Kyla asked flatly. "Jess is worse off than Cam, if you're going by total of bruises." She crouched beside Jess and touched the back of her neck, trying to get her to finish the last of Shann's herbal tea. Cam had already downed two cups, and her eyes were a bit glassy.

"Dang, why do you guys all have such cold hands," Jess complained, swallowing the tea with a grimace.

"I'm nervous." Kyla showed Jess her trembling fingers. "Excuse me, I've never seen a bullet get cut out of my lover's leg before. Oops." She bit her lip.

They all looked at Shann, who continued laying out medical supplies, unruffled.

"You're such a wimp, Ky." Leaning back against Jess, trying to be tough and more than a little high, Camryn snickered. "My hands aren't cold. I bet Shann's hands aren't cold either, and I know Jess's aren't—"

Cam squeaked as Shann brushed her thin wrist with icy fingers.

"I'm nervous too." Shann smiled, which transformed her briefly from a handsome woman into a beautiful one. "I've seen this done, far too many times, but it's always hard to witness a sister's suffering." She nodded at Brenna, who was kneeling

beside her. “Luckily, the one adanin among us who must be cool is steady as a rock. Are we ready, Blades?”

“That’s your second name now,” Kyla warned Brenna. “Once Shann dubs you, you’re dubbed for life.”

“Well, I’m glad I was cutting when Shann dubbed me, instead of doing a rectal.”

Camryn tittered, and Jess dropped Brenna a grateful wink.

Brenna flattened her hands on her lap for a moment, and her gaze grew hazy as she concentrated, picturing the procedure. Cam was a patient now, and her patients got her best efforts. In spite of the quivering in her stomach, Brenna’s hands on her thighs were steady and warm. She drew on thin rubber gloves from the medical kit and smiled at the pale Amazon who reclined in Jess’s arms. “Guess I’m ready, if my victim is.”

“Wait.” Cam scowled. “I’m probably going to yell. Just so you know, and don’t freak when it happens.”

“Beware Amazon macha, Camryn.” Jess smiled at Brenna over Cam’s shoulder. “Remember Dyan and the rosebush. Scream your bloody head off if you want.”

“Okay.” Cam smiled agreeably at Kyla as she knelt beside her and took her hand.

It was a grueling twenty minutes for all of them.

Brenna had been right. It was a superficial wound, if any such trauma to human tissue can be termed superficial. The small-caliber bullet had penetrated the large muscle of Camryn’s left calf. Brenna understood healing at an instinctive level, so the procedure was largely common sense. But she was using rudimentary instruments, sterilized in boiling water and alcohol, and the work was harrowing and slow. Camryn was quickly coated with sweat, in spite of the late-morning chill, and so was her healer.

Cam cried out twice, and each time Jess’s arms tightened in comfort, as Shann braced her leg. Later, Camryn would claim that her worst suffering came from Kyla crushing her fingers the second time she yelled.

Only Shann and Brenna watched the extraction directly, both with rapt fascination. They worked together like a team long familiar with each other's skills, Shann handing Brenna instruments and monitoring Camryn's breathing and pulse. But Brenna was never unaware of the pain Cam was feeling. She gave them both breathers twice that Cam denied needing.

Kyla was paler than the patient by the time Brenna patted a sterile cloth over Cam's leg to dry it before bandaging. Cam let out a long breath of relief, and her eyes drifted shut as she rested her head on Jess's shoulder. Jess looked as spent as she did.

Shann eyed her sisters with pragmatic sympathy. "Are you going to faint, Kyla?"

"Oh, no." Kyla's voice shook as she played with Cam's hand. "I'll be fine, lady. I always look like this when bullets get cut out of my lover's leg. It's just nerves."

Then she burst into tears, and Brenna and Jess exchanged weary smiles.

❖

"I'm a felon," Brenna murmured.

She didn't realize she'd spoken aloud until she felt Shann's hand on her shoulder. She started and sat up, and smiled at her self-consciously. "Sorry. I think I'm beginning to hallucinate."

"It's no wonder." Shann's rich voice was kind. "You're exhausted, Blades. Why don't you sleep for a while? I can finish this."

"Aye, why don't both of you sleep for a while?" Jess growled. "I'm as clean as I'm going to get, thanks."

Jess was referring to the alcohol bath Brenna had bared her to the waist to receive an hour before. She had taken Camryn's place on the pallet beneath the huge tree when her fever rose to the point that she couldn't hold a coherent conversation. The mild summer weather made it possible for them to forego Caster's musty tents, and sleeping under stars was always the preference in Tristaine.

Camryn and Kyla lay on a blanketed air mattress nearby, talking quietly. The wide bandage on Camryn's leg glowed a ghostly white by the light of the small fire that crackled warmly in the center of their circle.

It was late, after midnight. Brenna had left her wristwatch somewhere under Dugan, and she missed the sense of order that knowing the time might have provided. As happened frequently now, when Brenna felt unsettled, she looked at Jess. This time, it didn't bring the reassurance she'd hoped for. She was lying half-propped against the tree, still shaking with fever, even after a long, cooling bath. Brenna felt bleak with worry.

"I'd make you suck on a thermostrip again," she said, touching Jess's face, "but knowing the exact reading wouldn't change much. I can tell it's as high as it was an hour ago."

Kyla lifted her head from Camryn's shoulder. "Did you give her the teasel, Shann?"

"It was in the tea." Shann fastened Jess's shirt, then rested her hand on her warrior's side. "That should help cool the fever, Jesstin. You'll be on your feet again tomorrow, but there'll be no traveling for a few days. You and Camryn both need time to recover. I've rarely seen such a daunting collection of dents and bruises."

"We should have ducked, Jess," Camryn said sadly.

"I know," Jess sighed.

"But we'll not want to spend any more time in the lowlands than absolutely necessary." Shann surveyed the tents, and the small craters made in the dusty ground from dynamite blasts. "Once we're able to travel, we can set up a base camp in the lower range beyond the next valley. There's fish and game there to feed us, and it's far enough from City eyes to be safe."

"Well, you two better heal fast." Kyla yawned, rubbing her cheek on Camryn's breast. "We can only camp out down here, eating snared rabbits, for two weeks. We have to be home before the Festival of Thesmophoria. The thought of drowning out that lousy, lame little soprano Deidre in the midsummer music festival

is what kept me from braining a Prison guard with a pot down there. The Festival's great, Brenna. There are footraces, dances, a big feast."

"And Kyla has the most beautiful voice in Tristaine." Cam spoke with unabashed pride. "The artists' guild snapped her up when she was ten."

"Adanin." Shann's low voice was kind. "We can't go home. Not yet."

Brenna glanced at Jess. She lay still beneath the thin blanket, but her feverish eyes closed for a moment.

"Huh?" Camryn sat up, supported by Kyla's arm. "How long is yet?"

"For several weeks, at least. The three of you are convicted felons, Camryn. City agents can legally enter Tristaine to search for us." Shann's voice was as gentle as ever, but Brenna was beginning to sense the aura of command that made her a leader of Amazons. "Our best chance is to lose ourselves in this maze of foothills and avoid their patrols."

"Lady, we can't hide from the City forever." Cam's tone was respectful, but color was filling her sallow cheeks. "They're gonna come after us, but that's why we need to go home, Shann. It's not just us they want, it's Tristaine."

Kyla put a quieting hand on Camryn's side.

"It's all right, Kyla." There was pride in Shann's smile. "Dyan chose Camryn for Tristaine's council for both her intelligence and her candor. But, Kyla, you're troubled too, little sister. What are your thoughts?"

"I think that without Dyan, and you, and Jesstin, and Cam, our council's going to be divided." Kyla's brow looked creased with worry. "But even if everyone agrees on how to handle the City, Tristaine looks to you for guidance, lady. Our sisters need you now, more than ever."

"And when Caster nails a warrant for Shann's arrest to the door of Tristaine's main lodge, Kyla?" Jess's soft burr drew their eyes to her. "Will our sisters turn her over without a fight? Will

they give any of us over to the City?"

"So we'll fight." The muscles stood out in Camryn's jaw. "It's going to come to that anyway, Jesstin."

"If it comes to that, adanin, Tristaine is lost." Jess fixed the young warrior with her eyes. "Dyan knew that. We all know it."

"Brenna, this affects you too."

Brenna started when Shann rested her hand on her knee.

"You know our enemies well, and if you stay with us, your fate will be joined with Tristaine's. Your word carries weight in this council, Blades, so speak your heart."

Brenna glanced at Jess. "Well…I think we have time. Caster wants to avoid war too, for her own reasons. This Clinic study was supposed to discover some other way of defeating Tristaine, and we got out before it was finished."

"We" has changed again, Brenna thought. *Jess, me, and now these three Amazons. "We" is becoming Tristaine.*

"So, for a while anyway," she concluded, "Caster has nothing to offer the Military. And there's got to be all kinds of uproar about our escape. The Clinic will have to do a lot of fast talking to keep the contract." Brenna made herself meet Shann's measuring look. "I think it's safe to wait. It'll be some time before the City can move."

"I'm not saying we're banished forever, sisters." Shann looked at Camryn and Kyla. "But long enough to make it seem feasible that we've fled the County. We can go home when the City's grip on the mountains eases and we can slip past their patrols."

Camryn dropped her eyes and nodded.

"I can't believe Deidre gets to sing my solo." Kyla sighed and rested her head on Camryn's shoulder again. "All right, Shann."

"Thank you, adanin. And now, for our wounded, sleep will help more than anything else. I've never had much success at giving you direct orders, Jesstin, but I want you to obey a friendly request, all right? Lie still for a few hours."

"Sure," Jess mumbled.

"A friendly request." Brenna smiled, pulling the blanket up over Jess's chest. "That works with Amazons?"

"Sometimes," Shann said. "Even Jess." She rose gracefully to her feet and fed a few small branches to their dancing fire.

Camryn and Kyla lay down together, and soon their quiet murmurings drifted into silence.

Brenna measured Jess's fever with her hand, then took her pulse. She was resting comfortably enough. Brenna was tired, but too wired to possibly find sleep.

"You must be in severe culture shock."

Brenna blinked as Shann settled beside her again. "Me?"

Shann gathered her legs beneath her and leaned back on one hand to study Brenna. "Let me see if I understand what's happened to you. You were a reasonably successful Government medic. You were assigned to Jesstin's project, what, less than a month ago?"

Brenna nodded.

"So, in a few weeks, you've had your faith in your leaders dashed, you've lost your home and your career and any sense of security. And now you're running for your life through a mountain wilderness with four strange women, one of whom you've fallen in love with, while people are blowing things up and trying to kill you." Shann lifted an eyebrow and for a moment resembled Jess. "Is that about right?"

Brenna smiled. "I think you covered it."

"You must feel like you've fallen in with some bizarre cult."

Brenna winced. "Well, no, I hadn't thought of that one, thanks."

Shann laughed again and then covered her mouth when Jess stirred between them.

Brenna tucked the blanket around Jess's long legs. "Shann?"

"Yes, Blades."

"I don't know how you feel about me being here." She smoothed Jess's hair off her forehead. "Jess asked me to come, but the rest of you weren't counting on an extra body." She hesitated. "A body that was on the other side, herself, only a month ago. I don't know why any of you should trust me. I'm an outsider, basically."

"You probably always have been, basically." Shann shrugged. "That's why most women seek out Tristaine. They come to us because they don't belong in the City."

"That's what Jess said." Brenna considered this statement silently for a while. She could have refuted the idea that she'd willingly sought out anything except an honest paycheck in the beginning, but she wasn't even sure that was true anymore.

"Tristaine isn't unique, Blades." Shann brushed a pine needle off Jess's arm. "At least we don't think we are, communication between Counties being what it is. We believe there might be one or two clans very like Tristaine for every City in the Nation. Full of people who don't fit in."

"That's what the City tabloids say," Brenna said carefully.

Shann grinned at her. "Adanin, take your time. If you ever feel you must leave us, we'll find a way to get you somewhere safe. Just let things happen at their own pace for now."

"I'm trying." Brenna cleared her throat. "I guess this is as good a time as any to draw a clean slate, wherever I end up. It's not like I'm leaving a lot behind. Except for my sister, I have no family. I've always been good at my work, though."

Shann nodded. "I wouldn't have let you take the bullet from Cam's leg if I didn't believe that. I'd have done it myself."

Brenna lifted an eyebrow. "You've done surgical procedures? I thought you worked more with vitamins and plants."

"I use natural remedies, but a healer among warrior women gets far too much practice sewing her sisters back together." Shann's eyes were warm. "I asked you to help Cam because I wanted the others to know you have my trust."

"Shann, you just met me."

"Jesstin trusts you." Shann's long fingers stroked the warrior's arm. "A woman capable of claiming this Amazon's heart is worthy of our respect. You care very much for her, don't you?"

Brenna stared at Jess's still face, and she felt a sense of wonder. "Yes, I do. I've never…this is the first…" She gestured helplessly, searching for words. "And now it's not just Jess, it's the rest of you, too. I've never had friends…well, you're becoming friends…" She trailed off.

"I often wish we hadn't lost so much of our grandmothers' language." Shann brushed a lock of hair off Brenna's forehead, and she felt a warm shiver. "Today, we only have remnants. We struggle with such paltry, inadequate terms for friendship, but the early Amazons had many ways of describing the bonds between women. I think I understand what you're saying, Brenna. We're becoming your adanin, too, right?"

"Right." Brenna slumped in relief. "Thanks."

They both looked down at Jess, who was tightening beneath the blanket, her brow growing tense.

Brenna shifted closer to her and slipped her hand beneath Jess's hair to cup the back of her neck. "This helps her relax, sometimes." Brenna kneaded the tight muscles at the base of Jess's skull.

"Good. I used that touch to ease Dyan's headaches, the ones my herbs couldn't help."

Brenna looked up at the touch of sadness in Shann's voice.

"Did you know Dyan was my wife? I don't know how much Jess told you about her sisters."

"No. I knew you and Dyan were on Tristaine's council, but not that you were bonded, Shann. I'm sorry."

"Thank you, Brenna. I'm sorry, too. I wish you could have known Dyan." Shann's eyes shimmered in the firelight. "She'd snarl to hear us called 'bonded,' though. Another of those new

Tristainian terms. Dyan was my wife, and I was hers. In the old language, the word 'wife' is a prayer, in and of itself. I've always liked that."

Brenna smiled. "I like that, too."

Shann looked down at Jess, who had relaxed again in the grass. "Why don't you stretch out for a while, young Blades, just for a few hours? I'll wake Kyla soon to take a second watch, and I can take third before your turn comes around. Sound reasonable?"

"Sounds fine to me," Brenna sighed, already unwinding on the grass next to Jess. Shann spread the blanket to cover her as well, and Brenna grinned when she felt her tuck it securely beneath her side. "Does anyone in Tristaine ever accuse you of mothering them, Shann?"

"Frequently, and I'm honored by it. Our word for 'mother' is a prayer, too." Shann bent and kissed Brenna's cheek. "Now sleep, Brenna. That's a royal command."

❖

She ran in the midst of a herd of wild horses, surrounded by flying manes and large, liquid eyes rolling in stark terror. Then she felt, more than heard, the timpani of drumming hooves in panicked flight all around her.

Brenna and her stallion plunged headlong through the forest with the rest of the herd, and the acrid smell of the smoke finally reached her, as fire began to ravage the woods around them—

"Brenna."

She came awake with a shuddering gasp, darting up on one elbow so fast she almost smacked Shann with her head. She felt Shann's steadying hand on her arm, and she spoke as soon as she could breathe evenly. "Sorry! Sorry. What?"

"Everyone's safe." Shann's voice was low and soothing. "It's all right. Give yourself time to wake up."

For an unsettling moment, Brenna craved a drink desperately, but the urge faded. Nothing like a heightened adrenaline surge to start the day. "Jess?"

"She's better."

Brenna put her hand out and felt a moment of panic, in spite of Shann's words, to find the pallet beside her empty. She looked up at Shann, blinking.

"Her fever broke early in Kyla's watch." Shann was outlined in faint blue light, so sunrise must be close. "She's had a solid six hours of sleep. That's enough, until we get some breakfast down her at least."

Shann helped her sit up. Brenna raked her fingers through her hair and craned to see Camryn's face, half-covered by Kyla's curling red tresses, on the air pallet nearby.

"Cam's fine too, I've checked her." Shann paused. "Adanin, Jess felt strong enough to stretch her legs a little, and I thought that was all right. But I'd rather she not be alone long."

Brenna was already getting up, trying not to groan after another night on the damp ground. "Can you point?"

Shann nodded toward the dry riverbed. "She promised not to go far, so I expect the two of you back by lunch."

Brenna offered a weak smile as she tied her sneakers. "Did you bring some of Tristaine's coffee?"

"Of course." Shann nodded. "It's mother's milk to Jess. Go tell her."

Brenna nodded and limped toward the riverbed, still trembling a little from her abrupt awakening.

"Brenna?" Shann looked after her, folding the army blanket neatly. "What's this about horses, and a fire?"

Brenna groaned. "I still talk in my sleep, don't I? Sam used to tease me about it." She sighed. "Just a dream, Shann. I've had it for weeks. Well, first it was just me and this horse, running from something. Then it was my horse fighting another horse. This time it was me and my horse, and many other horses, and a

forest fire…" She ran out of steam and waved vaguely at Shann. "Never mind me. I'm still asleep. I'm talking out of my head. Be back soon."

Brenna didn't feel Shann's suddenly intent gaze on her as she made her way down the rise of the riverbank.

Shann felt a warm arm slide around her waist, and Kyla rested her head on her shoulder, yawning.

"Everything okay?"

"Good morning, little sister. Yes, we're doing well. Jess is stronger." Shann put her arm around Kyla, still looking after Brenna with a bemused expression. "I'm about to cook breakfast. Want to help?"

"Sure." Kyla eyed her queen curiously, then followed her fixed gaze. "What, lady? Is something up with Brenna?"

"Possibly," Shann murmured. "I'm beginning to think we might have a seer among us at last." She pressed Kyla's shoulders. "Now, adanin, while we brew coffee, a few thoughts about the joyous, sacred, and profoundly serious bond of marriage…"

❖

True to her word, Jess hadn't gone far. She'd found a wide ledge to rest on, topping a bluff just yards west of the riverbed.

Brenna first saw Jess's squared shoulders and erect posture, as she sat on an army blanket spread on the grass. She was looking out over a dizzying vista of treetops below her.

After months of confinement, Jess was enjoying the view. Her eyes swept the green expanses slowly, with restful pleasure. "Morning, Bren."

"Yeah," Brenna replied pleasantly. "How about you move, maybe six feet back from that ledge?"

Jess turned her head stiffly and regarded Brenna, who waited on the patch of grass between the riverbed and the bluff. She smiled and lifted herself on her heels and hands to inch painfully off the blanket and away from the ledge.

"Sorry." Brenna winced and folded her arms against the

early morning chill. “But you’re still weak enough to pitch headfirst off that thing, and I hate heights enough to just let you drop.”

Jess eased herself carefully onto the grass as Brenna knelt beside her. “Better?”

“Thanks.” Brenna sat back on her heels and studied her face. “Well, your powers of recuperation continue to amaze me, Jesstin, but you still look like a train wreck. How many shades of bruise are you capable of?”

Jess smiled ruefully and allowed Brenna’s cursory examination of her visible ills, touching her neck to gauge fever, taking her pulse, turning her head gently to check her pupils.

“You’re cool enough, for now, and I don’t think those ribs will trouble you too much if we keep you wrapped.”

“How do you plan to escape through a mountain pass with a fear of heights, Brenna?”

“I didn’t say I was afraid of heights. I said I hated them.” Brenna frowned at the tender swelling beneath Jess’s eye. “I just won’t look down until we reach Tristaine.”

Jess raised an eyebrow carefully.

Brenna hesitated, then brushed a faint line down the side of Jess’s angular face, tracing the path of a recent tear. Jess’s eyes shifted, but Brenna kept her hand lightly on her cheek. “Just nerves, Jesstin?”

Jess rested her face briefly in Brenna’s palm. “Missing home.”

“I know you do.” Brenna gentled her voice. “It must be terrible for Cam and Kyla, too, to have to wait.”

“Kyla was right last night.” Jess lifted Brenna’s hand from her face and cradled it in her own. “Tristaine’s council will be divided without our voices. There are those in our village who still believe negotiating with the City is possible.”

“How can they?” An image of the fighting stallions flashed through Brenna’s mind, and she shook it off. “After everything that’s happened, after Dyan, and Lauren—”

"They're a very small faction." Jess turned her troubled gaze to the valley below. "And our elders, the older women, are all solidly behind Shann. They'll keep the others in line. I know they will. Tristaine was dearly won, lass. We can't lose it now."

Jess skipped a pebble over a ledge yards away.

Brenna didn't hear it strike anything as it began its free fall.

They sat for a while in comfortable silence, the morning mountain breeze chilling them pleasantly.

"I've never had a community, a home like yours," Brenna said, finally. She felt the smooth swell of Jess's muscular arm, warm against her own.

"It's something I want to give you." Jess stroked the top of Brenna's bent head. "Someday I hope to make you my adonai, Brenna. My wife. I want to build you a cabin in our village, a home to grow old in together, safe among friends." Jess lowered her rich voice. "For now, if you'll let me, I'll be home to you, wherever we are."

Brenna shuddered with a familiar, delicious weakness that crept up her spine as Jess's warm breath touched her hair. "I've never had that either, that kind of love." Her eyes rose, and there was a note of pleading in them. "It scares me a little, Jess."

Jess's features softened, and she grinned down at Brenna and nudged her with her shoulder. "Well, I know what Shann would say. 'Jesstin has her quest now, young Blades, and you have yours. Jesstin must bring you home safe, and you must find the spine to love her in the manner she so richly deserves.'" Her brogue lengthened the word "richly," in a keen echo of Shann's musical voice. "'That's your job now, lass.'"

Brenna smiled. "Beats the hell out of my last gig, that's for sure."

Jess grinned and started unsnapping her shirt.

Brenna smiled again. "What are we doing?"

"Drills. We're going to give you a spine-strengthening session."

"I'm sorry?"

"I'm going to ravish you before breakfast."

"Oh, no, you're not."

Jess nodded and pulled her shirttails out of her pants.

"Jesstin." Brenna reached to feel Jess's forehead, but she ducked her touch deftly.

"Don't worry about me, lass. I'm fit enough to take on a wee mite like you."

"The last time I heard that," Brenna pointed out, "my staff laid you flat with one backswing."

"Oh, wench of little faith," Jess reproved, and reached for her.

Brenna straight-armed her back gently. "Jesstin, you're telling me you feel well enough to engage in sexual relations at this time?"

"Sweet Artemis, City girls love to talk."

"Just checking," Brenna said, and surged hard against Jess, who squeaked in surprise as Brenna's fingers wrapped in her wild hair and her head was pulled down for a heated kiss.

The two women sank to the rocky ground in full, unabashed lip-lock. Both of them cursed when they landed, Jess because the stony earth hurt her back, Brenna because Jess did, but they did so without ending the kiss. Their tongues entwined and they rolled.

Brenna's clothing was half off before she looked up and realized how close to the ledge they were. Glancing down she saw the army blanket tangled around her ankle, and she thrashed upright in Jess's arms instinctively. Not fighting her, just following a gut-level need to regain control and back away from danger.

"Wait," Jess breathed behind her. Her strong arms were wrapped around Brenna's waist, and she pulled Brenna upright against her so that her bare back pressed into Jess's open shirt.

Now they both kneeled in the grass, looking out over a carpeted expanse of green, silent space. Jess's arm was clamped beneath Brenna's exposed breasts, which bobbed against her tanned skin, the pink tips swollen and hard.

"I can't protect you from this kind of fear," Jess whispered, nodding at the dizzying drop beneath them. "And this kind of danger may always be part of your life with us." She wrapped her long fingers around Brenna's cool breast and squeezed. "But it will be a clean fear, not the hopelessness of the City. We'll be free, adanin." She began kneading both full globes, and her eyes clenched shut as a carnal heat streaked through her.

Brenna groaned with pleasure, in spite of her racing pulse. The edge of the bluff still felt terribly close, but her tension began to drain from her as Jess's palm rasped across her stiffening nipples.

"We'll be refugees at first, Brenna. Perhaps for a long time." Jess worked her free hand down beneath the waistband of Brenna's slacks. "Spread your knees, lass."

She skated over Brenna's soft mound, then moved lower to discover that her thighs were still clenched together.

Jess slapped Brenna's sensitive vulva, hard, and Brenna gasped and jerked her thighs apart, feeling the burning rasp of the grass against her kneecaps.

"But you're not alone anymore." The faint echo of a brogue touched Jess's voice again. "You have sisters now, other adanin. You have me, Bren." Her fingers swarmed down over Brenna's damp cleft, probing.

"Jesstin…" Brenna's hips bucked as Jess filled her snugly, then impaled her with a grinding twist. Jess began moving inside her with smooth, relentless strokes.

"I'm a warrior, Brenna," Jess murmured in her ear, "And I pledge my life to keeping you safe."

Brenna moaned as Jess flexed her knuckles gently, stretching her. The rough side of her narrowed hand scrubbed against Brenna's straining clitoris, sending needles of heat sparking along her shoulder blades.

"Tell me if you choose a life with us," Jess panted. "Answer me with your body."

Brenna whimpered helplessly, her head fell back against Jess's shoulder, and then she exploded in shuddering pleasure.

❖

After they'd calmed down, Jess wrapped the thin blanket around them both, and they watched the sun finish peaking over the eastern rise. Brenna sat in the grass in front of Jess, between her long legs, her back against her chest.

Brenna was dozing, and Jess smiled down at her, delighted at her soft snoring from her parted lips. She slept like a child in her arms.

"Hey." Jess squeezed her gently.

"Sorry. What? Hey."

"Nothing, darlin'. My butt's falling asleep, though."

Brenna awoke in stages, letting the cloud-studded sky fill her vision, as blue as her lover's eyes. "Good morning, Jesstin."

"Morning, adanin. Welcome to the day."

They sat for a moment longer, enjoying the view. After awhile, they helped each other up and made their way back up the riverbed, toward the faint, spicy aroma of fresh-brewed Tristainian coffee.

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BATTLE FOR TRISTAINE

TRISTAINE BOOK TWO

by

Cate Culpepper

2006

BATTLE FOR TRISTAINE

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By the Author

The Clinic: Tristaine Book One

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DEDICATION

For my mother, Joyce L. Culpepper

Don't be dismayed at goodbyes. A farewell is necessary before we can meet again. And meeting again, after moments or lifetimes, is certain for those who are friends.

Richard Bach
Illusions

Chapter One

Writing in one of these things is illegal in at least half the Cities in the Nation. Personal journals were outlawed even before personal computers. I've never understood how domestic terrorists could exploit some school kid's diary, but that's been the law as long as I can remember.

Shann tells me not to worry about it. "If we're captured," she said, "You'll be shot for treason long before anyone gets around to charging you with journal writing."

I've never even littered.

Brenna brushed a leaf from the page of her journal and focused on the tall Amazon at the edge of the grove. Jess was hauling a roped parcel of dried meat several yards up an aspen to keep it from predators. She was intent on the narrow platform as it rose in even stages toward a high branch.

Brenna lost herself for a moment in the subtle dance of muscle in Jess's tanned forearms and the glossy hair she shook from her eyes to check the plank's ascent. Brenna forced her gaze back to the notebook in her lap.

I'm losing track of time out here. The battle in Caster's camp is a dim memory now when I'm awake.

It took Jess and Camryn several days to heal enough to make the hike through the foothills to this meadow. That journey took a week, and we made camp here over a month ago. How long has it been since we escaped from the City? Six weeks? Impossible.

Shann knows more about healing than I do, but we couldn't get Jess through a night without fever for what felt like months.

Brenna tipped her head back to catch the light breeze that feathered her hair across her forehead. The nights had already turned cold, but their refuge was not so high in the mountains that it missed the last blush of summer. The hushed morning trill of a wood thrush joined the music of sparrows in the surrounding trees, and Brenna was filled with a pleasant lethargy.

Shann wants me to record my dreams in here as well as keep a diary. I think that's redundant because I can't seem to stop talking in my sleep, so everyone's heard all my dreams anyway.

The Amazons have decided I'm some kind of latent mystic. Even Jess seems convinced of it.

Practicing mysticism, I should add, is still illegal in every City in the Nation.

For the first time, it might be possible to listen for what Shann calls my inner voices and think of something other than brute survival. We've all been so focused on finding food, tending the wounded, and keeping watch for these last weeks. But our immediate needs are being met. One advantage of Tristaine's Amazon heritage is the woodlore her daughters have retained. Everyone but me seems to know enough about fishing and hunting to keep us decently fed.

All of them teach me when they can. Shann deserves her reputation for saint-like patience, based on how she taught me about Amazons this summer. She's a walking encyclopedia on Tristaine, and she's generous about finding time for me. If you need to take a speed course about an Amazon clan, it really helps to have their queen's undivided attention.

Kyla keeps me from poisoning anyone when I cook, and she's teaching me to track. She's better at night tracking than either Camryn or Jess, which gratifies us both to no end.

Camryn is friendly now, but she still keeps her distance. She answers any question I ask, then drifts politely away. We're closer than we were before the battle at Caster's camp—digging a bullet

out of someone's leg will do that—but I still can't call her Cam to her face.

Mostly, I learn from Jess—everything from how to skin a boar (she's impossibly sexy even when skinning a boar) to freehand fighting techniques. She started drilling again weeks ago. Sooner than I liked, but I can see her strength coming back. She takes us all through three hours of defense training a day now. Even Shann joins us sometimes, and she moves really well for a woman in her forties. I've got a lovely hematoma on my hip the size of a fist.

Kyla's musical voice interrupted Brenna's meditation on her bruise. "Hey, Jesstin! Shann's eyes are bothering her again."

Kyla and Camryn paused on their way into the forest. They carried empty packs for gathering herbs and edible greens, and Cam cradled one of their two rifles.

"Does fennel have three leaves or four?"

"Small yellow blossoms," Jess called, tying off the pallet with an efficient slipknot. "Know what you're picking, Ky, or you'll poison our lady, rather than ease her eyes."

"We'll look for ambrette too, Jess, fer you and yer monthly crrrrankiness." Kyla's trilling imitation of Jess's brogue broke Camryn into cackles, and Brenna smiled as they disappeared into the trees. Their adolescent teasing reminded her so vividly of Sammy.

As far as we can tell, Caster is laying low in the City. We haven't seen or heard signs of aerial surveillance for weeks. I'd like to think we've seen the last of her, but stone-cold sobriety won't let me kid myself.

Shann wants me to get the basic facts about our recent history down. If this journal survives us, she wants Tristaine to know what kind of enemy they're dealing with.

Caster was the most eminent scientist in the City, and the Clinic where she worked was the best medical research facility ever funded by the Government. I'm putting all this in past tense because I assume, believe, and devoutly pray that our escape changed all that. Caster was banking heavily on the Tristaine Study. She staked

her reputation on its success. Without Jess, there's no study. Now there's just one disgraced and very pissed-off scientist.

The Military funded the study to find a way to force the Amazons of Tristaine out of their mountain village. They were becoming folk heroes in the City, and that made them dangerous. Steady streams of women were stealing over the City limits to join the clan. Any kind of political unrest is anathema to the Government, and in the popular imagination, Tristaine was becoming a sort of renegade promised land.

The Feds had Jess captured and hired Caster to devise a method to gain an Amazon's compliance. They wanted to find a way to render an Amazon passive and controllable. They had no idea who they were dealing with. None of the tortures used on political prisoners were able to turn Jess. I know Caster would have killed her trying, and Jess would rather have died than betray her clan.

Shann wants us home in Tristaine before the first snowfall. The Amazons long so much for their mountain village. I long for it too sometimes, and I've never even seen it.

Every night before we sleep they tell stories about Tristaine. Every morning, I wake up next to Jess, my head on her breast, and I hear her heartbeat, steady and strong. Then I remember kneeling over her on the floor of Caster's lab at the Clinic, pounding on her silent chest and screaming.

Brenna dropped the pen as a shiver coursed up her spine. This couldn't be what Shann intended, this futile dwelling on the past. And it was easier to shelve those memories now that Jess was strolling up the rise toward her. Brenna studied her easy stride, her broad shoulders, her rugged face pleasantly flushed with exertion.

A shame she's working in the brush today, Brenna thought, *or she'd be shirtless. That golden tan. . .*She felt her ears blush.

A certain swagger entered Jess's walk as she climbed the short rise. She decided to allow herself that indulgence. That fond, almost hungry light in Brenna's green eyes merited a small strut. Jess felt a come-hither smile of her own drift across her face.

She settled her long form onto the grass beside Brenna, a bare arm brushing against her, connecting them with a friendly warmth. Their silence was comfortable as they enjoyed the mild morning sun.

Brenna shifted against the log and examined the swell of Jess's bare shoulder. The skin there was smooth now, with no lingering trace of the multiple stunner burns inflicted in the Clinic. The colors and lines of the small tattoo, the glyph that identified Jess as an Amazon warrior in Tristaine, were clear and vibrant again.

With the tip of one finger, she lightly traced the image of three arrows in flight, then bent to rest her lips against her lover's shoulder for a moment. Jess's skin was warm and salty.

"Brazen hussy." Jess's light brogue made something delightful of those words. "Lipping me in broad daylight now, like a wanton guppy."

"Amazon ego, Jesstin." Brenna flipped open her journal again. "I wasn't kissing you. I was sucking on you for nutrients. I'm hungry. If you really loved me, you'd haul down that pallet of boar again and make me a nice ham sandwich."

Jess scrunched lower against the log and closed her eyes. "And while I'm carving boar, who will protect my fair wench from rampaging lions?"

"All right." Brenna sighed. "I did ask you once, probably while I was weak from hunger, about the possible presence of lions in these woods. To my unending mortification. But never mind, I'll pass on the boar. The only reason Shann lets you out of cooking duties, Jess, is you can't turn out anything remotely edible."

"I make tasty eggs."

"You burn eggs to cinders, honey."

"Aye, I do," Jess admitted. She squinted at Brenna. "You really want me to make you a pig sandwich?"

"Nah, stay put." Brenna gave her a friendly nudge. "I can wait for Camryn and Kyla to bring home a nice salad. Maybe they can find me some hallucinogenic mushrooms out there." She turned to a fresh page in her journal. "I'm going to need them if Shann expects me to play fortune-teller for Tristaine."

"A little weed might help." Jess cracked open an eye. "I'm serious, lass. You need to relax, if you're to see what's coming. I don't think you've relaxed since you were five."

"How would you know what I was like when I was five?" Brenna asked as she scanned what she'd written. "Me and Sammy were growing up in a City Youth Home, and you were growing up in the mountains, in some Tristaine kindergarten, learning to shoot pigs with your toy arrows and getting high at recess."

"I was such a cute little tyke." Jess chuckled, stretching against the log. "With my tiny red eyes."

"I'm sure you were. Ah, Jesstin, this is so much—gaaaah!" Brenna slapped the notebook shut. "I have no idea what Shann wants from me. Do I look like an oracle to you?"

"Why not?" Jess turned her head on the rough bark and regarded her with affection. She understood all too well how City life could bleed the confidence out of the strongest woman, and Brenna had spent more than two decades there. "You never belonged to the City, Brenna. If they hadn't gotten their hooks into you young, you'd have been drawn to Tristaine years ago. Your sister Sammy too, most likely. If the two of you had grown up among us, we'd have nurtured a seer's talent, and you wouldn't doubt yourself now."

Brenna stroked the cover of the journal. "I guess I'm lucky Shann doesn't see me as a sorceress, or you guys would expect me to float us back to Tristaine on a cloud."

"Shann knows women well, adanin." Jess smiled, her eyes drifting shut again. "If she's wrong about you, she's wrong. But if marking your dreams and recording our story might help us preserve Tristaine someday, is it so much to ask?"

She didn't seem to require an answer, so Brenna opened the journal and went back to scanning the few paragraphs she'd written. A shadow swam across the white page, and she flinched violently. Jess put a steadying hand on her wrist.

"Brenna, I'm sorry." Shann's gray eyes held real regret as she joined them. "I didn't mean to startle you."

Brenna pressed a hand against her pounding heart. "Why

can't Amazons learn to rustle some grass when they walk, like normal people?"

"I heard her coming ten yards back," Jess said helpfully. "Shann has enormous feet. She's hard to miss."

"True," Shann agreed. She hopped up on the fallen log and walked its length, her arms spread for balance. "Dyan despaired of teaching me stealth decades ago, Brenna. And I despaired of teaching Jesstin to cook. And lo, it came to pass that Tristaine's Amazons lived in harmony forever more."

Shann walked the log with her tongue clenched between her teeth in concentration. Strands of silver shone in her light brown hair, but at the moment, her posture and expression were almost childlike with pleasure.

Jess peered at Shann's feet. "We'll want to patch those boots before we break camp for Tristaine, lady. They're falling apart. You can't scale cliffs in those."

"Cliffs?" Brenna repeated politely. "Ah. Are there many of them between here and Tristaine? Cliffs?"

"Yes, there's one rather daunting ridge, even on the kindest route." Shann pivoted, wheeling her arms slightly for balance, then started back down the log. "But," she stepped over a small protruding branch, "I made it over alone, even with my enormous feet."

Brenna slid the thick spiral notebook back into her pack. "Jess says it'll take us about three days to hike from here to Tristaine, more or less?"

"If Gaia grants us good weather." Shann nudged Jess's dark head aside with her toe to clear her path.

Brenna was finding it impossible to hold on to the feeling of safety she'd enjoyed earlier. A sneaking cold began to creep through her, despite the sun's rays on her back. "How can we be sure Caster's not just nesting up there, waiting for us?"

"We'll scout our routes carefully on the way," Jess replied. "Once we get close to Tristaine, there'll be sentries posted at regular intervals. They'll warn us of anything waiting in the village. You're stepping on my hair, Shann," she added.

"Oops. Enough time has passed with no sign of us that Caster might consider us well and truly banished, Brenna. At least beyond the border of the County." Shann stood balanced on the log in graceful silence for a moment with her hands clasped behind her. "In any case, our home calls to us, and we need to return soon. Jesstin and Kyla and Camryn haven't known Tristaine's peace since they were captured—"

"Camryn," Brenna said.

Shann glanced down at her. "She and Kyla are hunting herbs, Blades. They'll be back soon, hopefully with enough wild onions for a—"

"C-Camryn," Brenna said again, and she laid cold fingers on Jess's arm.

Jess heard the fear in Brenna's voice and sat up.

They heard the dull, flat crack of a rifle shot, deep in the trees.

Jess was on her feet and pulling Brenna erect as Shann jumped from the log. They raced down the grassy rise toward the tree line where Camryn and Kyla had entered the forest minutes before.

Jess and Brenna ran full out, quickly leaving Shann behind. Acid coated the lining of Brenna's stomach as she snapped through the snarled greenery of the forest floor. She was acutely conscious of Jess, beside and slightly ahead of her, leaping a waist-high bank of brush without breaking stride, searching for any path through the dense trees ahead.

They heard a frenzied squealing—not just one inhuman voice, but several, a chorus of chalkboard shrieks that chilled Brenna's blood. Camryn's rifle sounded a second time, then a third.

The wild boars had lost one of their pack to Jess's arrows the day before. Brenna had been unpleasantly surprised by the dead creature's total lack of resemblance to the City's domesticated swine. It was four feet of smelly, bristled brutality, its gray tongue lolling between two deadly looking tusks in its lower jaw.

Now the rest of that wild porcine tribe were bursting through the green foliage all around her, their tusks slashing fat leaves to green slivers in their terrorized flight. Brenna dodged, narrowly

avoiding one gray-black torpedo streaking toward her, and called back a sharp warning to Shann.

She heard a solid thwacking sound and an explosive grunt, and as she followed Jess through a tangled curtain of vines, she saw Camryn. The young Amazon had reversed the empty rifle in her hands and used its solid oak stock as a club against the head of the last charging boar.

The blow was powerful, but it didn't stun the huge creature entirely. It was enough however, to dissuade it from another lunge, which was fortunate since Camryn had no leverage for a second swing. Her bad leg gave out beneath her, and she sprawled onto her knees in the sparse grass, keeping a white-knuckled grip on the rifle barrel.

Jess's solid kick was enough to send the addled boar into a shuffling, grunting trot after its brothers.

Over her pounding heart, Brenna registered the trampled greenery and the high, thin squawking of birds startled out of their morning's peace. Only a few feet away, blue-winged flies had already settled on the two dead boars in the high grass.

Jess helped Kyla stand, and Brenna tried to make sense out of Kyla's stammers as Shann joined them, panting.

"They j-just attacked, lady." She was as pale as ash. "You can let go of me, Jesstin. I'm okay."

Brenna went to Cam, who struggled upright, using the rifle as a crutch. Like Kyla, she was covered with dirt and a frightening amount of blood. It took Brenna a moment to reclaim her bedside manner.

"Sit down, Camryn!" She grabbed the girl's arm just as her leg buckled again and helped her awkwardly lower herself to the grass.

"I shot him, then he jumped on me, but I'm fine." Camryn's teeth rattled like castanets, looking past Brenna to Kyla, who was staring just as wide-eyed back at her. "This is his blood on me—the pig's. It's not my blood."

"What happened, Cam?" Jess raked her fingers through her hair and willed the faintly sick aftermath of an adrenalin surge to pass. "Weren't you watching?"

"Wild boars happened, Jesstin. This isn't a City park."

Shann knelt beside Brenna and Camryn. "Blades? What do you think?"

Brenna finished her examination of Cam's trembling extremities and sat back on her heels with a nod of relief. "You're all right, Camryn. A few bruises, but nothing too serious."

"There were seven of them," Camryn told Shann. "Seven boars. I didn't even see them, lady, until they swarmed us."

She looked about twelve years old, Brenna thought. Almost as tall as Jess and a member of the same warrior's guild, Camryn, though ordinarily inscrutable, was as pale as Kyla now that the crisis had passed.

"I shot two," Camryn continued. "Ky helped me bat one off. The others ran. Jess kicked out the last one before you got here."

"Those tusks are like razors, adanin. They could have cut you both down." Jess was still angry. "You weren't on a nature hike, Camryn. We knew this pack was out here."

"And our little sisters fought them off." Shann's voice was low as well, but her gaze on Jess was more intense than Brenna had seen before. "One rifle against seven animals. They did well, Jesstin. Let it be."

"I kept distracting her, Shann." Kyla's voice was still high and breathless, and she kept her hands pressed tightly to her thighs, as if to contain herself. "We found some henbane. No fennel, but a patch of fiddleheads, lady, for your eyes. Cam, I'm s-so sorry."

"It wasn't your fault, adonai." Cam looked bleak.

"Let's get you both back to camp." Shann's tone warmed as she extended a hand to Camryn and helped her stand. "We'll make you a fine pork dinner, adanin, a fitting end to this morning's saga."

"Ah, Artemis, you guys are gonna be so pissed," Kyla whispered. Tears rose in her eyes. "I'm sorry. Don't yell, Jess."

"What are you on about, Ky?" Jess's tone was milder, but Brenna eyed the red-haired girl uneasily.

"I might as well…" Kyla sighed. "Look, I can't move my hand off my leg to walk, okay, because if I lift it—" She demonstrated by removing her palm from her thigh.

An alarming jet of blood sprayed from it, and Brenna shot to her feet.

Jess lunged and caught Kyla as she fainted.

❖

The supplies in the medical kit they had smuggled from the Clinic had been all but depleted after the clash with Caster's men. Brenna was able to form a rudimentary tourniquet, which sufficed long enough to get Kyla back to their holdings, but once there, she used the rest of their suturing thread to close the wound.

"That's the last of the sulfa, too." Brenna dropped the empty vial into the kit with fingers that were still wrinkled from repeated washing in the frigid water from a nearby stream. Her hands had been coated with blood by the time she'd gotten the wicked slice in Kyla's thigh securely closed. She looked at Shann, troubled.

"It's a bad cut, Shann. Not long, but very deep." Brenna kept her voice low, and both Jess and Shann stepped in closer to hear her. She glanced over her shoulder at Camryn, who sat by Kyla's pallet, holding her wife's hand as she rested. "I'm worried about infection. A wound like that needs a long course of antibiotics, and as of now, we're fresh out."

"What about permanent damage?" Jess asked. There were fresh lines of tension around her eyes.

"Not that I can tell." Brenna finally had good news. "I don't think any nerves were affected. She has full sensation and mobility. It's just a damn deep cut. Can we use anything out here against infection?"

"We can find herbs in the marshland just south of us that purify the blood." Shann tapped her thighs thoughtfully. "But they can be toxic, and Dyan was allergic to most of them. That doesn't mean her blood sister will have the same reaction, but we'll want to watch her closely."

"She'll need healing time before we travel." Brenna brushed Jess's arm and felt the tightness in the fine muscle. "We were planning to leave for Tristaine soon, but would a few more days do any harm?"

"It might harm Tristaine." Jess regarded Shann. "Our clan has been without their queen too long, lady."

"Ky, it doesn't matter," Camryn said behind them. They turned and caught her tender expression as she lifted her wife's hand. "Will you please stop worrying about such dreck?"

"It will." Kyla looked obstinate, one of her more characteristic features, and Brenna was relieved to see a spark of returning spunk in her wan patient. "I'm going to have a gigantic scar like a big zipper running right up my leg. And did I get it in battle? *No,* no battle wound for Kyla. Kyla had to go get herself bit by a *pig*."

Shann settled on the grass beside the pallet, and her serene smile warmed Brenna's jangled nerves. "Don't dismiss the skills of our resident medic, little sister. Blades stitched you as carefully as a Tristainian quilt-crafter, and your zipper will hardly be noticeable."

"Thanks, Bren." Kyla summoned a smile and played with Camryn's fingers. "Hey, Cam, at least our legs have matching deformities now. Except around the storyfire, you'll brag about a bullet making your scar and a dumb *pig* making mine."

"It was a really big pig." Camryn couldn't smile. She was still as pale as Kyla.

"We'll swear it was a giant python around our storyfires if you wish, adanin." Shann's finely veined hand stroked the girl's damp brow. "She's still a bit shocky, Bren."

"I'm okay." Kyla yawned, shivering.

Brenna knelt and pulled the army blanket higher around Kyla's shoulders, then felt her hands and took her pulse at the throat. "Your color's still a little off, Ky, but your circulation's picking up, and your heart's strong and steady." She glanced at Shann. "I think those breathing exercises really helped."

Shann was revered as a healer in Tristaine, but all Brenna's City training rebelled at reliance on natural medicine. The use of wild plants as remedies was suspect enough, but guided visualizations and patterned breathing? To a certified Government medic, these techniques seemed the primitive milieu of witch doctors. But Brenna couldn't deny the benefit of Kyla's intent focus on Shann's voice

earlier, when it distracted Ky from the burn and jab of the stitching needle, and her comparative comfort now.

"I was so stupid to keep yapping at you like that, Cam." Kyla's eyelashes fluttered. "If I'd just kept my mouth shut, we'd have heard them coming. If Dyan were here, she'd serve me my head on a platter. Apple in my mouth."

"I should have kept better watch, Ky." Camryn's thumb moved in repetitive circles across the back of Kyla's hand. "Dyan wouldn't blame you."

"True enough." Jess stood over them, her arms folded. "Dyan was a wise woman. She'd blame the big pig."

Brenna caught Shann's small smile at Jess. Camryn kept her gaze on Kyla's limp hand.

"Clouds moving in." Jess studied the small circle of sky above the treetops surrounding their camp. "We'll want to store some dry firewood in case those turn ugly."

She bent and rested her lips on Kyla's forehead, then straightened and disappeared into the pines.

Brenna looked after her and worried her lower lip with her teeth. It took a moment before she felt Shann's nudge.

"We could use fresh water, Blades. Would you mind a trip to the brook?"

"Sure, of course not," Brenna contradicted herself absently. "We'll let Kyla rest for a while, Camryn. You need to get cleaned up, and Shann should check you over again. Be right back."

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Jess chopped a dead limb from the fallen tree, wrenched its dry, stringy branches from the trunk, and tossed them onto a growing pile. The open collar of her blue shirt was damp, but the sharp blade still bit powerfully into the dry wood with each swing. She turned at Brenna's voice.

"One should not sneak up on a hatchet-wielding Amazon warrior." Brenna stood just outside the copse of aspen, her hands clasped behind her. Jess nodded, and she came closer and settled on a wide stone blanketed with moss.

Jess went back to her chopping, bits of bark dancing in the dappled sunlight of the glen.

"A pity Jode couldn't have slipped a chainsaw into our packs," Brenna observed, "before he helped us escape from the Clinic."

Jess shrugged. "Standard camping gear's all he and Pam had time to put together for us, but this'll do."

"You want to take a break when you're through here? You've been pushing pretty hard the last few days, Jesstin, and it looks like we won't be able to start for Tristaine right away."

"Amazons heal fast, and we want to be ready. We need to gather some vines that might be strong enough to rope us when we hit that ridge."

"You really think we can carry a wounded girl safely over miles of mountains? Not to mention cliffs?" Jess could hear the uncertainty in Brenna's tone. "Two women and two newly recovered warriors?"

"Five Amazons," Jess corrected. She hacked at another branch.

"I'm no Amazon, Jess."

"You weren't born one," Jess acknowledged. "But then, most of us weren't. Shann herself was born in the City. And it's miles of hills, lass, not mountains. Tristaine is remote, but there's only the one ridge to worry about."

"One's enough." Brenna was quiet for a moment. "You know, Dyan probably could have erected a fully equipped critical care unit in the time it's taken you to chop our kindling."

Jess was puzzled. "Sorry?"

"I never met Dyan of Tristaine, but I can picture her perfectly." Brenna leaned back on her hands on the sun-warmed rock. "She was seven feet tall, gorgeous, sexy, brilliant, fast, strong as ten horses—"

Jess emitted a soft bark of laughter. "Dyan was five-six, broad as a barn, freckled, and plain as dirt. Young Kyla got more than her fair share of the looks in that family. But smart, strong. Aye, Dyan was that. And more."

"I know. She was on Tristaine's high council. She led your warriors. She was Kyla's blood sister and Shann's wife. And Camryn's hero, and your best friend."

Jess straightened and lowered the hatchet to her side. She raked her damp hair out of her eyes and looked at Brenna.

"Jess, I don't mean to preach about this. But I think Camryn's back there blaming herself for what happened to Ky, because she thinks she's not living up to some standard Dyan must have set for all of—"

"Ah, Cam's beating herself up because I half-flayed her in front of her sisters." Jess grimaced and rested her foot on the log. "Dyan would have snatched me baldheaded if she heard me pop off at a scared kid like that."

"Look, that's what I mean." Brenna rested her elbows on her knees. "Dyan's memory is all around us. She's like a ghost you're afraid of disappointing."

"Bren, it's not Dyan." Jess swung one long leg over the log and sat, gingerly. "Aye, she was one of the best of us. We love her, we grieve for her, and we'll miss her forever. But no one here is trying to walk in Dyan's boots, lass. It couldn't be done."

"Okay. You're not trying to live up to some impossible standard, then." A breeze blew Brenna's hair across her forehead as she surveyed Jess clinically. "But I can swing that hatchet almost as well as you, Jesstin. And either Shann or I could have helped you carry Kyla back to our camp. So why do you insist on pushing yourself like this right now, when your back's killing you?"

Jess sighed. Hiding the occasional twinge was difficult when married to a psychic healer.

Brenna pushed herself off the rock and went to the log. She swung around and sat behind Jess on the rough bark, clasping the broad shoulders.

"I've got a passing familiarity with this body now, so even if I weren't a brilliant physician, I could tell you're hurting by the way you move."

She slid her hands beneath the thick hair and wrapped them around the base of Jess's neck, probing the dense muscle carefully.

"You don't have to do everything yourself, Jesstin. Correct me if I'm wrong, but this feels an awful lot like empty Amazon macha."

Jess didn't answer for a moment. She studied the glen, unwilling to give in to the pleasant warmth Brenna's hands were coaxing into her rigid neck. When it finally seemed reasonable to believe that no Government troops were going to leap from the trees at any moment, Jess lowered her shoulders beneath her lover's gently insistent touch.

"Aye," Jess said slowly. "Maybe it *is* Amazon macha. But it's not Dyan we're trying to live up to, adanin, me and Cam. Or not only Dyan. You called us warriors…You know what that means to us?"

Brenna's hands smoothed the planes of her upper back now. "Well, I know you and Camryn are pledged to Tristaine's warrior guild, and Dyan was your leader. That means you're part of your village's fighting force, your army?"

"We fight," Jess affirmed, shivering with the tendrils of pleasure spun by Brenna's strong fingers. It was important to her to get this right. Jess talked to Brenna as easily as she prayed to her Mothers, but the complexities of Tristaine's culture were difficult to explain. "But an Amazon warrior is more than a soldier. We protect Tristaine's women in times of peace too. We make sure they're safe. Whether the threat's a flooding river, or rabid bats, or a mad Government scientist."

"Or a charging boar," Brenna finished. Her hands stilled. "There are rabid bats in Tristaine?"

"Aye, they have their own guild." Jess grinned when Brenna tweaked her ribs. "Camryn and I, we're the only warriors here, Bren. Shann's our queen, you and Ky are both dear to us. We have to stay alert."

"Jesstin, that's sexist as hell." Brenna moved her hands lower on Jess's back. "I saw Shann put a bullet through a man's head before he could kill you, and both Kyla and I have been in Caster's talons and escaped whole, just like you and Cam. We're not delicate little—"

Her probing thumbs hit a particularly painful kink, and Jess tightened, her left shoulder rising.

"You found it," Jess pointed out.

"Sorry," Brenna murmured, smoothing the stiff muscle with the flat of her palm.

"I'm not calling any Amazon frail, Bren." Jess rose, shaking off Brenna's restraining hand. She reversed herself on the log so she sat facing her. "You're strong, and you have a brave heart. I know that. I love that."

She lifted Brenna's hand and held it, sifting through her fingers. She opened them and held her palm to her damp chest. "But this—you—are precious to me, adanin. I'd give my life to protect you. That would be true even if I'd never taken a warrior's oath." Jess searched Brenna's face. "Let me do what I think I must to keep you safe."

Brenna stared at her silently for a long moment. Then she smiled, the love in her eyes rich and tender, and cradled Jess's face in her hand. "I accept your protection. And I thank you for it. But just know this, Jesstin. When I was ten, this bully at the Youth Home pushed my sister Sammy down, twice. I broke the bitch's nose. Does that tell you anything?"

"I should always be nice to your little sister."

"Nope." Brenna skated her fingers up Jess's throat and wrapped them lightly around it. "I'll always have your back, Jesstin. In any fight, you won't need to look around for me. I'll be right beside you."

Jess covered Brenna's hand with her own and leaned in to kiss her. They were getting better at this now, with weeks of sweet practice.

Brenna's lips moved, warm and pliant beneath Jess's searching ones, then parted to admit the slow sweep of Jess's tongue. They breathed softly, drinking in each other's taste, their mouths warm and pliant.

"Yer sure you've got no use for Amazon macha now?" Jess drawled and kissed her again.

Brenna explored the planes of her face. "You're gonna tell me. . .that's who's kissing me, right? The macha Amazon?"

"Ah, no, lass." Jess skated her lips over Brenna's lifted

chin and down her taut throat. “It is indeed yer own sweet Jesstin, smoochin’ you here on this log. But it’s the macha Amazon warrior doin’ this.”

Strong hands gripped the front of Brenna’s blouse and ripped it open with one yank, baring her breasts. Jess lifted her gaze from naked cleavage to blue sky and grinned. “Thank ye, Lady Gaia, for this bounty I am about to receive!”

Brenna laughed, a high, breathless sound that was equal parts surprise and pleasure. Jess shifted closer to her, and the soft fabric of her shirt warmed her bare breasts. A flush rose in Brenna’s cheeks.

“I’m makin’ ye blush.” As always on such occasions, Jess’s brogue was deep as syrup. She leaned forward slowly and Brenna leaned back.

“Maybe it’s aggression you’re seeing, and I’m getting ready to pop you one in the nose,” Brenna suggested, leaning further back. “Hey, Camryn taught me that base-of-the-palm-to-the-nose thing. It looked real, real, painful—”

Brenna sputtered into silence as Jess employed her best time-honored technique for shutting her up. Jess’s kiss grew forceful, as she bent Brenna down on the log. She covered her with her upper body, holding her down against the rough bark. Her hands found Brenna’s breasts and circled them lightly, their erect nubs tickling her palms.

Jess squeaked, and Brenna lifted her head.

“My back,” Jess gasped.

Brenna frowned and began to sit up. “Damn it, Jesstin, I told you—”

“All better now.” Jess’s grin was gamine, and her body relaxed instantly, pressing Brenna back down on the log.

“You rotten punk,” Brenna snarled, slapping Jess’s shoulder.

“Amazons heal fast.” Jess lowered her head and continued healing.

❖

“I’m not the one who brought up pythons, Jesstin. Shann brought up pythons.”

"Brenna?" Jess scanned the snarled branches overhead. "If you're eaten up by a rabid lion, or ambushed by a giant snake, I'll make Camryn suck the poisoned blood from your—"

"Blech. You and what army, Amazon?" Camryn yanked on the vine Jess pointed to and snapped it free of the branch above.

Brenna measured the coil of vines looped over her shoulder, frowning. "You really think these things are strong enough to catch an adult female in free fall? Of average height and weight?"

"We'd best stop at the canyon on the way back to camp and test them." Jess threw Camryn a bland look. "Cam, you and I are still too shaky from our battle wounds, so Brenna will have to tie these to her ankles and jump off the—"

"You're having a good time with me, aren't you?" Brenna slapped Jess's shoulder. "I'd like to see you navigate gridlock City traffic at rush hour, Jesstin."

"Blech." Jess shuddered. "I'd rather test the vines."

She began kicking a path through the high grass of the thicket, and they started back to camp. Brenna waved a hand to disperse the small winged creatures scattered by their progress. She stifled a yawn. Her dreams had been especially vivid the night before, and sleep had come in discordant snatches.

More important, though, Kyla had passed the night well. Her wound showed no sign of infection, and the pain was localized and manageable with Shann's mild herbal tea. Camryn was still quiet this morning, but that wasn't unusual. Brenna had come to recognize silence as her natural state.

"I'm not sure how we'll find Tristaine, Bren." Jess rested her rough hand on Brenna's arm and guided her around a snarl of brambles. "But if the village is quiet, we'll do what we can to get a message to Samantha in the City."

Brenna drew in a quick breath. "Hey, I'd like that, Jess. A lot."

"We'll have to be careful. They might be watching her. But we still have some people in place in the City. One of them can contact her eventually."

"Wait…and risk getting caught?" Brenna's hope dimmed. "If

Caster found out I tried to contact Sam, Jess, it would be bad for her and her husband. She's about to have a baby. I'm not sure I want to take any chances."

"I bet she'd want you to take a chance." Camryn walked a few steps behind them. "Your sister, I mean. She's probably real worried."

They stopped and waited until Cam reached them. Brenna noted she was limping slightly.

Jess's palm was gentle on the back of Camryn's wiry neck. "I think you're right, adanin. Your Lauren would want to know the truth, if it was you missing."

Camryn nodded. She'd given Brenna her only picture of Lauren for safe storage in her journal. Cam's younger sister had been lost in the same ambush that killed Dyan.

The sun was touching the western ridge by the time they reached the meadow adjoining their camp. Even in fall, the golden grass was still flush with the rich growth of high summer, and they waded through knee-high waves of it.

Brenna heard the faint screeing of some new species of grasshopper—probably carnivorous—and scanned the ground uneasily. Her ears pricked again at a new sound, a musical trilling whistle that rose from the far end of the meadow.

She looked up to see Shann, standing on a large rock near their base camp. She was too distant for Brenna to discern her expression, but her head was tilted, and she seemed to be searching the skies.

"Hey, do you guys…?" Brenna turned and saw that Camryn and Jess had stopped several yards behind her. They looked like mirrors of their elder sister, their eyes trained on the cloudless blue expanse above them. The soft screeing sounded again, and this time Brenna followed their gaze skyward.

"What is it, Jess?" Brenna frowned. "Are you hearing a plane?"

"No, a gyr."

"You're hearing a jar?" Brenna squinted.

"A gyrfalcon, Brenna," Jess answered. "It's a kind of bird."

"Thank you, Jesstin. I know a falcon is a *bird*—"

"I see her!" Camryn pointed.

Brenna tried to follow Cam's finger. She picked out the tiny silhouette before many City women could have. Her weeks in the mountains under the Amazons' tutelage had sharpened her senses.

She heard Shann's eerie musical whistle again.

At first the falcon was a tiny, dusty thread flapping against the blue bowl of sky above them. It circled, descending in lazy spirals toward the far end of the meadow. Brenna shaded her eyes and traced its path.

"Watch your footing." Jess's hand brushed Brenna's back in passing, making her jump. "The field's pocked with gopher holes, and a twisted ankle won't bring Tristaine's tidings any faster."

This cautionary lecture was lost on them all, including Jess. Brenna wasn't sure yet why they were running, but her own tension matched the sense of urgency emanating from the two Amazons. For one thing, she wasn't wild about watching a bird of prey dive-bomb the unprotected head of Tristaine's queen, who waited motionless on the distant rock.

Brenna jumped over a furrow, then caught her breath as the falcon slowed its descent. Its glossy silver wings sent up a backdraft of chill mountain air as sharp, curved talons stretched toward Shann's upraised arm. The gyr touched down with surprising gentleness, leather tethers trailing from its leg.

By the time they reached Shann, she was smoothing its breast feathers with the backs of her fingers. She spoke to it in a low, crooning tone, her eyes shining with pleasure. Brenna, ever practical, noted with relief that beneath the falcon's fierce claws, Shann's forearm was wrapped in several layers of thick denim.

"Isn't she beautiful? Her name is Talfryn, Brenna. It means 'the high end of the hills.'" Shann smiled proudly. "Look at her wingspan, Jesstin. She was just an eyas when you were taken!"

"Aye, she's lovely, Shann, really." Jess clawed her tumbling hair out of her eyes. "What does she say?"

Shann handed her a small folded paper, then gathered the bird's trailing jesses and wound them around her wrist. Jess shook open the parchment carefully and studied it. Brenna felt a stab of

misgiving as a look of unpleasant surprise flitted across Jess's rugged features. She handed the tattered square to Camryn and Brenna.

The creased parchment felt like soft cloth in Brenna's hands. Red lines interlaced with black to form a twirling symbol that covered a third of the worn sheet. The drawing made no immediate sense to her. No eventual sense either, to be accurate, but something in the strong, blocky design chilled Brenna. The news wasn't good, whatever it was. She looked up to see Shann studying her face.

"Lady, we should leave for Tristaine tonight." Cam looked like she wanted to bolt.

"It's only a secondary alarm, Cam. There's no immediate danger. Jesstin? My arm's wearing out." Shann waited while Jess wound her jacket around her forearm, then transferred the large falcon to her with the ease of long practice.

Brenna still openly gawked at the bird, transfixed by its alien, prehistoric beauty. Both Shann and Jess handled the exotic creature as naturally as Brenna had once punched numbers into a cell phone.

"Blades?" Shann shook out her arm. "How soon do you think we can have Kyla ready for hard travel?"

"Wait, I need to sum up." Brenna ducked slightly as the bird flapped its wings, presumably for balance. Its talons looked wickedly sharp. "This big messenger pigeon is named Talfryn, and she was sent here from Tristaine. She somehow found us in this one little field, in the middle of a huge mountain range. And she's carrying a message in her beak from your village that says, 'Come home, there's trouble.' We don't know what kind of trouble. That's where we are, right?"

"The scroll was tied in Talfryn's jesses, but otherwise, well done." Shann smiled. "I love watching your eyes when you're learning something new, little sister. There's such life in them."

"Thank you," Brenna sighed. "And that's all the parchment says?"

"Yes, that's all this glyph tells us." Shann nodded. "Tristaine is endangered and we're needed. It's a matter of leaving a bit earlier than we hoped. We'll not be able to spare Kyla the recovery time she

needs, but we can rig a pallet to carry her."

"At least," Brenna said faintly. "If we're going to be climbing mountains."

Shann's voice was working its usual calming magic on Brenna's nerves, but she thought she could detect a subtle tension in the lines of Shann's body. She couldn't read the language of her movements as easily as she read Jess's, but Brenna had learned to trust her clinical eye.

Shann turned to her second. "Jesstin? What's your counsel on the urgency of Tristaine's message?"

"We can break camp in the morning. I'll rig a stretcher for Ky tonight." Jess stared into the falcon's gold eyes, an odd smile lifting the corner of her mouth. Then she glanced around. "We make fine targets out here, sisters. Let's find some shade."

Maybe it was just an adrenaline- and falcon-fueled energy surge, but the moment Jess spoke, Brenna's upper arms prickled. She felt vulnerable in the wide expanse of the pasture, and she quickly closed ranks with the three Amazons as they moved toward the trees containing their camp.

Brenna felt Shann's hand on her arm. "How much time does Tristaine have, adanin?"

"At least a week, I think." Brenna blinked. "Wait. How much time before what?"

"It's all right, Brenna. You answered me." Shann smiled at her, then wound her arm around Camryn's waist. "Let's show Talfryn's message to your adonai, Cam."

Jess had turned to wait for Brenna several yards up the muddy path. The powerful falcon rested easily on her raised forearm, and the muscles in Jess's shoulders stood out in stark relief beneath the last red rays of the sun. The trees overhead sent dappled shadows across the strong lines of her face, and Brenna felt that small, secret muscle in her sex relax.

Brenna's City friends would say she avoided fanciful thinking, but in her eyes, Jess was rendered an engraving out of myth, gold-edged and timeless.

Jess lifted an eyebrow, and then her smile turned roguish. As her insolent gaze slid slowly down Brenna's throat to fasten on her breasts, Brenna felt her nipples stiffen and rise. She strode past Jess, muttering invectives, and they returned to the fragile safety of their camp.

Chapter Two

Brenna ignored the dampness of the soaked earth seeping into the seat of her jeans. She was almost too tired to register her discomfort or do much else besides sit, slumped on the muddy hill and nodding inside her musty poncho. The rain had let up ten minutes before, but she had yet to muster the energy to push back her hood.

The incessant rain that had plagued them for three days had finally stopped, a blessing the Amazons attributed to a benevolent goddess. This was fine with Brenna. She was willing to worship anything that could turn off the maddening drizzle for a few hours.

At least she had pleasant scenery to enjoy, stupefied or not. Jess had found high ground to lay their holdings for this brief rest, out of the worst of the runoff from the storm.

Brenna sat on a moonlit hill, the ghostly globe the Amazons called Selene visible overhead as scudding wisps of cloud swam across its surface. A silvery vista of treetops lay below her, a deep gray-green blanket stretching back unbroken miles.

Brenna set the softly glowing lantern behind a stump, blocking its meager light from the valley. She took such precautions automatically now. Living among mountain women was helping her adapt to the wild through osmosis.

She lifted the edge of the heavy spiral notebook in her lap and stifled a shivering yawn. Her body was exhausted, but her nerves were stretched taut. Sleep was not impossible, but felt unlikely. When it did come, it was too filled with chaotic dreams of battling and dying horses to bring true rest. If she couldn't sleep, she might as well try to write.

Brenna glanced over her shoulder as she fumbled through the journal to the first clear page. Shann boiled some kind of root mixture over the remnants of their fire. Jess was a silent shadow several yards above their camp, sitting watch on a high rock formation that looked out over the valley. The two blanketed forms that were Camryn and Kyla were motionless, and Brenna hoped that meant they slept. Shann caught her eye and smiled as she stirred the small pot. Brenna smiled back, with more assurance than she felt, and turned back to her journal.

What we thought was a three-day hike might take twice that. The terrain we're covering isn't brutal, but carrying injured, it's treacherous and hard to navigate in this bloody downpour. At least the rain cuts down on those tiny, demon-bred, buzzing gnats that target my eyes and drive me to psychosis when the sun is out. May each and every one of them fry forever in some horrific little bug hell.

Kyla gets more and more quiet as we travel. At first, she griped about being treated like an invalid, but lately she just closes her eyes, grips the wooden poles bracketing her pallet, and hangs on. She worries me.

We trade off litter-bearing duties. Shann and I try to make sure Camryn and Jess don't push themselves too far, but there's precious little we can do to spare them. Cam's limp is pronounced at the end of a night's travel, and Jess has got to be simply worn out.

She's everywhere, laying traps to catch enough protein to keep us on our feet, hacking out trails through snarled vines, moving swiftly ahead of us to scout out our next route. The damn woman either refuses to sleep or honestly can't. It seems whenever I open my eyes I see hers, shadowed but alert, moving restlessly over the camp. Keeping watch.

We'll reach the ridge tomorrow.

This time Brenna did hear when Shann walked up behind her. She scuffed her feet with such earnest warning, Brenna had to smile. Shann spread her poncho on the wet grass beside Brenna and

pointed sternly. Brenna lifted herself with an effort and sat on it as Shann lowered herself beside her.

"Oof," Shann groaned and snugged her jacket over her knees. "Sweet Artemis, when did I become an old woman?"

It seemed a rhetorical question, so Brenna grunted something sympathetic and accepted the steaming bowl Shann handed her. She sniffed it curiously.

"Arsenic root," Shann said quietly. "It'll give us enough strength to make Tristaine. But it will alter our gene structure. We'll all have testicles when we arrive." She gazed out over the valley, then looked at Brenna again and snorted with laughter. "Brenna, it's onion soup!"

"Oh." Brenna blushed again, grateful for the dark. "Sorry, Shann. But arsenic soup would be fine with me right now, if I could sit down while I drink it."

"Poor Blades." She swept her fingers gently across Brenna's forehead. "You're never one to complain, but I know how tired you must be."

"We're all pretty spent." Brenna warmed her hands around the bowl. "Kyla's hurting."

"Yes. There's not much more we can do for her tonight. Tristaine's infirmary will have stronger analgesics than we can risk in herbal remedies." Shann rested her elbows on her knees as she absorbed the moonlit view. "Though I believe we passed a patch of dynamite hallucinogenic mushrooms, about half a league back. They'll do in a pinch."

Half a league, five minutes, I'm there, Brenna thought. The prospect of fading out for a while on a gentle, drugged wave held strong appeal at the moment. She wondered if the craving for a drink would ever leave her entirely. She had made no reference to that desire in her notebook, but it still occupied her thoughts daily. She drained the bowl of fragrant soup in one swallow.

Shann regarded her for a moment. "You have questions, I think."

Brenna readjusted her stiff legs on the poncho to give herself time to focus. She realized she still looked for Caster's mind-twisting

in Shann's quiet authority, and still felt a wave of disorientation when she couldn't detect it. In their weeks together, Shann often sought Brenna for private counsel and usually began their talks with that same gentle invitation.

"Yeah. Several dozen." Brenna flipped through her journal for a clean page to take notes. Then she relaxed her fingers around the pen and looked up at Shann. "Jess said something, weeks ago, about Tristaine being divided since Dyan's death. What's that about?"

"There was division even before we lost Dyan." Shann folded her hands in her lap and almost visibly ordered her thoughts. "The City has always feared us, Brenna, for the many generations of Tristaine's existence in these mountains. And now there are those among us who believe that cooperation with its Government is the only way to ensure our survival."

"Cooperation?" Brenna was puzzled. "How can anyone in Tristaine believe that? You guys scare the crap out of the Government, Shann. That's why the Military hired Caster in the first place—to wipe out Tristaine. Amazons are legendary in the City. Women keep defecting to your village in droves."

"Hardly droves." Shann smiled. "But we've had a small, steady stream of City women join us through the years. And it's our newest sisters, those who've come to us in the last decade or so, who seem most willing to trust the Government's offer of peaceful assimilation."

"They really think they'll be allowed to keep their culture intact under City rule?"

"They believe cooperating with the City is our only hope if we're to keep Tristaine intact, period." Shann's velvet voice was troubled. "Our sisters aren't evil or stupid women, Brenna, but I fear they're dangerously deluded. And one of them, Theryn, sits on our high council. Dyan's reputation was enough to keep her faction in check while she lived—"

"And now Dyan's gone." Brenna softened her voice. "You've been away from Tristaine for months. Are you afraid this Theryn is trying to take over? Is that why they sent for you?"

"The glyph Talfryn brought us means rising tensions, yes." Shann turned her mild eyes on Brenna. It seemed there was no one else in the world more worthy of the queen's respect and attention at that moment.

"This will be the Tristaine we bring you to, little sister," she continued. "I wish we could offer you the feminist utopia that was our grandmothers' dream, but Amazons have learned that finding sanctuary must always be a process, rather than an achievement. Do you understand, Blades?"

"Yeah." Brenna nodded. "I do. But I have to admit, the stories you guys tell me about Tristaine, it really does sound like some kind of paradise sometimes. Hearing that it has its problems is probably a good thing, right? It'll help me keep some perspective."

"Tristaine is a paradise, peopled by very human women." Shann smiled and covered Brenna's hand with her own. "With all the joy and angst inherent in that simple phrase."

"Ooh, I like that," Brenna murmured, scribbling neat notes in her journal. "'A-n-g-s-t.' But, yeah, Shann, I see what you're saying. I've always known we're not through with the City. Or with Caster. And I realize I might not be universally welcome in Tristaine. Don't worry. I never sugarcoat my prospects. I know what to expect."

"You've had to, I imagine." Shann studied her silently for a moment. "What's going to happen in Tristaine in three days, Blades?"

Brenna looked up at her, puzzled, then closed her journal with a rueful sigh. "Shann, I don't know why I said anything about a timeline. I didn't even realize you were asking me about the village."

"And you didn't know what was happening to Camryn before the boars attacked, only that she was in danger." Brenna grimaced, and Shann smiled at her. "Don't try to force it, adanin. Our Grandmothers are slow to share their secrets."

"I'm sorry, Shann, but your Grandmothers, being dead for umpteen generations—"

"Shann, Brenna?"

They both turned as Jess's low voice reached them. They couldn't see her, crouched as she was on the rock overhang above the camp, until she moved. Brenna followed her raised arm to the blankets where Camryn and Kyla lay. Camryn had lifted herself on an elbow and bent over her partner.

"Help an old lady." Shann took Brenna's arm.

Brenna's own knees creaked as they hurried toward the small fire that still burned near their bedrolls.

"She hasn't slept." Concern roughened Camryn's voice and emerged as irritation. "I've been trying to keep her covered, lady, but she's—"

"Been changing my own diapers for years now," Kyla cut in and tugged the blanket from Camryn's grip. "I'm fine, people. You can stop hovering over me like wasps every time I twitch."

"Manners, little sister." Shann knelt beside Kyla. "Can we blame your foul mood on the pain in your leg?"

"Oh, Shann, I'm two days from my moons," Kyla grumbled, "and that's as close to an apology as you'll get from me. Bloody hell!"

Shann's eyes darkened as Kyla's hand tightened in her own, and Camryn stroked Kyla's hair until the spasm passed. Brenna managed a sympathetic smile for Cam. She knew all too well the helplessness she had to be feeling.

"We scale the ridge tomorrow, lady." In the shifting firelight, Camryn looked as if she'd aged ten years. "Do you think Ky can make it?"

"I'll be riding in that sling thing," Kyla mumbled.

"Blades?" Shann looked at Brenna. "Your thoughts?"

Brenna hoped the tsunami that roared through her stomach at the thought of the climb ahead didn't sway her clinical judgment. Another look at Kyla's ashen features convinced her. "Ky, you're hurting a lot as it is, and you haven't slept well. We might want to talk about taking just one day here to rest."

A stubborn line formed between Kyla's brows in a way Brenna now recognized as reminiscent of her blood sister Dyan.

"I'm crazy to get home too, adonai." Camryn cradled Kyla's free hand in her own. "But if Shann and Brenna both think we—"

"Look, I should get to decide this!" Kyla clenched her wife's hand with sudden strength. "I haven't seen Tristaine in half a season. I miss my sisters. And my dog. And if we can get there by the full moon, we'll be in time for the Festival of Thesmophoria, and I'll get to sing the Challenge, rather than that tone-deaf, immature, lame little toad *Deidre*. So *shut it*, Camryn. We're going home!"

Brenna blinked. Shann looked up at Jess, who stood over them with crossed arms, one shoulder braced against an aged cedar. Jess shrugged.

"We're decided then," Shann said pleasantly. She tucked the blankets around Kyla again. "If you rest tonight, Kyla, we'll face the ridge tomorrow. And the night after, we'll warm our feet at Tristaine's hearth."

She leaned forward and kissed Kyla's forehead, then laid a hand on Camryn's bony wrist. "Try to sleep, adanin. That means you too, Brenna, and take Jesstin with you. I have first watch."

❖

Brenna lay still while Shann finished feeding the small fire that warmed their circle. She tied her cloak around her shoulders and settled again on a moss-shrouded stone to begin her watch.

Brenna turned onto her back and scanned the star-spangled sky overhead. She could now pick out the Seven Sisters easily. Tristaine believed that particular star field composed the small campfires of the clan's seven founders, the women who first carved a crude camp above the City seven generations ago. Their names ticked through her mind like music: Kimba, Jade, Beatrice, Julia, Constance, Wai Yau, Killian.

According to Shann, the star representing Julia's campfire guided her, Tristaine's first—and only—seer and prophet. *I'll follow any star that gets us up that ridge tomorrow,* Brenna promised silently, not realizing she was praying. *If that star can wipe out a few zillion of those gnats, that's gravy on the meat loaf.*

She looked across the camp and studied Shann's austere beauty in the moonlight, made more poignant by the lines of grief that bracketed her mouth. She was studying the colorful glyph etched on her wrist, which identified her as an Amazon queen. Along with the design, the symbol of royalty, Shann's glyph consisted of the figures of three women—Amazons, presumably—and her fingers moved slowly over them now.

Not for the first time, Brenna wondered at the emotional burden carried by the leader and guardian of an endangered tribe of warrior women. One who had recently lost her own adonai—her wife and closest adviser—to violent death.

Brenna clasped Jess's forearm, which rested lightly beneath her breasts. She turned on her side, and Jess stirred and moved closer, warming her back.

"Ye haven't relaxed since ye were five," Jess teased in a sleep-thickened voice that turned her brogue to malt.

"I'm sorry, Jesstin," Brenna whispered, stroking the muscled arm holding her. "I finally got you to sleep. Don't let me undo my own good work."

Jess let the soft slide of Brenna's palm on her skin coax her awake. She breathed in the light scent of her lover's hair and rubbed her tense shoulder.

"You're tight as wire, Bren." Jess worked her left hand gently between Brenna's thighs. "How do City girls unwind after a long day?"

"Uh, not that way." Brenna grinned, then tapped Jess's arm. "Hey, listen. Kyla's snoring. Good. At least she's sleeping deeply enough to…Jesstin?"

"Darlin'?" Jess slid one leg over Brenna's and laid her arm beneath her breasts to hold her in place. Her fingers had moved beneath the waistband of Brenna's pants and softly stroked the furred mound between her legs.

"Jesssss." Brenna squirmed. "Excuse the hell out of me, but this is *not* the way to relax me, all right?"

"You're wrong, lass." Jess's breath brushed warmly across the side of her neck. "This works every time. It's an old Amazon

remedy for easing tension and summoning pleasant dreams." Brenna could feel faint tremors coursing down her back.

She suppressed a gasp as the long fingers slid home, gliding among her suddenly liquid folds with insolent confidence. Her spine wanted to melt, but she was acutely aware that they were not alone. "Jess! We're at a *slumber party* here!"

"We're going home, my Brenna." Jess's voice and fingers stroked her skillfully, patiently, in a pattern proven to reduce her to shivering fragments. "In Tristaine, you and I will have a lodge of our own at last, and privacy. But we'll not do anything, then or now, that would shame us to have our sisters hear."

"Damn it, Jess, you know I can't—" Brenna bit her lip and tried to slow her breathing. "I can't just…whoa…do this quietly… this is the second time you've—"

"Shhhh, Bren, aye, you can be quiet, if I ask it," Jess whispered as her fingers moved faster now, with a tighter urgency. "Silent as a breeze…"

Brenna crested hard, and Jess was damnably right; the effort to keep silent only prolonged her pleasure. She timed Brenna sweetly and well, stroking her down slowly from shuddering climax to liquid peace.

Jess chuckled, gloating, and Brenna nudged her with a reproving elbow. She woofed into her soft hair. "Are you worried about tomorrow's ridge, lass?"

"Nope," Brenna sighed, melting back against Jess at last. "Piece of cake...sleep, Jess, now."

"Yes'm."

Across the camp, Shann smiled up at her seven Grandmothers, as tears traced the lines of her face.

❖

"Did you get hit?"

There was gruff concern in Camryn's tone, and Brenna made herself lower her hand from her eyes. "No, Camryn, I'm fine."

"Don't look down unless you have to," Cam advised her again.

"It's not looking down that gets me, at the moment."

Jess's ascent was kicking down enough small gravel to warrant proper eye protection for the women waiting on the ledge below. But apparently basic Amazon climbing gear did not include safety goggles. Or anything even faintly resembling a net.

They had one nylon rope they had smuggled out of the City, and Shann had brought another from Tristaine, made of some tough, sinewy fiber that seemed equally durable. But this high off the forest floor, Brenna found the twined vines that made up the rest of their suspension anchors woefully inadequate. She shaded her eyes to look up at Jess, then covered them again in spite of herself.

"She's climbing well, Blades." Shann patted her arm reassuringly. "Jesstin grew up in these mountains. She scaled heights like this when she was just a—whoops."

"What?" Brenna cried.

"Nothing," Shann said, steadying her quickly. "That outcropping there juts out too far to manage Kyla's sling, that's all. Jesstin's marking the second route for us."

Brenna looked for herself. She appreciated Shann's kindness, but refused to take comfort in anything she said. After all, it was Shann who had referred to this harrowing cliff as "a bit daunting." She peered skyward through her spiky bangs and sighted Jess again, working her way steadily toward the crest. Her movements were smooth and unhurried as she passed from one hold to the next.

Jess was climbing unanchored, laying rope and vine for the rest of them to use as she went. The lines would offer marginal security as they moved up the rock face, but if Jess slipped, nothing would stop her from plummeting down to the granite ledge where they waited, or beyond it to the valley below.

"She'll be fine, Bren." At Brenna's feet, Kyla managed a wan smile. Camryn tied off the last of the vines that would secure the makeshift sling designed to carry her over this treacherous stretch. "Jess is half mountain goat."

"More than that," Camryn muttered.

Brenna crouched cautiously on the narrow ledge and helped Camryn slide Kyla's bandaged leg into the folded blankets that

comprised the sling. It was a clever contraption, strong enough to bear her weight, but leaving her uninjured leg free so she could distance herself from the rock.

"I wouldn't mind hitching a ride in this thing myself." Brenna eyed the sling with some envy as she checked the dressings on Kyla's thigh.

"It's how we carry babies and little kids," Kyla grumbled.

"And injured, sulking Amazons," Shann added. "Look, adanin." She pointed to a dizzyingly high spot up the cliff. "Our goat has triumphed."

Brenna craned her neck and saw Jess rise to her feet at the top of the ledge and slap dirt off her legs with her hands. She rested her fists on her hips and stood still a moment, scanning the forest below.

The goddesses who guarded Tristaine had granted them fair weather for the climb, which made Brenna weak-kneed with gratitude. She couldn't imagine scaling all this loose rock in a downpour. She tried to focus on anything other than imminent death and concentrated instead on the goal. She would glory in the sunshine and the soul-satisfying view that Jess, after her months of captivity, was sure to be soaking up at the crest.

"Blades." Shann laid a hand on her shoulder, and Brenna rose carefully.

"I'll get started." Shann steadied herself against the rock and looked down at Brenna, her eyes warm. "You're strong and agile, little sister. You'll be fine."

"I will be," Brenna confirmed, "if no queens fall on my head." She smiled up at Shann with more bravery than she felt.

"I'll swan dive past you, I promise." Shann bent and kissed her cheek, then gripped the nylon rope. She pulled herself up to the first long shelf that marked the route Jess had set for the climb. "Camryn, Kyla, move with care, please," she called over her shoulder.

"Lady," they chorused in assent, and all watched Shann's progress closely.

The order they ascended made sense to Brenna, at least after Jess had explained it. The strongest climber, Jess, went first to

set anchoring points and chart the safest route to the crest. Shann climbed second to help guide Kyla's sling up the rock, while Brenna and Camryn shared Kyla's weight with Jess, who pulled the vines that raised the sling up the cliff's face.

"We're set." Camryn leaned in and kissed Kyla solemnly. She and Brenna would have to climb evenly up the rise to keep Kyla level. Jess had prioritized that necessity as she marked their path.

"Hokay," Brenna said to the stone wall before her. "I could be filling in requisition forms for Caster right now." That perspective helped her begin.

At first the climb was not the wet-palmed horror she feared it would be. Shann was right. She was up to this. Brenna had been an athlete even in the City, and long weeks without alcohol, with regular workouts and fresh air, had strengthened her. She moved slowly up the steep grade, finding holds where her hands and feet expected them, keeping her center of gravity in easy balance. She and Camryn watched each other carefully, glancing down to monitor Kyla's progress.

"Slowly, sisters." Jess's faint, low voice sounded above them like a benediction from one of the Seven. "This isn't a race."

"Watch the patch of loose shale here, Cam," Shann called down, panting a little as she lifted herself to the next hold. Camryn whistled acknowledgment.

Kyla was weathering the climb well. She used her free leg to kick off from the rock face, but otherwise moved as little as possible to keep the sling steady. Brenna heard a lilting melody below her as she pulled herself, gasping, over a snarl of roots.

"Oh, great, Ky's being funny." Camryn's breath was coming a bit harder too. "That's an old Amazon love chant she's singing. The words are 'don't let me go.'"

"Amazons have love chants?" Brenna squinted dust out of her eyes and peered upward for her next hold. She could see Jess, taking in line carefully as Shann eased herself around a tangle of brush. She and Camryn were better than halfway up the cliff's face, and she was beginning to believe she would live to see the sun set. "The

City has Reproduction Clinics. I think Tristaine is more romantic."

"We have reproduction clinics too," Kyla piped up, "but I bet they're a hell of a lot more fun than the City's."

"Save your breath down there!" Jess called.

A gritty scrambling of stone drowned out her voice, then Shann's sounded, sharp and clear. "Rock!"

Luckily for Brenna the instinctive thing was also the only thing she could do. Her forearm shot up over her head, and she braced herself against the cliff's face, making herself as small a target as possible.

Shann's foot had struck a loose shelf of shale, which broke off and hurtled toward them in dangerous chunks. For a moment, all Brenna heard was the impact of stone ricocheting off rock, and she hissed in fear for Kyla, swinging unprotected below them. An ugly thud and a muffled cry reached her scant moments later, and her eyes flew open to see Camryn reeling against her line, a hand pressed to her head and blood welling between her fingers.

"Shann!" Jess called.

"I'm secure, Jess!" Shann answered immediately, breathless but anchored again to the cliff wall.

"Brenna, Cam?"

Jess was answered when Camryn's line went slack and she sagged senseless in the halter securing her to the guide rope. Brenna lunged to the side and reached for her, but couldn't span the distance between them without losing her hold and snarling the rope that held the sling.

"Brenna, stay there!"

She heard Jess's shout through the tympani of her heart in her ears and craned her neck to search for Kyla.

"I'm okay, Bren!" Kyla had been able to shift her body so that most of her weight was taken from Camryn's line. Brenna felt the increased pull in her arms and legs.

"Cam, you talk to me!" Jess barked.

Camryn spun in a slow half circle, her hands trailing limply. A thin line of blood wended its way down her face.

"She's unconscious!" Brenna called to the group at large. She clenched both rock and line so tightly that the tendons in her wrists stood out like wires.

"It's all right, Bren. I've got her." Jess stood braced on the lip of the ridge, the nylon rope secured around a stone pillar. "You're tied off, all of you. Now keep your heads! Shann! Lady, can you reach me without my help?"

"I can, Jesstin."

"Then come." Jess gripped the rope and the woven vines that secured the sling.

"Brenna? Shann and I will help you lift Kyla and Cam. Camryn will be dead weight, but the harness will hold her," Jess called down in a clear, even voice. "Do you understand?"

"Maybe we could just c-camp here?" Brenna didn't even know if she was kidding. The ridge had changed from a benevolent challenge to a deadly trap in seconds, and she couldn't catch her breath.

"Jess." Brenna's voice shook. "Tell me what to do!"

"Brenna, lass, go easy."

Brenna looked up to see Shann lift herself safely over the edge of the cliff, then roll quickly to her feet. Jess was well braced and held most of Camryn's weight off the main line.

"We've done rescue lifts like this. Those knots are made to hold! You just need to keep climbing, adanin."

She tried. With every straining sinew and ounce of courage at her command, Brenna ordered herself to scale the rock. She forced her gaze away from Camryn's still form and found a sturdy ledge within reach. She heaved herself up to it, grunting with effort. The vines creaked alarmingly in her ears, and she looked down to check on Kyla.

"Good, Bren," Kyla's voice trembled, "don't worry about me. I'm fine down here."

Brenna's eyes locked on the yawning space that separated them from the forest floor. She felt as if the rock itself exhaled, breathing out against her in a cold, implacable wind to force her off its face. She gasped raggedly and clenched the rock in a spasm of fear.

"Brenna, Jesstin will help you lift," Shann called down, somehow her voice both calm and commanding as she laced the rope around the pillar. "Carefully, now," she cautioned.

Jess can't lift all three of us, part of Brenna's mind tried to reason through the chaos. *Shann's securing the slack in the line to brace us, Jess is taking half of Kyla's weight and most of Camryn's. I have to help her. I can do this. I'm strong enough. If I can just stay balanced. . .and let go of this bloody rock.*

"So, I must rescue your skinny butt *again*, Stumpy."

Brenna wouldn't have thought anything could penetrate her paralysis, but the strange voice that floated to her ears made her jerk in shock. She looked around wildly.

"Vicar, sweet Mothers!" Shann's tone was rich with relief. "Can you reach them?"

"On my way, lady," that new voice responded

Brenna watched a tall form rappel down rapidly toward them from the top of the ridge. She shaded her eyes as gravel clattered in her wake and tried to bring her breath under control.

"Yahoo! It's Vicar!" Kyla cried as she braced herself carefully against the rock with her hands. "She's one of us, Brenna. Vic is *so* cool!"

"Brace Camryn, Vicar," Jess called.

Brenna's jaw hung slack as a tall, muscular woman landed lightly on the rock beside her.

"Who're you?" the woman asked bluntly. Her *r*'s carried the same light brogue that flavored Jess's speech, and she was of similar build. However,Vicar's coloring was different. Intense brown eyes drilled into Brenna's, beneath a tousled mop of blonde hair.

"That's Brenna, Vic. She's adanin." Kyla's voice had begun to sound thin and reedy. "See about Cam. She looks really hurt."

"Aye, little sister." Vic gathered herself and pushed off the rock's surface, and Brenna felt a sick moment of vertigo until the line caught and curved Vic's flight. She swung past Kyla, then pulled herself up beside Camryn.

"Whoa, youngster, that's a wicked bump!" Vicar said. "All right, Jesstin, I've got her!"

"Hakan is here too, Kyla." Shann's voice reached Brenna. "The three of us can pull you up with Vicar's help. Brenna, are you ready?"

Brenna felt the sudden shift in her harness when Vicar took on most of Camryn's weight and balanced the sling carrying Kyla. Her body suddenly made sense to her again. She understood the amount of energy needed to move it, and the mountain no longer seemed to want to shrug her off its surface.

"We'll take it slow and steady," Jess called from above. Brenna looked up briefly to see her flanked by Shann and a third woman in dark clothing. All three of them held lines.

The climbers rose in gradual stages. Brenna moved methodically, trying to tamp down the demon of panic that still threatened to break free in her chest. The Amazon called Vicar climbed with ease beside her, even with Camryn slung over one broad shoulder.

Brenna got close enough to see Jess's face, and that both helped and hindered. The encouragement she saw in those cobalt eyes strengthened her, but her lover's pallor reminded Brenna of how narrowly they had skirted disaster.

Shann eased herself under the line and knelt on the ledge to help Vicar lift Camryn over the ledge. "Thank you, adanin!"

"She's coming to." Vicar clambered up and knelt by Shann. "I could hear her mutterin'. Are you all right, lady?"

"I am now, Vic." Shann spared her warrior a warm smile and clasped her hand. "Gaia's blessings on you and Hakan for your damn fine timing."

Jess pulled Brenna over the lip of the ridge. She felt Jess's strong arm slide around her waist, and she leaned against Jess for a moment before they finished lifting Kyla to safety.

Shann checked Camryn's eyes and probed the back of her skull. "Brenna, can you see to Kyla?"

"Sure," Brenna panted, as she fervently hoped blood would start to circulate in her fingers again soon, so she could feel the straps of Kyla's sling. The hammering of her pulse had finally

started to quiet now that three feet of solid ground separated her from the ledge.

"Is she awake?" Kyla, too, was pale again, and her hands trembled badly as she fumbled with her straps.

"Getting there," Shann murmured, "here she comes."

Camryn grimaced then blinked. "B-Banshee bile," she stammered. "What hit me?"

"Your queen," Shann sighed. "Camryn, I'm terribly sorry. It was all my fault."

"Camryn, you idiot!" Kyla's tone was sharp despite her ashen complexion. "You could have ducked! You scared the crap out of me! Are you all right?"

"Stop shrieking at me, Ky. I'm fine," Cam mumbled and felt along her scalp gingerly. She blinked at the woman who supported her, then grinned. "Hey, Vicar!"

"Hey, bean sprout." The big warrior cupped Camryn's neck gently. "Don't you budge now till Shann gives the word."

"That small cut's already closing, but we'll watch you for concussion, little sister." Shann tilted Camryn's head carefully. "I want you to tell me if you feel dizzy or nauseous, or if your head—"

"Ah, Shann, up it comes." Cam groaned and leaned over Vicar, retching.

Vicar braced Camryn carefully until Cam started chuckling into her lap. Then she snorted laughter too and eased her upright again. "I see a season in a City Prison hasn't taught this brash little dyke any manners, lady!"

"I'd say throwing up on you is a pretty reasonable reaction, mate." Jess stood smiling down at them, winding the nylon rope into a neat coil.

The lines in Vicar's forehead relaxed. She got to her feet, and Brenna's jaw dropped again. There was definite filial resemblance between Jess and Vicar, but the blond Amazon towered over Jess's very tall form by a good three inches.

"You look well, Stumpy." Vicar took Jess's shoulders and appraised her keenly. "We've been worried about you."

"Warriors are masters of understatement," Kyla observed, and Brenna smiled at her.

"Nice save, Vic." Jess's eyes brimmed with tears. "My thanks, adanin."

The two warriors embraced, briefly but hard. Brenna was still amazed at how easily Amazons touched each other and the amount of love evident even in such fleeting contact.

"One or both of them are leaking, I take it?"

Brenna squealed in surprise and jumped a foot sideways when the low voice sounded behind her. The prodigiously muscled black woman called Hakan smiled at her politely.

"Poor Blades!" Shann laughed from her place beside Camryn. "We can't seem to stop sneaking up behind her. Brenna, meet Hakan."

Not especially tall, Hakan looked as if she could snap an aspen with her teeth. Like Vicar, she was dressed in warm, close-fitting furs, an ensemble unheard of in the City. She wore her glyph, an intricate twirling of silver lines that looked almost like a web, high on top of one cheek.

"Jesstin tears up easily," Hakan explained, extending sculpted fingers toward Brenna.

"She does," Brenna agreed as she shook the callused hand. "Thank you, H-Hakan, for your help."

"Did one of our gyrfalcons reach you, lady?" Vicar crouched beside Shann. "We sent all four by different winds."

"Yes, Vicar. Talfryn brought us the council's alarm."

"And the elders sent the two of you to find us?" Jess asked.

"Aye, Jess." Vicar nodded at Hakan. "We're one of three patrols the elders charged to track you down. We figured the southern meadow was our best bet." She grinned at Kyla. "We heard this youngster's sweet singing and swashbuckled over in the nick."

"Can our injured travel, lady?" Hakan asked. "Can we make for the village?"

"With all *prudent* speed, yes," Shann said before Kyla or Camryn could speak. "Tell us, adanin, what's happening in Tristaine?"

"Our source in the City says the Feds are about to move," Vic said quietly. "We can expect attack before snowfall."

Brenna saw a bleak look pass between Shann and Jess.

"We're preparing for migration, then?" Shann asked.

"Yes, Shann." Hakan's eyes on her queen were compassionate. "We await your order to evacuate the village."

❖

Except for the bite of cold in the air, Brenna was experiencing an odd déjà vu. A quiet stream of Amazons, moving with purpose through mountain splendor under a darkening sky toward an uncertain fate. Traveling with Jess and Camryn and Kyla after their escape from the Clinic had held this same element of anticipation and foreboding.

Shann walked beside Camryn, keeping an eye on her throughout the long night's passage. Jess and Vicar followed them, carrying Kyla's pallet. Hakan led their party through the high hills toward Tristaine, and Brenna figured she was paired with her for her own protection.

She still flushed with shame when she thought of the ridge. What if help hadn't arrived just in time, in the warrior-ex-machinae forms of Hakan and Vicar? Would she still be there, frozen to the cliff's face in a rictus of fear, useless and worse in her first true test before the women of Tristaine? None of them had blamed her for her paralysis, or even mentioned it, but without much effort, she could imagine scorn emanating from the silent warrior beside her.

Brenna shook herself mentally. There was self-examination and there was self-pity, and she was wandering perilously close to the latter. She made herself focus on her surroundings, the cricket-laden twilight and the path through the pass ahead.

She cleared her throat. "Do you need quiet, Hakan, to concentrate on the trail?"

"Not here." Hakan spoke for the first time in miles. "Closer to the pass, we'll need to watch for patrols."

"Patrols?" Brenna swallowed. "Patrols from the City or Tristaine?"

"Both," Hakan replied.

They walked quietly for a while.

"Hakan," Brenna said, "may I ask why you—"

"My line was born on another continent," Hakan broke in, "generations before my family migrated to the City. You'll see women of many colors in Tristaine."

"Actually, I was going to ask about your glyph, not your race." Brenna smiled. "But thank you for telling me. I've seen pictures of black people," she added. "There's a black neighborhood in the City, but I admit I haven't—"

"Black citizens are limited to their own borough." Hakan's voice was toneless.

"Yes." Brenna looked at her rugged profile. "I realize I won't get a grip on everyone's history until I live in Tristaine a while. Shann's tried to tell me about everyone's origins, but it gets confusing. Why Vicar and Jess speak with a brogue and no one else does, for instance, and who in Tristaine is really descended from ancient Amazons, from which continent, and how women who come from the City become Amazons. . ."

Brenna realized she'd begun to wave her hands, and she smiled shyly at Hakan and folded her arms. "You're from the City yourself?"

"I am. My mother brought me to Tristaine fifteen years ago, but I was raised in the Black Borough."

"Did you feel welcome when you came to the village?"

"After a time. Beginning a new life can be difficult." Hakan's boots were soundless on the uneven, rocky ground. "When I first came to Tristaine, I tried to earn my place by riding one of the clan's renegade stallions. I ended up on my back in the dirt with this huge brute lunging over me."

Brenna tried to smile. "Please tell me this isn't one of Tristaine's initiation rites. What happened?"

"I froze." Hakan chuckled ruefully. "Couldn't have moved if Gaia herself commanded it! Then your Jesstin jumped in and distracted the beast, while Dyan dragged me out of the arena. It was the first time I owed my life to them. Far from the last."

Brenna pressed her folded arms around a pleasant warmth in her chest. “Yeah, Jess can make quite an impression.” She paused. “Thanks, Hakan.”

“For?”

“Your story. You saw me freeze on the ridge. You know I’ve been there.”

“And now you know I have.” Hakan shrugged her broad shoulders. “As Shann says, Brenna, if we had no personal demons to battle, we would not need sisters. Shann was raised in the City too, by the way. Amazons are Amazons, wherever they’re bred.”

“That’s true, isn’t it? I’d forgotten Shann was City-born.”

“And glad she was to shake its dust from her feet,” Shann said behind them. She turned and called over her shoulder. “Jesstin, Vicar? Bring our wounded songstress so she can see her village.”

Brenna had been so engrossed in her conversation with Hakan, she had missed the sense of anticipation rising in the Amazons as they approached the pass. Jess helped Kyla stand, then lifted her easily into her arms. The seven women moved through the lush undergrowth toward the low rise that dipped through the mountain range.

For a moment, Brenna feared another attack of vertigo, but the descending trail sloped in a gentle grade to the heavily wooded valley below. She came to a sudden stop, struck by the beauty of the moon rising over the shadowed pocket in the earth. Her gaze skated across the night sky, over constellations the Amazons held sacred, then down into the valley. In the midst of the trees, Brenna saw a gathering of fireflies—softly twinkling lights that might have been those stars fallen to earth.

The campfires of Tristaine.

Jess had stared out barred windows many sleepless City nights. The smog-shrouded lights of the City milked the stars of much of their brilliance, but Jess drew comfort knowing they sparkled brightly over her Amazon village. She hadn’t believed she would live to see these campfires again.

Jess sighed and heard Kyla echo her softly from her place in Jess’s arms.

Brenna felt the solid warmth of Jess's shoulder against her and leaned into it, sliding her arm around her waist. "Welcome home, Jesstin," she whispered.

Tears coursed down the angular planes of Jess's face. Brenna started to catch them, but she let them fall. *Tears shed in grief need comforting*, she thought, *but not these*. Brenna heard the words in her mind in Shann's voice and turned to see her smiling at them.

❖

"We'd best signal, Hakan."

They were nearing the outer periphery of Tristaine's patrol area. Jess was enforcing a deliberately sedate pace as their party neared the village, but it took all her will to sustain it. Home was tantalizingly close, and Jess hungered to feel Amazon ground beneath her feet again.

"They won't hear us for another half-league, Jesstin," Hakan said. "Theryn moved the outer watch closer to our gates."

"Did she now." Jess smiled sourly and felt Brenna press her hand. She met her inquiring look and shook her head slightly.

The music reached them long before Hakan finally paused to signal Tristaine's sentries with a complex series of whistled notes. They gathered in a close group and waited, and soft woodwind melodies trickled to them faintly through the trees.

"Hey. Hey!" Kyla sat up on her pallet, grinning hugely. "Cam, listen! It's the festival. We didn't miss it!"

"Ah, very cool!" Camryn brightened. She admitted to a killing headache, but otherwise seemed none the worse for the ridge. "Ky, you can still sing the Challenge at midnight!"

"Damn straight."

Shann winked at Jess and slid an arm around Brenna's shoulders. "I'm glad for you, Blades. You'll get to see us at our best, before our migration begins. It's the Festival of Thesmophoria. We celebrate it each fall to give thanks for our orchard's harvest."

"Partying Amazons." Brenna grinned at Jess and endless possibilities.

"Stand down, sisters." Shann was looking past them.

Jess saw Brenna whirl and brace for an army of ax-wielding warriors sneaking up behind them.

There were just two, and they carried bows.

"Sweet Gaia, it's good to see you safe, lady!" A dark-haired woman with a scarred face reached them first and went directly to Shann. She could have been twenty or fifty, and there was genuine affection in her brown eyes as she embraced her queen.

"I've missed you, Myrine." Shann released her and nodded at the other Amazon. "Hello, Patana."

"Lady," said the second sentry. She was young and heavily muscled and wore her hair clipped so short it was difficult to discern the color. She jutted a strong chin in Kyla's direction. "What's up with the young one?"

"Kyla's leg is injured, but she's healing well."

"Good." Patana's small eyes shifted and returned Brenna's gaze. "Who's this?"

Jess stepped up behind Brenna. "My adanin, Patana, and therefore yours. Her name is Brenna."

Brenna offered Patana a neutral smile, and Jess was aware of Patana's gaze on her breasts.

"Welcome, Brenna." Myrine clasped her hand, and then the dimple in her cheek deepened as she turned to Jess. "Demon's blood, Jesstin, who let you out? We send the City our ugliest Amazon, and they ship her back to us more dog-scarin' homely than ever."

"Still short, too," Vicar deadpanned from the rear of the group.

Jess felt her smile warm considerably as she drew Myrine into a backslapping embrace. "Thank you, Artemis," she intoned. "I'm truly home. Back to the daily abuse that is my birthright."

The hands of Jess's old friend were gentle on her back. Myrine kissed her shoulder before shrugging her off. She shouldered her bow again, a recurve hewn from cedar, beautiful in its simplicity.

"Your homecoming will brighten a sad Festival, sisters," Myrine said. "You can expect a grand welcome."

"My-rine, are you gonna come here and fawn over me, or what?" Kyla whined, levering herself upright on Camryn's arm. "Look. A pig bit me!"

Myrine's face lit again, and she jogged over to greet Kyla and Camryn.

"We'll see you in, Shann." Patana gestured toward a path into the trees.

"It's all right, Patana," Jess said. "We know the way. Wait here for the night watch to relieve you, and join us after—"

"Come on, Jesstin, the mountain's quiet." Patana slapped Jess's shoulder, and Shann winced. "The City's not going to ambush Tristaine in the hour before night watch gets here. Hey, I hear you've got some wicked wrestling holds! What say we try them out tonight when the matches begin?"

Jess turned back slowly and measured Patana's grinning face through a filter of memories that was less than kind. An intelligent woman and an able fighter, Patana had always struck her as a braggart and a bully. Dyan told her she'd been pressured to name Patana her second, an honor that had gone to Jess.

"A match sounds good," Jess replied. "Later. For now, Patana, stay here until you're relieved. This isn't the time to get lax on security."

It was quiet for a moment, except for the distant music from Tristaine.

"Guess you're the boss again, Jesstin." Still smiling, Patana rested her shoulder against a tree. "Theryn will be glad to have your support. Sure, 'Rine and I will hang here for a while. I'll look forward to those matches," she added.

"We'll save you some cider, Patana." Shann stepped smoothly between her two warriors and called back to Vicar and Hakan. "We ready back there?"

"Yes'm," Vicar called as they lifted Kyla's pallet.

Shann looked up sternly at Jess for a moment. Jess shrugged. Shann sighed and raised herself on her toes to kiss her cheek. "Let's go home."

The trees were thinning now. The full moon hung low over the valley, filling it with a ghostly blue glow. They began to see light through the trees, the warm flickering gold of torches and small bonfires, and the music grew louder.

Jess heard a murmuring beneath the melody, a subterranean rustle of many voices. An isolated bark of laughter rose, then the piping music drowned it out. It did seem a subdued Festival at best.

Shann touched Brenna's arm as she passed her. Vicar and Hakan followed, carrying Kyla, who reached out and grabbed Brenna's hand.

"C'mon, City girl." Kyla's wan cheeks were filling with color. "You're about to meet more hot women than you've ever seen in one place in your whole deprived life!"

Brenna laughed weakly and shook her fingers free before Kyla could pull her any farther.

Jess paused and had a private word with Camryn. Cam's eyes were stormy, but she nodded, then dipped Brenna a shy smile as she jogged after Kyla and her entourage.

Brenna studied Jess. "Everything okay?"

"Aye, it is. Just passing on some of Dyan's advice." She opened her arms, and Brenna stepped into them. "It's a cold night, adanin. You're shaking."

"Just stage fright." Brenna scrubbed her cold cheek against Jess's chest. "Are you sure we can't just camp here for the night?"

"We can." Jess regarded her seriously. "I'll stay here with you, Bren. If this would be easier in the morning—"

"Jesstin." Brenna lifted her head. "For a butch warrior, you can be flat-out kind sometimes, you know that?" She straightened in Jess's arms. "I'll be fine. Half of this is excitement, anyhow. I just hope the other half doesn't throw up on anyone."

"If it comes to that, aim for Vicar." Jess grinned, but then nestled Brenna's face in her rough palms. "I know you're scared, querida. I understand. And I wish I could promise you all will be well with Tristaine. Not just tonight, but forever. We can't know what these next days will bring. I'll promise you this, though."

"I'm listening."

Jess savored the fond light in Brenna's eyes. "You won't be alone, Bren. I'll be with you, whatever comes. And our adanin will watch over us both."

Their lips blended with a sweet, natural warmth, and they rested against each other for a moment to enjoy it.

Then Brenna stepped back. "All right, warrior. Take me to my in-laws."

Jess grinned, took Brenna's hand in her own, and led her home.

Chapter Three

The murmuring buzz ahead gradually increased, then abruptly surged as shouting broke out, which swelled into cries of welcome. Shann and the others had reached Tristaine's village square.

Brenna was dazzled by the bright torchlight that marked the entry to the Festival, and she blinked, hesitating at the top of a small hill. Hand in hand, she and Jess stared down at the milling throng of Amazons below.

The sheer mass of bodies threw Brenna at first. Hundreds of women and a fair number of children, wearing an array of colorful wraps, were swarming around their sisters, and the noise was growing riotous. The baying of—wolves? dogs?—mixed with human voices, and the music was rising to reflect the joyous new energy in the square.

"Hoo," Brenna said softly, and Jess squeezed her hand.

She saw Shann surrounded by dozens of Amazons all trying to greet her at once. Unhurried, she addressed each of them for a private moment before moving on, bestowing a touch or an embrace. She knelt briefly to inspect one child's scraped knee, and Brenna lost sight of her. Kyla and Camryn were in the center of another welcoming throng, and several women ran back and forth between the two.

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Jess may have had to sling Brenna over her shoulder and tote her down the hill, because how they got there remained a blur. Brenna remembered being above the crowd and then in it, and after

two months in a quiet mountain meadow, the racket alone all but flash-fried her nerves.

The square was lit with gold from bonfires and torches, and the scent of the pine boughs used in Festival decorations was everywhere. That's about all Brenna could take in before someone saw Jess and yelled her name, and then they were swamped.

Brenna never doubted Jess was well loved in Tristaine. She had found her irresistible in the City, under the worst conditions imaginable. But her lover had grown up with these women, and for almost a year, they didn't know if she was alive or dead. They couldn't stop touching Jess. A quiet part of Brenna realized she had never experienced anything like this, the kind of emotion that poured from these adanin. The intensity of that bond could power the City generators for a month.

No one paid any particular attention to Brenna at first, which was fine with her. She worried a little that Jess might be backslapped to death, but watching her, she couldn't stop grinning. Three of her old friends jumped her, a little too roughly for Brenna's taste, and Jess actually *bellowed* with delight. And that wonderful dark, rich, rolling laugh...Jess held her silence even under Caster's whip, but seeing these sisters again unlocked her throat.

Brenna's throat kept closing up. *I'm not sure I can live in this place if it makes you feel so bloody much all the time,* she thought. *Maybe Jess and I can live in a cave higher up. No, wait, lower down.*

"Walk with me!" Jess had to yell to be heard as she took Brenna's hand and began weaving through the rejoicing villagers.

Brenna was enjoying this, becoming light-headed with the buzz of euphoria in the women around her. Nothing much was demanded of her at the moment, and most of the Amazons greeted her with enough friendly interest to bolster her courage.

"Too many voices," Jess shouted cheerfully in Brenna's ear. They didn't make much headway at first, as it seemed every Tristainian they met was waiting to greet Jess with an ecstatic embrace. Gradually, they wended their way through the mob and

reached the corner of the village square. Brenna paused, panting a little as Jess stopped at a handmade table bearing mugs of hot cider.

"Sip it," Jess instructed as she wrapped Brenna's cold fingers around the earthware mug. "It's strong."

The stronger the better, Brenna thought, and inhaled the tart fragrance that rose from the steaming brew. Its heady aroma seemed to expand her senses, and her gaze darted everywhere, taking in the village.

The blue moonlight revealed shadows of log buildings beyond the bonfires, spaced widely over the grassy plain. Tristaine was bisected by a fast-moving river about thirty yards wide, and Brenna could hear its muted roaring beneath the clamor of the Festival.

"That's our meeting house." Jess pointed at the stately lodge across the river, on Tristaine's highest ground. "It can seat six hundred Amazons for clan council. Those cabins are our homes. They extend farther up the mountain for those who want privacy. Those two long lodges over there," she indicated, "belong to our guilds, the artists and the tradeswomen. They made the cup you're drinking from, and our woodworkers built that bridge spanning the river."

Brenna heard the pride in Jess's voice and thought it was well justified. She had imagined this place for months and, at least by moonlight, it was truly beautiful. "Is that an orchard over there?"

"Aye, our orchard and gardens. And we house our animals in the field beyond them."

"Lions and pigs?" Brenna grinned.

"Sheep and goats," Jess corrected. "And the fastest mustangs ever bred in these hills."

"What's the little crater with the bonfire?" She nudged Jess. "Did you blow up a lodge when you were a stoned toddler?"

Jess laughed, a breeze lifting her hair from her brow. She looked fully healthy for the first time since Brenna met her. "That's our storyfire circle where we trade legends at night. It's the closest we come to mass entertainment, lass. We have great theater, though, and our chorus can invoke angels."

"Hey, is that a stadium?"

"Tristaine's arena." Now Jess was beaming. "Our warriors train there and hold tournaments. That's Shann's infirmary next to it. And north of the arena are the stables…" Jess looked down at her. "Ach, I'm going real fast, Bren. You'll not be tested on this stuff in the morning, I promise."

"I want a full tour in the morning." The cider was helping Brenna relax. "I'd love to see the infirmary, Jesstin."

Jess began to agree, but then they were swarmed again by a party of well-wishers. She kept Brenna's hand and introduced her, but gradually Brenna worked her way unobtrusively out of the group. She lifted another mug to warm her belly while she watched the festivities.

Brenna was entranced by the range of dogs of every shape and size, yapping and dancing freely throughout the village. The ownership of pets was carefully regulated in the City, and only the aristocracy could afford the few purebred species allowed.

Her eye fastened on a speeding projectile of white fur and traced the small yelping mutt as it raced through the square, launched itself fearlessly into the air, and crashed into Kyla's open arms.

"Max!" Kyla shrieked and laughed as the dog swiped her face with its tongue. Brenna worried briefly about germs, then chided herself for her City mentality.

"Maximillian." Camryn lifted the ecstatic mutt off Kyla's lap and held it squirming and kicking at arm's length. "Greetings, Max. How's the fiercest wee beastie in Tristaine? We missed you."

Brenna grinned as the somber warrior held off the wild gyrations of the thrashing ball of fur, determined to slurp her face.

"The clan's dogs belong to everyone," Jess's low voice rumbled at her side. "But like our horses, they choose their favorite allies."

"I can see that." Brenna felt Jess's arm around her shoulders. "Kyla looks wonderful, Jesstin. So does Cam."

"They do," Jess agreed. "Whoops. Look, lass, a royal summons."

Brenna followed Jess's gaze to a large canopy erected near the Amazons' storyfire pit. Shann beckoned to them from beneath its colorful fabric, and they picked their way down to her.

"You were looking a little overwhelmed, Blades." Shann pressed Brenna's shoulders. "I'm craving a moment of calm. Will you join me? You too, Jesstin. You have elders to greet."

"With pleasure, lady." Jess's eyes were shining, and Brenna turned to see three older women seated on padded benches around a small fire. They regarded Jess with unbridled delight as she bent to kiss their cheeks, her strong fingers gentle around hands gnarled and mottled with age.

"Jesstin, you've sprung up like a weed." The large woman seated in the middle beamed at them, and her two friends laughed, a sound like river water splashing over mossy rock.

"They've been telling me that since I was six," Jess explained to Brenna.

"These three elders sit on Tristaine's high council, Bren." Shann was pouring fermented cider into mugs from a ceramic jug. "They've guided me wisely for long seasons, and Jocelyn taught me everything I know of healing."

"I'm pleased to—Jocelyn?" Brenna's eyebrows arched. "Um, pardon me, are you Jode's mother?"

"That's me." Jocelyn smiled, and her smooth face wreathed in wrinkles. "Shanendra tells us Jodoch served his mother's line well in the City."

"He's my hero. Really." Brenna's shoulders were relaxing again. Jocelyn's maternal presence was as warming as the small fire at their feet. "We could never have escaped from the Clinic without him."

"Welp, at least this one has manners." The woman with a shaved head on Jocelyn's right grinned at Jess, her sun-weathered skin shining like mahogany in the firelight. The colorful glyph she wore on one side of her neck identified her as one of Tristaine's warriors. She waggled heavy eyebrows. "And she's better looking than most you've panted after, urchin."

"Sarah." Jocelyn tapped the bald Amazon's knee. "It would be nice if you'd let us greet just one new arrival with some courtesy, before your odd candor sends her screaming off into the night. Brenna? The serene angel on my left is Dorothea…and this old wretch is Sarah, our village banshee."

All three elders tittered again.

"Sit down, little sister." The sweet-faced Dorothea clasped Brenna's hand in her own and patted the small bench beside her. "We want to pick your brains a bit before we march off to our winter palace in the morning."

"You mean before we're banished with the rest of the crones." Sarah snorted into her cider. "Like the useless relics we are."

"Self-pity, adanin. Not attractive." Jocelyn plucked a corner of the other woman's shawl, but there was affection in her voice. "The migration is voluntary, and you know it. With that asthma, you can't take another winter up here. You wheeze like a bellows at night. Lady, you've told Brenna about our annual tradition?"

Shann nodded. "She knows Tristaine sends her infirm down to the southern meadows each fall to escape the mountain blizzards. A cadre of warriors goes with them for protection and hunting through the winter."

Jocelyn resettled her ample weight on the bench and directed her question to Brenna. "And you know that this year our queen will order the entire village emptied?"

"Yes. I guess that's necessary because Caster's getting ready to attack." Brenna eyed the pitcher of cider as it made its rounds. The focused attention of the three elders was a little unnerving. Even Shann was watching her with an odd intensity. "Everyone will leave except for a squad of Jesstin's handpicked warriors to make sure no one follows the clan." She sought out Jess, who stood in respectful silence behind Shann's bench.

Dorothea nodded. "It's a sad time for us, young Brenna. It's difficult to sever the bonds holding us to this land."

"Sever. As in forever?" Brenna looked at Shann, troubled. "You mean this migration is permanent? Everyone's leaving and never coming back?"

"I'm afraid so, Blades." Shann smoothed her hand over her arm as if to comfort herself. "We've always known that we can't match the firepower of the City's Military, not under full assault. If Amazons are to survive, we must move on."

"The high council who sat thirty years ago proposed this plan, Brenna, long before our lady's reign." Jocelyn's tone was gentle. "We've always known we would have to leave eventually. Shann and Dyan had the vision to prepare us for it."

Brenna didn't understand why her throat ached with tears. She had walked into Tristaine for the first time only an hour ago.

"The heart of Tristaine will endure." Shann looked up at Jess, who avoided her gaze. "Amazons are long accustomed to exile, Bren. We carry our heritage with us. And our culture. The City's grenade launchers can destroy our lodges, but as long as some of our sisters live to rebuild them, they can't touch the soul of our clan."

"But." Sarah leaned forward. "This Caster *puta* won't have grenade launchers, praise Anath." Her voice was low and firm in the quiet. "If we have to lose our village, lady, we should at least take out that craven bitch and her mercenaries first."

"Mercenaries?" Jess looked inquiringly at Shann.

"Yes, adanin." Shann quirked one eyebrow at her second. "Our elders bring us interesting tidings from Theryn's source in the City. Apparently, Caster has fallen badly out of favor with her superiors since your escape from the Clinic. She lost her Government funding and much of her reputation."

"But now the old hag has suckered money out of some private outfit down there." Sarah waved a gnarled hand. "Enough to hire a company of militia, anyway."

"How many? Do we know?" Jess's voice held new tension.

"Theryn's contact could only learn the size of Caster's private grant." Shann looked at Jocelyn, who nodded. "She has enough funding to pay and arm a small platoon at least."

"One platoon? Shann." Jesstin knelt next to her queen. "We can handle one scientist and a squad of thirty City soldiers."

"Soldiers far better armed than our warriors, Jess."

"But it's our terrain." Jess lifted Shann's hand. "We have the

advantage there, lady, and we're better trained. We can drive Caster out."

"Perhaps." Shann brushed her fingers through Jess's hair. "But only perhaps. And if we did win that battle, Jesstin, what then? One small defeat would hardly stop the City."

"We could stop *Caster*." Jess pressed Shann's fingers. "Her vendetta against us is personal, lady. You've seen the venom that runs through her veins. The City's Military isn't going to bother to track down Amazons who've moved deeper into the mountains. That banshee might. We can end that threat."

"But at what price, adanin?" Shann's elegant features were pensive. "After tomorrow's migration, less than fifty warriors will remain to defend our village. We would risk shedding such dear blood—"

"Shanendra." Jocelyn's voice was compassionate. "You know as well as I that a queen of warrior women must find the courage to order her sisters to fight."

"Listen well to the counsel Jesstin offers, lady," Dorothea added. "Your own Dyan taught her, and she has your adonai's courage."

"Yes, Grandmother. She does." Shann kissed the back of Jess's hand. "All right, Jesstin. Instruct your cadre leaders to prepare for battle."

"Done, Shann."

"And this is where you come in, little sister." Jocelyn smiled at Brenna.

Brenna started. "Me?"

"Tell us about these dreams, Brenna." Dorothea patted her hand, her small eyes brightly studying her face.

"Oh, no." Brenna drew a breath. "Shann—"

"Brenna," Shann said quietly, "I'm sorry, adanin. I know this is hard for you. But things are moving quickly now. Even if you don't trust your own abilities, I'm asking you to trust me. These elders are leaving with the first party tomorrow. They need to hear this in your own words."

"Okay. I'll try." Brenna met Jess's gaze again and cleared her throat. "I dream about horses. Horses aren't allowed within City limits, and I don't have a travel permit, so I've never seen a horse, except on film. But I started dreaming about them when I met Jess, after she was transferred to the Clinic…"

Brenna recounted the series of nightmares that had plagued her for months. The night she first tended Jess, she had dreamed of riding a black stallion and falling with it when its heart was pierced by a spear. Then there was a milling herd of horses, trumpeting panic as two stallions fought to the death. And the most recent, a foal shrilling in terror, trying to escape a blazing fire hungrily consuming the forest.

Her throat was dry when she finished, and she gulped the cooling cider, feeling oddly depleted.

"Thank you, youngster." Dorothea patted Brenna's hand again. "You've done well. I'm sorry I won't get to know you better, Brenna."

"Maybe she could cough up something more specific tonight if we drugged her good?"

"Sarah." Jocelyn sighed and looked at Shann, her weathered face unreadable. "I agree, lady. Brenna follows Julia's star. But I don't know that she's helped us."

"We'll hold private council, Grandmother." Shann knelt beside Brenna and smiled into her dazed eyes. "Thank you, Blades. I'll see you and Jesstin later, after the Challenge." One blunt fingernail tapped the mug she held, and Shann whispered, "Slow down on these, little sister."

Brenna's face flushed with heat. She stood and found herself enveloped in Jocelyn's soft robes.

"Welcome to Tristaine, young Brenna." Jocelyn cupped her face in her hands. "Remember, we are an Amazon clan—not cabins in a mountain valley. Tristaine will rise again. We promise you that."

She released Brenna and winked at Jess. "Now go, widget, and show your adanin our Festival. We need to mutter wisely with our queen for a while."

Jess ushered Brenna out from under the canopy, and the happy chaos of the Festival descended again. Brenna filled her lungs with cold, pine-spiced air, overloaded with enough questions to keep Jess awake till dawn.

A laughing pack of children raced by, and she squeaked and dodged with relative deftness, she thought, given the amount of cider she'd imbibed. The Festival had transformed, with the return of Tristaine's queen, from a rather somber affair into the joyous celebration Kyla had described so lovingly. Everywhere Brenna looked, swarms of colorfully dressed Amazons gravitated to different gatherings.

Several circles of dancers had formed near the log meeting house, and the music was far more lilting and energized than the lonely woodwind notes they had heard outside the village.

Dozens of warriors decked in leather finery that weakened Brenna's knees were clapping and hooting around pairs of Amazons wrestling in an enclosed ring near the arena. The night was heady with music and noise and scented smoke.

"Brenna, I think it best you and Kyla leave with the first wave tomorrow."

"What? Say again?" Brenna straightened and blinked at Jess. "Are you drunk, too, widget?" She snorted laughter.

"I'm serious, Bren." There was a sadness in Jess's voice that aged her. "This battle will be bloody. Even when it's over, our last task here might prove just as dangerous."

"Wait a minute." Brenna tried not to slur her words. "What task, and what kind of dangerous?"

"We have to defeat Caster's soldiers, Bren, and then we must destroy the village."

"What?"

"Land is sacred to us." The tears glittering in Jess's eyes made them no less fierce. "Leaving this valley to the City would be the desecration of a shrine. We'll not allow whoever follows Caster to profit from Amazon lives, Brenna."

"Jesstin, slow down." Brenna frowned and waited for a wave of dizziness to pass. "First, with the Amazons gone, there's

nothing here the City could want, and second, to repeat, what kind of dangerous?"

"Bren, it's nothing you can help with. There's no need for you to stay."

"Jesstin!" A cheerful voice hailed them from the small, sloping rise that led to the wrestling matches. "The ring awaits us, sister!"

Jess glanced over her shoulder. "A moment, Patana."

"Hey." Brenna's tone was ominously low. "You're awfully quick to dump me, Jess."

"You don't have much time to decide, lass. I'll abide by your wishes, but—"

"Damn straight you'll abide my *wishes*!" She slurred that time, but she didn't care. She was mad. "Damn it, Jesstin, you don't just stroll up to a person and suggest she leave you, possibly forever, because—"

"Ah, Jessie, come on!" Patana's merry shout turned several heads. "You can bring your City girl!"

Brenna saw the muscles in Jess's jaw clench. She fought off her fogginess and touched her arm. "Look, this isn't the time for a wrestling match, even if we weren't having our first fight. You're coming off a week-long hike with no sleep, and excuse me, but that Patana woman looks mean as a snake."

"She is. Don't worry about Patana." Jess's brogue was clipped, and she took Brenna's shoulders. "Adanin, no one expects you to risk yourself for a clan you've just seen. My warriors will join the rest of the clan in the southern meadows when it's over. It'll just be a few weeks."

"You're serious, aren't you?" Brenna stepped back, and Jess's hands fell from her shoulders. "You'd let me go, just like that."

"Bren—"

"Jess, you surprise me!" Patana taunted. "Dyan's finest, her right hand, surrenders without a fight?"

"I'll talk to you later, Jesstin. You better go. One of *your warriors* is calling you."

The crowd swallowed Brenna as she slipped between dancing Amazons and headed toward the river. The twisting figures moved

around her in dizzying patterns. A few moments later, she heard a raucous cheer rise behind her as Patana's challenge was accepted.

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Brenna wandered aimlessly from one cheerful bonfire to the next.

She felt curious stares as she moved through Tristaine's village square, but she was long accustomed to shutting out appraising looks, and no one bothered her. The numbing warmth of the hard cider in her blood helped.

Cheers rose periodically from the direction of the stadium, and she heard one woman yell to two others that the wrestling matches had moved to the arena. Dozens were thronging toward it, but there were still seas of milling, laughing women to be lost in.

Brenna reached a smooth wooden bench at the base of a huge oak tree and lowered herself to it gratefully. She pressed the tight muscles at the base of her neck, whispering invectives against tall blue-eyed Amazon warriors. A cold nose poked her thigh, and she yelped. Max yelped back.

Never having held a dog, Brenna found the furry white creature with pointed ears and quizzical brown eyes as exotic as a miniature unicorn. After a few moments, the little dog's questing black nose and inquisitive sniffs convinced her that Max wasn't going to rip out her throat.

"You're Max?" Brenna smiled, a bit sentimentally. "Kyla's doggie."

She scratched the mutt under the chin, and his eyes closed blissfully. Max extended his neck and tipped his furry head to direct her fingers to the best itchy spots. The campfire glowed pink through his tufted ears. He growled softly in pleasure and Brenna laughed, delight breaking through her mild buzz.

"I'm glad to see you're making friends, Brenna." Myrine stood smiling at her from across the fire, and the little mutt yapped happily and trotted over to greet her.

An imposing woman with silver-streaked black hair followed Myrine. When Max saw her, he changed course and bounded

cheerfully toward another gathering. Brenna watched him go, a little wistfully.

"I trust we're making you welcome, adanin." The second woman smiled, and the firelight glinted whitely off her sharp teeth. She wore a cloak of charisma not unlike the aura surrounding Shann, Brenna thought, but hers was bolder, more vibrant. "Introductions, please, Myrine?"

"Brenna, this is Theryn, Tristaine's liaison with the City." Myrine turned to Theryn with something like deference. "She's the reason we have any modern technology at all up here. Theryn makes an effort to welcome all new arrivals, and she especially wanted to meet you."

Brenna nodded. She could handle this. She was fine. Part of her registered the faint rumble of cheering coming from the stadium, but then she forced Jess out of her thoughts. She recognized this attractive woman's name. "You're on Tristaine's high council, is that right?"

"I have that honor." Theryn's shining cloak swirled as she sat on the bench close beside Brenna. "Myrine? Please go and find out who claims victory in the ring—Patana or young Jesstin." She winked at Brenna. "I have a fine jade dagger riding on the outcome of the match."

"Of course, Theryn." Myrine handed Brenna the cup of cider she held, winked at her, and moved off into the crowd.

"No offense, my new friend, but I bet against your beloved." Theryn's padded shoulder brushed Brenna's as she leaned into her confidingly. "Patana is one of Tristaine's best in hand-to-hand. Jesstin is good, but accepting Patana's challenge might have been a wee bit rash."

"Maybe." Brenna warmed her fingers around the mug. "But so is betting against Jess, so maybe you're a little rash, too, Theryn."

Theryn laughed softly, a melodic sound. "Your loyalty becomes you, Brenna! Please know I have nothing but affection for your brave warrior. I have great respect for Dyan's right hand. But Patana has become my own prodigy, and I have trained her well. I'm rather skilled in the martial arts."

"I see."

Theryn pursed her full lips. "But in all candor and truth, I can't claim to know either Patana or Jesstin well. Dyan and Shann were more my contemporaries, really, than Jess and her peers."

"Well, I guess Shann's still your contemporary then." Brenna drank deeply and shuddered. "She told me some Amazons here, mostly newer women from the City, believe Tristaine can make a deal with its Government."

"Loyal and direct." Theryn appraised Brenna. "Which is fortunate, because the migration begins tomorrow, and there's precious little time to prepare for a truce. I'm convinced we can negotiate with the City, Brenna, but I'll need your help."

Brenna blinked. Theryn's handsome face was blurring around the edges. "My help?"

"I know, from what little Myrine has told me, that Jesstin suffered a great deal in the City." Theryn's shoulder brushed hers again, a slower and more intimate caress. "Shann has always given Jesstin's counsel more…credence than mine. And Jess was stubborn before her arrest when it came to holding Dyan's word as gospel. Now I imagine she'll prove quite inflexible."

"Quite." Brenna concentrated on focusing on Theryn's intense gaze and speaking clearly. "Theryn, you've never met Caster. She's the Clinic's top scientist in Military Research. I know her really well. I worked with her. You have no chance of negotiating with her, I promise you."

"Ah, but you've just met me." Theryn lifted one of Brenna's cold hands and warmed it in her own. "Don't underestimate my persuasiveness, young Brenna. I'm no stranger to halls of power, and I carry considerable influence in Tristaine's council. With luck, I might find a workable alternative to the apocalypse Dyan had in mind for our village."

"Apoca? Lips?"

"If you'll trust me, Brenna, together we might be able to save Amazon lives. Perhaps even that stubborn warrior of yours." Theryn lifted one gloved hand and caressed Brenna's face. "You're truly not interested in hearing more?"

Brenna frowned again, flipping through her mental filing cabinet in search of Theryn's chart. This was one of the few Amazons Jess had spoken of without warmth, but her initial argument sounded pretty damn compelling. Besides, Brenna was ticked at Jess and didn't give her opinion much weight at the moment.

"But what could Tristaine offer Caster, Theryn? When she can just take anything she wants?"

"This Caster must be highly educated, of course, as am I. She's a woman of science, and I believe we can approach her on a purely logical basis."

"But spe…specifically—"

"Ah, Brenna. There is such beauty in this valley." Theryn's gaze moved from Brenna's eyes to her lips and back. She lifted her hand and pressed it to her breast earnestly. "Help me fight for our village, sister! Let your first contribution to Tristaine, to your new home, be its salvation!"

Brenna heard another distant cheer from the stadium.

"I see we're both right about Jesstin's obstinance." Theryn chuckled. Then her full lips parted, and she moved closer to Brenna. "All I'm asking of you is to keep an open mind in the days to come, young one, and an open heart."

"Jess's obstinance?" Brenna blinked, and Theryn came into focus again. "You mean that cheering's for *her*? That bloody stupid wrestling match is *still* going on?"

"Evidently." Theryn brushed two fingers down the side of Brenna's face again. "We badly need your fresh perspective, my lovely young friend. You have such wisdom and such—Brenna?"

Theryn's voice faded behind Brenna as she moved swiftly through the crowd. Irritation burned off some of her alcoholic haze, and she targeted the log stadium with swift certainty.

She crossed the footbridge over the river, not glancing at the women who walked with her in laughing groups of mixed races. Brenna kept her eyes fixed on the arched pines that marked the entrance to Tristaine's arena.

It seemed most of the village had crowded up on the log risers that surrounded the fighting field, a rectangle of hard-packed dirt.

Dozens of Amazons formed a large circle that marked the boundaries of the wrestling ring. Most held torches, flooding the fighters in gold light.

Brenna slipped quietly through the crowd, her annoyance increasing as she heard a thud of bodies and another raucous cheer split the chill night air. She spied two familiar forms, Vicar and Hakan, and tapped her way in between them to see into the ring. It was unfortunate timing.

The last cheer had come from this side of the circle, among Jess's friends. Now Brenna heard a burst of shouting from the far end, just as her lover flew bodily through the air to crash hard into a watching throng of warriors at ringside.

Jess was helped to her feet with an edge of urgency as well as revelry. The crowded stadium fell almost silent between bouts of cheering. There was a tension in the air that Brenna felt clearly, even through the dazing effects of the cider.

Jess grinned at the warriors who righted her and shrugged off their hands, her eyes still locked on the opponent waiting across the ring. Patana had her hands braced on her knees, head lowered, pulling for breath. In spite of the chill in the night air, her short-cropped skull gleamed with sweat in the torchlight.

Jess's face was just as damp, and Brenna saw a trembling fatigue in the long muscles of her legs. Her throat and shoulders were patched with angry red marks, and other harbingers of bruising stood out on her bare forearms. More alarming, Jess's slow walk to the center of the ring revealed the minute limp that surfaced only when her old back injury was flaring.

Patana finally straightened, and if anything she looked worse than Jess. But Patana was not Brenna's concern. Perhaps the cider fogged her reason, but not her bedrock resolve.

After the Clinic, Brenna would never stand by passively while Jess was hurt again.

She elbowed Hakan aside and would have stepped into the ring if Vicar hadn't snatched her arm and pulled her back.

"Wait, little sister." Hakan's broad hand touched Brenna's shoulder. "She knows what she's doing."

"Not even close," Brenna retorted. "Look at her, Hakan! She's been climbing mountains for days. She hasn't slept. She's exhausted!"

"Jess realizes all that." Hakan's tone was maddeningly patient. "Dyan trained her warriors to understand their limits and ration their reserves. Let Jess choose her moment."

Brenna fumed. "Dyan trained Patana too, I assume?"

"Not from birth, as she did Jesstin."

Brenna looked up at Vicar, who released her arm, her rugged face expressionless.

Then Vicar tensed, her gaze pinned on the fight. "There she goes!"

Brenna focused on the firelit center of the ring again, in time to see Jess's spinning kick. And then Patana went flying. Arms and legs flailing wildly, she crashed into her small group of supporters, toppling them like leathered bowling pins.

The cheer was instantaneous and deafening, as it seemed the vast majority of the Amazons crowding the stadium were backing Jess. The roar crested as Patana climbed stiffly to her feet and raised one sullen hand to Jess to cede the match. Beside Brenna, the hoarse shouts of Vicar and Hakan blared in her ears like twin klaxons.

As Jess walked out of the ring toward them, her limp diminished, and her shoulders straightened. She acknowledged the roars of approval around her with a brief lift of her hand, then ambled on with the relaxed gait of a tall woman at ease in her body.

It was pure bravado, and Brenna knew it. Jess was ready to collapse. She whispered brand-new invectives under her breath about macha Amazon stoicism and realized her own knees were trembling. She locked them.

Brenna was *not* going to be distracted, either by her own worry or by Jess's feral beauty, backlit by torchlight in a stadium resonating with cheers. There was romantic fixation, and then there was—

"*Stupidity*, Jesstin!" Brenna clenched Jess's arm. "You're going to be crippled tomorrow, you know that!"

"True," Jess muttered, flinching beneath the backslapping congratulations of her sister warriors. "It had to be done, though, Bren."

"I've been waitin' too long to see someone humble that blusterin' shrike, Stumpy!" Vicar's brogue ran rampant as she tousled Jess's hair. "Tristaine can go the way of bleedin' Brigadoon now, mate. Vicar dies happy!"

"Let her breathe, adanin." Hakan strong-armed the women who were starting to crowd in, and they pulled Jess to the side of the arena and the first tier of risers.

She sank down on the rough seat with a sigh, and Brenna sat beside her and lifted her hand to take her pulse. Vicar took off her own cape and tossed it around Jess's gleaming shoulders.

"Anything crucial?" Brenna asked.

Jess shook her head. "I'm just beat."

"Yes, slightly." The pulse beneath Brenna's fingers was rapid and rather faint.

Hakan rested her booted foot on a log riser. "The defeated party looks a bit played out too, Jesstin."

Brenna picked out Patana on the other side of the stadium, surrounded by a small cluster of women. She recognized Myrine and Theryn among them. Theryn was tipping the warrior's head back, checking her nose solicitously. She gave Patana's shoulder a comforting pat, and then, as if sensing Brenna's gaze, Theryn scanned the crowd and saw them.

Brenna felt Jess go still beside her. Theryn smiled and nodded graciously. Jess returned a courteous but formal gesture. Theryn's gaze lingered on Brenna for a moment before she turned back to her followers.

"Myrine and Patana?" Jess was speaking shorthand. Her breathing was returning to normal, but her color still wasn't good.

"They became adonai last spring." Vicar's tone was subdued. "Li and I have seen little of 'Rine since."

Jess nodded. "And Grythe?"

"Aye, Grythe is still with us, more's the pity. Just not around tonight." Vic sighed.

Then the shadows cleared from Jess's eyes as Camryn flopped down beside them.

"That was very, very pretty, Jesstin!" Camryn was grinning, and she looked more like the teenager she was than Brenna had ever seen her. "Ky and I saw the end of it. She's setting up to sing the Challenge. You were sincerely hot, Jess. You own Patana's smelly butt now!"

"Speak of your sisters with respect, Camryn." Jess sounded weary. "Have you seen our lady?"

"She's getting ready for the Queen's Council. Oh, hi." Camryn seemed to notice Brenna sitting next to her for the first time and smiled at her. "Ky says to tell you she's singing this Challenge right to you, Brenna."

"Yeah?" Brenna raised her brows. "Okay. Thanks. I'm honored, as long as she doesn't challenge me to sing back."

The mood of the open stadium was changing now. Amazons were flocking in, filling the rows of log bleachers, and there was still a sense of jubilant excitement among them. But the long match and its dramatic finish had bled some of the frenzy from the Festival, leaving a warmer and calmer essence.

The fighting arena was clearing. Brenna saw a stream of women wearing beautiful pastel-streaked robes, which shimmered like silk, move single file toward the center of the ring. Camryn pointed at Kyla in a light, ornate chair carried by two larger women.

Kyla's auburn hair fell in soft, shining waves to her shoulders. Her beautiful features were calm and alert, and she smiled thanks at her bearers after they set her down carefully in the center of the arena.

Jess nudged Brenna. "Lass, you're ice."

Brenna looked up at her and was lost for a pleasurable moment in her cerulean eyes. But when Jess lifted an arm to drape Vicar's cape over Brenna's shoulders as well as her own, Brenna leaned away.

"I'm still ticked at you for trying to kick me out of here, Jesstin." Brenna paused, frowning. "I'm also really cold. But that doesn't mean everything's okay."

"Understood, querida. We'll fight later." Jess's dimple appeared.

Brenna slipped down to the tier below them and leaned back between Jess's knees. She closed the thick cape around them both and rested her head against Jess's waist with a gusting sigh. The sudden warmth was blissful.

Brenna's gaze traveled the ebony sky overhead, picking out Tristaine's guardian stars easily. Jess's arms were solid around her, and she felt their hearts settle into their accustomed matching rhythm.

The buzz of noise in the stadium quieted, and Brenna returned her attention to the ring. Kyla had risen from her chair, and that simple movement had silenced six hundred Amazons.

After a moment of hushed expectation, Kyla began to sing. A complex melody flowed from her throat in a tone both darker and richer than her usual light soprano.

"This Festival celebrates the Amazons' harvest when we lived on the plains." Jess's breath stirred Brenna's hair. "It bids good-bye to the warmth and ease of summer. The Challenge Kyla sings is the call of Artemis to Her daughters, bidding them to have courage for the long winter ahead."

The hewn-log arena should have dispersed Kyla's lonely voice to the open sky, but the beauty and depth of her gift defied acoustics. Brenna felt gooseflesh that had nothing to do with the cold rise on her arms, as Kyla's melody soared and floated.

Her singing had been silenced in the City Prison, and her music had not returned immediately when she was freed. Weeks of fresh mountain air and the company of her family had finally restored her voice, and Brenna often woke, pleasantly, to Kyla's trilling song in the meadow near their camp. But the voice that emerged from their little sister now was fuller, more mature and resonant.

"What's she saying now?" Brenna whispered.

"The Challenge is given in Tristaine's mother tongue," Jess replied. "Our Lady charges Her Amazons to honor each other and to protect all women from any power that would enslave them."

Brenna felt a stillness take the crowd as they listened, a collective hush that connected them all to the girl in the center of

the ring. There was sternness in Kyla's voice and a bleak note of adult desolation. Then such loving fierceness in the swelling climax of her chant that Brenna shivered in Jess's arms.

"Artemis ends Her Challenge by giving our clan Her blessing for the coming winter," Jess whispered.

Kyla's song ended in a fading note that echoed up the quiet bleachers. A sigh moved through the tiers of women, and then waves of applause swelled to embrace Kyla. She was radiant, her brown eyes large and still. Jess nudged Brenna and tipped her head toward Camryn, whose face glowed with love as she watched her adonai absorb the tribute. Brenna and Jess grinned at each other proudly.

Was life in Tristaine always so emotional, like being pre-menstrual, twenty-four seven? Brenna wondered. She had to smile even as tears threatened, and Kyla's tiny white-robed form blurred around the edges. She wasn't a sentimental person, at least she never had been. But she had dive-bombed through a dozen different feelings tonight, all of them stronger than anything she'd experienced in an entire year before she met Jess.

And Brenna was far from alone in this pleasant haze. The women around her were carrying on like the restored family they were. Just as the applause for Kyla's Challenge tapered, Shann walked into the circle of torchlight, and the thunderous ovation convinced Brenna that living among Amazons indeed awakened the heart.

It wasn't the mindless shrieking of City Youth Concerts, but a warm, welling wave of happiness given voice, and the applause and cheers bathed and soothed and invigorated Brenna in turns. Jess squeezed her, her eyes dancing as Shann reached Kyla.

The Amazon queen took Kyla's hand and kissed her cheek, then gestured for her to sit in the waiting chair. Kyla looked toward Camryn and rolled her eyes, then settled herself gingerly. Shann looked up at the tiers of women surrounding her, and Brenna remembered, again, that she was more than their wise elder sister and had always been more.

"The winter sun rises soon over Tristaine." Shann's silk voice reached them clearly, as if she stood within hand's reach. "And when

Selene's moon lights Her lodges again, the daughters of Artemis will have left for the southern meadows. Never to return to this valley."

Shann even seemed taller now, Brenna marveled, and she moved with a regal grace as unconscious as it was riveting. Unlike Caster, Shann bore the mantle of leadership lightly on her slender shoulders, but the aura of command she wielded was undeniable.

"We'll carry with us the ashes of our seven Mothers," Shann continued. "Their spirits will continue to guide us, as they have guided Amazons for generations. They have traveled with us to new continents—from seaside, to plain, to mountain. Tristaine has fallen and been born again a dozen times in our written history."

Shann bent gracefully and swept her hand across the packed dirt of the arena floor. She straightened, and black earth trickled from her fingers. Her voice was as intimate as warm wine.

"This land is not your mother, or your wife, or your adanin. This valley is not Tristaine. Tristaine sits beside you. She'll sleep in your lodge tonight. She'll walk at your side in the morning. She'll fight by your side at dusk. And with Her, you'll build our new home. Tristaine is our bond, sisters, the woman-spirit that connects us and makes us one clan."

Brenna sighed softly and heard that sound echoed around her. A light brand of exalted warmth was sweeping the arena. It was mirrored in Camryn's open face and in Vicar's softened features. This public address was the Queen's Council, Brenna remembered, but Shann could have been speaking to each of her women individually, in private trust.

"This land is precious to us because it nourishes and shelters our kindred. The daughters of Artemis have lived and died here for seven generations, so by our lights, this valley is holy ground. Our warriors are willing to die for this land."

Shann's lovely eyes hardened. "Our village will never fall into the hands of our enemies. You have your queen's word, adanin."

She brushed the black earth from her hands. "City-born or mountain-bred, the Amazons of Tristaine are sisters. We have thrived, while a hundred Cities crumbled to dust. The essence of Tristaine will flourish wherever Gaia leads us next. We follow Her path."

Someone shouted approval, and that call was echoed, at first by single voices, then dozens. Brenna felt Jess's arms tighten around her, and she was swept up in the rising applause, which crested in cheers and ringing war cries that shook the stadium.

Chapter Four

Jheika, rise.

Brenna's head thudded in an unlovely rhythm, and her mouth felt coated with ash.

Wake up, little sister.

She tugged the fur over her shoulder and grasped at the fading remnants of sleep.

"Adanin."

Long fingers brushed through her hair, and Brenna snorted awake. "Here. Sorry? What?"

"Sleep a bit longer, Bren." Jess's lips touched her forehead. "I won't be gone long."

"Whoa?" Brenna sat up, then bit her lip to keep from groaning.

"We'll make that visit to Shann's infirmary as soon as I get back, lass." Jess's smile was sympathetic. "She's got an herbal concoction that might help your head."

Oh, lordy. The thought. Brenna had to swallow twice to keep her gorge down. "Where you—?"

"Just a quick errand with Vicar."

"I'm awake. I'm up." Brenna tried to look alert. Light had only begun to filter into Jess's lodge. She had a vague memory of coming to this small cabin after Shann's address and falling onto a luxurious pile of quilts. "Is it a private errand?"

"No." Jess hesitated for a moment. "Actually, you're invited, if you want to join us."

"I do." Brenna gave the fur a sluggish kick and accepted Jess's hand to help her up. She swayed once erect and felt strong arms encircle her waist. Her lover seemed to know this was not a

romantic moment, and she supported Brenna quietly until she was steady.

"Good morning, lass." Jess's kiss on the top of her head was light and tender.

"Mrng." Brenna cleared her sandpapered throat. Jess had built up the fire in the stone hearth before waking her, and the light tang of cedar smoke filled the air. The small lodge was remarkably cozy. Tristaine's cabin-crafters must be wizards with natural sources of insulation.

She blinked through her spiked bangs at the neat interior of the cabin. Jess had earned her lodge with years of work with Tristaine's horses, and her sisters had kept it pristine during her long months of captivity.

It was simply furnished with pieces hewn from white oak. The chairs were padded with quilts. Art covered the walls— pictures drawn by adult hands and childish ones— scenes of battle, lovemaking, and Tristaine's river. Colorful masks of clay and plaster and wood adorned the support posts.

Brenna's own single unit in the City would have gone aesthetically barren if it hadn't been for Sammy's gifts. Politics were partially to blame. Once Homeland Security became more important than civil rights in the City, many forms of creative expression fell under Government regulation. There simply wasn't a lot of art around, especially not to hang on walls.

But Brenna had spent most of her City adulthood looking at her unit through the bottom of a wineglass, so she hadn't been too inclined toward interior decoration anyway. Now, the richness and diversity of the designs in Jess's lodge amazed her.

Brenna yawned against her shoulder. "Let me take a look at you before we go?"

"Nah. I'm creaky, but I'm all right."

Brenna looked up at her. "The migration's today."

"Aye." A sigh moved through Jess's long form. "The first wave leaves in a few hours."

"Ah, Jesstin," Brenna murmured.

"I know." Jess rested her lips in Brenna's hair again. Then she

dropped her hand and slapped her butt. “Meet Vic and me outside. Five minutes.”

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Sometimes the craving for it had been a raw ache in the back of her throat, especially when she was tense or scared. The temptation to seek out the sweet, sick haze liquor provided might always haunt Brenna, but she wouldn’t give in to it again.

Brenna was breathing a little hard when she reached Vicar. The other woman had her shoulder braced against a pine, her arms folded, and her long legs crossed at the ankle. She didn’t look up as Brenna reached her, but a muscle in her jaw flexed.

“Hey,” Brenna panted, for lack of anything better to say.

“You’ll feel easier with someone on your left.” Vicar pushed off the pine and walked between Brenna and the sheer ledge. She strolled with an insolent ease that mortified Brenna all the more.

“Sorry about this.” Brenna scowled at her feet. “Someday, I’d like to talk to you when I’m *not* expecting to fall off a cliff. I’m not always such a nit, Vicar, I promise.”

Vicar said nothing, which Brenna found disconcerting. She let it pass. It was a beautiful morning. When she could force herself to look into the canyon, she saw striations of colors in the rock walls, colors she didn’t even have names for.

“So, Brenna. You’ve met Theryn.”

Brenna glanced at Vicar. “Last night, yeah.”

“You two going to be friends, then?”

“I think Theryn’s fooling herself if she believes she can bargain with the City. I told her as much.” Brenna actually did feel safer having Vicar between her and the drop. And she preferred her questions to her silence.

“You worked with Caster? At this Clinic?”

“Right.”

“And you made decent money in the City?”

“For a Medical Technician, yeah.” Brenna was starting to pant again as the trail steepened. She waited.

"A Government Medical Technician. You helped with Jesstin's…experiment, then."

"Yes." She looked up at Vicar again. "Ask me whatever you need to. I understand. But get around to asking if I love her, okay?"

Vicar's eyes were measuring. "Do you?"

"With my whole heart."

They climbed silently for a while.

"Jesstin's my cousin," Vicar said. "Our mothers were blood sisters."

"No wonder you two are so—"

"I'd kill or die for her, Brenna. Our lady needs Jess, and so do Tristaine's warriors. You might prove to be our true adanin. I'll give ye every chance of that. And I'll protect you from any threat, because you're Jesstin's lady. But I'll be watchin' you too, lass."

They were nearing Jess, who waited for them at the top of the trail. Brenna simply nodded at Vicar, then surprised them both by resting her hand on her corded forearm for a moment.

"Were you able to counsel young Vicar on that regrettable bedwettin' problem, Bren?" Jess called.

Brenna didn't dare smile, but Vicar emitted an amused snort. "Does she look sound, Stumpy?"

"Aye, she does."

The "she" Jess and Vicar referred to, apparently, was the huge earthen dam, supported by both wooden beams and mortar, which walled off one end of a large mountain lake. The water lapped peacefully against it, confident of its solid support.

Brenna stopped short, astonished by the unexpected majesty of the lake. It stretched beyond sight, curving behind a protruding islet of conifers in the distance. The glassy surface reflected the brilliant blue of the sky overhead like an inverted bowl, and Brenna was struck speechless again.

Some part of her spirit mourned for the residents of the City, most of whom would grow old without ever crossing its electrified fences. She thought of the child Sammy carried, who would never see such a lake.

"Did Amazons build this?" Brenna was awestruck, and for a moment, Jess just looked at her, smiling a little. Then she nodded.

"Our grandmothers built it, generations ago. It was the work of the first thirty years we lived on this land."

"Where—?" Brenna kept looking from the dam to the ponderous lake it contained. "Where did they learn engineering?"

"Amazons helped design the pyramids," Vicar muttered. "We've never needed City men to build our beds. Or anything else."

The scorn in her tone was hard to ignore, and Jess threw her cousin a quizzical look. "Did the bairn keep you up last night? What's the matter with you?"

Vicar shrugged an apology at Brenna.

"Bren?" Jess held out her hand and she took it, gingerly stepping closer to the outcropping that became the walkway formed by the top of the structure. "We don't have to go far out. Look there."

She stopped in front of Jess and followed her long arm as she pointed over her shoulder. She spotted a particularly nasty bruise on Jess's wrist and frowned at her, then squinted at the dam.

"Not there. The hill next to the dam, near the base of that rock shelf."

"You mean that hole down there?" Brenna crouched, more to grip the walkway for balance than to see more clearly. "What is it? A cave?"

"A mine, lass," Jess corrected, steadying Brenna with one hand. "It leads to the richest vein of silver and lead ore our cavers have ever found."

"A silver mine." Brenna pivoted to stare up at Jess, the dizzying drop forgotten. "Tristaine has a silver mine? Does Caster know about this?"

Vicar smiled without mirth. "And you thought the City was after Tristaine because of our progressive politics."

"The allure Tristaine holds for an oppressed people does threaten the City, Vicar." Jess's tone was more formal as she helped

Brenna stand. “But the Government also wants Amazon silver to fill its coffers. Even if Artemis herself descended now and vanquished Caster’s troops, the Federal Military would keep targeting this village.”

Jess took Brenna’s hands. “Do you understand why we couldn’t tell you this, Bren, before you came to Tristaine?”

“Sure,” Brenna responded, still trying to file this revelation in her head. “You don’t owe me any explanations, Jess. I’m learning this stuff when I should. The mine is the reason we have to destroy the village, right?”

“Aye, we want to keep Tristaine’s wealth from enriching City tyrants.” Jess turned Brenna gently back toward the dam. “Take a look at the center section, about two-thirds of the way up.”

“I see it, but what am I looking at?”

“We’ll be building a small platform there tomorrow. Against the main support post.”

“A platform to hold what?”

“Enough dynamite to take out the dam.”

Brenna looked at Jess. “I’m sorry?”

“Several mountain streams drain into Ziwa, as we call this lake,” Jess explained. “In turn, she feeds Terme Cay, the river that runs through our village. When the dam breaks, they will empty into the valley and fill it. Tristaine’s mine and its lodges will vanish beneath their waters.”

Brenna released a long breath. She could see it happening in her mind.

“Jocelyn safeguarded the box, Jess,” Vicar said behind them. “She’ll turn it over to Shann before the first wave leaves.”

“The only piece of City high technology we’ve found a use for, Bren.” Jess’s smile was grim. “The explosives can be detonated by a remote transmitter. There are lots of safeguards. It would be hard to throw it without meaning to, but Shann can trigger the blast from Tristaine if necessary.”

“It would move so fast.” Brenna knelt and stared at the implacable lake, then at the dam, which seemed suddenly fragile to an extreme. “Just seconds to reach the—”

"The flood wouldn't hit Tristaine straight on," Vicar cut in. "The flow would follow the riverbed at first. It feeds east into the canyon, before curving down through the valley. Trees and other debris will slow it a bit, but not much. Dyan estimated it would reach us in about ten minutes."

"Or less," Jess added. "And anyone who can't get out of the valley in time would die. It wouldn't be like drowning in a City swimming pool, Brenna. Women would be crushed in the debris carried by the flood. They would suffocate among dead animals, logs, branches, mutilated bodies. Ugly deaths."

"Right. Got it, thanks." Brenna stood and brushed the dirt from her palms. She looked past Jess and smiled. "Vicar? Would you excuse us for a moment?"

Vicar arched one eyebrow, bringing home her familial resemblance to Jess again, in spite of her fair coloring. Then she nodded, offered a vague salute, and started back down the trail.

"Jesstin."

"Yes'm."

Brenna folded her arms. So did Jess, and somehow it looked more impressive when she did it.

"I'm not leaving with the migration today. I'm staying with you."

"I see."

"Want to hear why?"

"I can't wait."

"Are you listening, really?"

"I am, Bren."

She drew a deep breath. "Because I take this adonai stuff seriously. Because I'm in love for the first and last time in my life. And because the wife of an Amazon warrior watches her back. Is any part of that unclear at all?"

Jess swallowed.

Brenna smiled.

Tears filled Jess's eyes, and she dropped her arms in exasperation. "Well, *shit*."

"Jesstin. Amazon obscenities are so much better than Cit—"

"What am I supposed to say to *that*?" Jess scrubbed her forearm across her eyes, then set her hands on her hips and studied the lake. "If Shann orders it, will you go?"

"No. Shann isn't my queen yet. I haven't taken the Amazon pledge of allegiance, or whatever."

"The *what*?"

"I'm staying with you, Jesstin."

Jess touched Brenna's face. "It rips me up, lass, thinking of you getting hurt."

"Hah," Brenna said. "Welcome to my world, warrior! That's the same fear I feel for you every time you fight." She pressed Jess's hand to her cheek. "Jess, you know this is my decision."

"Aye, I do. You know I had to try."

"Aye, I do, lassie." Brenna took Jess's arm and wound it through her own. "Walk on my right, please."

They started back down the trail leading to the village where the women, children, and warriors leaving in the first wave had already begun to assemble.

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Tristaine's square thronged with women again, but this morning the activity was as orderly as it had been clamorous the night before. Perhaps some Amazons struggled with the same alcoholic aftermath that plagued Brenna, or, more likely, the sadness of the coming parting weighted their hearts. No singing or friendly shouts were heard in the efficient assembly.

A long caravan of women and children was forming in the center of the village square. Brenna saw Patana, moving as stiffly as Jess, barking orders at the warriors preparing to escort the first party of refugees to the southern meadows. There was a new aroma in the air, strong but not unpleasant, and Brenna looked around for its source.

"Adanin, good morning!"

Brenna whirled and nearly fell into Jess, as Hakan rode up to them on a towering horse. Brenna gasped a curse that was certainly

less creative than Amazon obscenities. “Don’t you women *ever* get sick of sneaking up on people?”

“My apologies, Brenna.” Hakan’s teeth flashed in her ebony face, and the silver glyph webbing her high cheekbone shimmered. “Jesstin, you found the dam sound?”

“It’s been ably tended, sister. Well done.” Jess shaded her eyes against the rising sun and rested her hand on the horse’s muscular neck. “And how is Val?”

“Valkyrie thrives, thanks very much.” With the touch of one knee, Hakan sent the mare erect, her iron-shod hooves pawing the air once before clattering down again. Brenna nervously nudged Jess back. This looming beast looked like the horses in her dreams.

“These things are *huge*. And beautiful.” Brenna gathered her courage and squinted up at Hakan. “May I?”

“Go ahead, Brenna. She’s gentle as a half-ton lamb.” Hakan moved her mount closer, and Brenna stroked the powerful jaw. Brenna grinned, surprised at its softness, like satin over steel.

During their climb to the dam, Jess had pointed out the pasture housing Tristaine’s herd. The mustangs had looked mild and tame in the distance, cropping grass and puffing steam in the chill morning air. They all looked alike to Brenna, sturdy little beasts with flaxen manes and tails.

The huge horse before her was almost twice their size with a beautiful reddish gold coat and a white mane. The star on Valkyrie’s forehead looked like a child had painted it, with white stripes dripping down from the lower points.

Jess nodded toward the caravan that gathered in the square. “They look about set.”

“Yes. And the second wave will assemble at noon.” Hakan patted her mount’s neck. “I’m riding escort for the first, as far as the pass. I’ll be back by dusk.”

“Need one more, for escort?” Jess eyed the horse hungrily, and Brenna knew she was itching to ride again.

“Sorry, my friend.” Hakan’s grin flashed. “I’m afraid you’ve got warriors to command. You’d best get over there and muzzle Patana before she bullies someone into a fistfight.”

"Me?" Jess hooted. "I spanked Patana last night. Let Shann muzzle her."

"Sorry, my friend. You were Dyan's second. Tristaine's warriors follow you, Jesstin." Hakan nodded to them both, then gave Valkyrie some unseen signal and trotted toward the caravan.

Brenna studied Jess's face. "You're in command of Tristaine's warriors?"

"Technically," Jess sighed.

"Hoo! Poor Caster."

Jess rolled her eyes, then leaned down and kissed her forehead and tousled her hair. Brenna combed her bangs with her fingers, muttering, and followed her into the crowded square.

Brenna blinked as little as possible, so as not to miss anything. Tristaine by day was a different world than the mystical realm of last night's festival, but it was no less intriguing. She was struck by the many shades of coloring among the Amazons, both in skin tone and clothing, and the proliferation of children, both male and female.

A beautiful, curvaceous young woman threw herself into Jess's arms, squealing, "It's *Jesstin*!"

"Hello, Monique." Jess grinned, patting the girl's back. "This is—"

"Oh, Jesstin, it's *you*!"

"Aye, it is," Jesstin agreed. She gently worked Monique's arms from around her neck and straightened, wincing. "Brenna, this is Kyla's friend, Moni—"

"Oh, *Jesstin*, we feared we'd never *see* you again!" Dark eyelashes fluttered up at Jess. "Thanks be to sweet Aphrodite you returned before we *left*!"

"Love that Ditey," Brenna said politely to Monique's back.

The young woman whirled. "Oh, you must be *Brenna*!"

Brenna found herself engulfed in her arms.

"Kyla just *adores* you, Brenna! Welcome to Tristaine!" Monique laid a smacking kiss on Brenna's cheek, then released her, beaming. "Ky needs me, so I gotta run, but I am just so, so *glad* we got to meet! Good-bye, Jesstin, you ravishing warrior! Gaia preserve you both!"

Brenna watched Monique scurry toward a cluster of young Amazons.

"Monique is in the guild of the artists," Jess explained.

Brenna spied Kyla and Camryn among Monique's friends, and she smiled with an unexpected blend of relief and pleasure. She and Jess had slept within arm's reach of these sisters for months, and she had missed them.

Cam stood over Kyla as she sat cradling a wriggling Max.

"Good-bye, my furry little burrito," Kyla crooned. "Be good. Behave yourself. Stay out from under the horses. Keep the mice out of the oat bins." Tearing up, Kyla kissed the small dog's black nose. "Here, Mon, take him, quick."

"C'mere, you adorable coconut." Monique scooped Max into her arms and giggled as he licked her nose. "Okay, we're *gone*! Bye, Kyla, and dear Camryn. Let me just say again you two are *so,* so great together. May Gaia preserve you both—"

"Thanks. Walk with Jade, Moni. Walk, walk." Camryn waved her on urgently, patting Kyla's shoulder.

Kyla watched her friend carry little Max to the wide column of women forming in the square, and her shoulders lifted with another deep sigh. She smiled weakly at Brenna and Jess. "Hey. Morning, you guys."

"I'm glad you got to see wee Max before the migration, adanin." Jess bent and kissed Kyla's cheek. "You know our sisters love him too. They'll keep him fed and happy."

"Yeah. I wouldn't want him here. It's too dangerous." Kyla swallowed, then looked past them. "We all have hard good-byes to say."

Brenna turned and saw Vicar standing close to a lovely woman with oriental features. She wore a beautiful red and silver glyph on her forehead, and she carried a small bundle wrapped warmly in a quilt. Vicar lifted a corner of the blanket and rested her large palm lightly on the baby's dark, fuzzy head. Her lips moved in prayer.

"That's Vicar's adonai, Wai Li," Jess murmured behind her. "She's taking their son to the meadows."

Brenna felt sadness drape her shoulders. The expression on

the women's faces was indescribable. She turned so she wouldn't see the mother and child walk away, or Vicar's eyes as she watched them go. She laid a cold hand on Jess's arm, suddenly needing to feel its solid warmth.

"Go on," she whispered to Jess.

Jess nodded and walked over to Vicar. Her broad shoulder brushed that of her cousin, and they stood together for a while in silence.

Brenna pressed her hand to her waist. It was rising all around them, the grief of parting, permeating the air as visibly as smog clouded the skies above the City. Everywhere she looked now she saw families sharing a last embrace, and her eyes filled with tears.

Kyla took Brenna's hand and cradled it in her own cold ones. "I don't see how they stand it. Saying good-bye to this place forever. And the wives of the warriors, they might never see their adonai again…"

Camryn looked pale beneath her tan. "They can sleep well, though, Ky, knowing we'll never surrender Tristaine to the City."

"Oh, fat bloody lot of comfort *that* would be for me today, Cam, if I was leaving you here!" Kyla swiped the back of her hand across her eyes. "I can't believe you asked Shann to make me go, Camryn. I'm still pissed at you for that."

"*Thank* you," Brenna said to Kyla, vindicated. "Jess tried to kick me out, too."

"Figures."

"But you've been injured, Ky," Cam protested. "You're not going to be able to fight with us. If Dyan were here, she'd make you go, with that pig bite on your—"

"Oh, Titan's tits she would, Camryn!" Kyla sighed gustily and looked at Brenna. "Warriors."

Brenna nodded.

"Pardon me, little sisters." Dorothea was making her way toward them through the crowd, clutching a beautiful shawl of pure blue silk around her shoulders. She lifted her gnarled hand when Kyla rose from her stool. "Sit down, sit down, little one. Rest your leg! I've just come to give you your elders' blessing before we go."

"We're honored, Grandmother." Kyla hugged Dorothea with a gentleness that was almost maternal. "Please kiss Jocelyn and Sarah good-bye for us, okay?"

"I'll kiss Jocelyn. Sarah, I will shake by her warty old paw." Dorothea motioned Camryn's head down so she could kiss her cheek. "Now. Young Brenna? Help me find our lady."

"Okay," Brenna said. Dorothea was already winding her shawled arm through hers and starting into the throng. The sturdy maple cane she carried served her well, and Brenna didn't have to slow her step to walk beside her.

"Watch over Kyla and Camryn, my little sister. Guard them well." Dorothea studied Brenna as they walked. "Remember, all Amazons are mothers to the young of our clan."

"I will. We all will." Brenna led Dorothea around a horse and cart being loaded for the journey. "What's going to happen to Tristaine's mothers, if we can't come back to this valley? Aren't most of the men who sire our children City dwellers?"

"Most," Dorothea confirmed, striding sturdily along. She waved her cane at two women who called greetings. "Most fathers of Amazon children are sons of Amazons themselves. But all our brothers don't reside in the City. There are smaller towns on the other side of this range that house several of our male kin. And other nomad tribes, of both men and women, wander these hills." Dorothea winked at her. "Amazons have never wanted for quality seed, Brenna. Our Nation may indeed perish one day, through war or other calamity, but never through lack of reproductive opportunity."

"That's good to know." Brenna smiled, then eyed Dorothea with concern. "Will you be comfortable on this migration? You've got a strong gait and great balance, but I worry about your arth—"

"Oh, weeping Cyrene." Dorothea's lilting laugh cut her off. "I'll be fine, little one, riding in a lavishly cushioned wagon. Now, you have five more minutes with an elder of Tristaine, Brenna, before her august wisdom vanishes forever into the mists of the southern meadows! Do you really want to spend them fretting over sources of semen and my creaky joints?"

Brenna grinned, liking the warmth of the other woman's arm

in her own. Liking *her*. "I wish you could stay, Dorothea. I bet you could tell me some wonderful clan stories."

"I could tell you some wonderful clan gossip." Dorothea chuckled. "But as our time is short, daughter, I'll try to hold myself to two brief sermons."

"I'm all ears."

"First, I speak for Tristaine's elders in blessing the bond you've made with Jesstin. She's very dear to us, Brenna, and we know she's chosen well."

"Thank you." That cavalcade of emotions was swamping Brenna again, and she hadn't even had her morning coffee yet. "I'm really—thank you."

"And last, listen to Shanendra, and trust your instincts, girl." The spotted hand patted her again. "You don't have the luxury of self-doubt, young Brenna, or foolish modesty. Banish them both and embrace your legacy if you're to serve Tristaine."

Brenna's head was starting to pound again. This was getting a little heavy. "Dorothea, I know Shann thinks I've got some kind of psychic ability, but honestly, what I have is bad dreams."

"If that's all they are, this sad world may finally have seen the last of the Amazons."

Brenna stopped short.

Dorothea's voice was still mild. She stood gazing at the crowd around them, as if memorizing faces. "The greatest Amazon queens have always come to power in times of our greatest need, Brenna. We're in one of those times now. If our queen can't rely on your guidance—the guidance of the first seer Tristaine has bred in generations—our clan might well die out at last."

"Sweet Gaia," Brenna murmured, the first time those words passed her lips. "Dorothea, hey, please, don't put that on me. I'm not a seer. I'm really not. I'm a medic, and a good one, and I want to serve Tristaine and Shann with everything I have, but—"

"Poor little sister." Dorothea cupped Brenna's cheek. "I've thrown you for quite a loop. Here, take this. You look cold." She swept the colorful shawl off her shoulders and reached up to wrap it around Brenna's.

"Oh, Dorothea, thank you, but you need—"

"You can only offer your clan what is yours to give, little sister. All I have to give you is this." She smiled. "If Artemis is kind, all we can give will be enough. Ah, here's our lady!"

Shann, a walking emblem of grace under pressure, was moving smoothly through the continuous volley of summons and questions that flew at her from all sides. Her step was unhurried, and she answered each call with a single, calm instruction before nodding to hear the next. Shann spotted them, gave a quick wave to ask for a moment's peace, and then took Dorothea's hands.

"Good morning, Grandmother! Brenna, how did you sleep?"

"We both slept better than Tristaine's queen did, Shanendra." The small lines etching Dorothea's mouth deepened with her frown. "You're going to ruin that nice, clear complexion if you don't get enough roughage, lady, and at least eight hours' rest every night."

"Then I shall pass a law mandating two-hour naps and adequate roughage for everyone." Shann did look like she hadn't slept since addressing the village last night, but she was still cloaked in an aura that Brenna could only call regal. "Brenna, I've called a meeting of our high council tonight after the migration. I'd like you to join us."

"Me?" She felt Dorothea's gaze on her. "Sure, Shann, of course."

"How can I serve you, adanin?" Shann stepped closer to Dorothea, and her expression softened. "I know we have to say good-bye soon."

"That's why I've come, lady. To ask for the Queen's Blessing."

"Oh, Dorothea," Shann exclaimed, stricken. "Are you sure?"

"Very." The old woman nodded. "I haven't told Jocelyn yet, but I will soon. The timing is rotten, but my loom is packed. I'm ready. I'll miss you, little one."

"And I you, Grandmother." Tears rose in Shann's eyes, and she laid the palm of her right hand gently at the base of Dorothea's throat. Brenna watched quietly as a subtle curtain of privacy lowered around the queen and her elder.

"The Queen's Blessing on your journey, Dorothea. You've served your clan well, and you leave Tristaine much richer for your wisdom. Your daughters will remember you around storyfires for generations to come. You'll find our Mothers waiting to welcome you with a warm fire in the hearth." Tears spilled down Shann's cheek, but her smile carried a profound tenderness. "Dorothea, daughter of Marthe, walk with Beatrice. She'll lead you home. We'll see you again there."

"Thank you, sweetheart. That was just lovely." Dorothea beamed up at Shann, then touched her lips to her cheek. "Walk with Killian, Shanendra. Brenna? Walk with Julia."

Brenna watched Dorothea move purposely through the crowd, and she turned to Shann, at a loss. "What just happened?"

Shann cradled Brenna's hand in her own. "Dorothea senses she's going to die soon, Brenna. The Queen's Blessing is given to Amazons who are certain they're facing death."

Brenna felt a sinking in her gut. "Dying? Shann, she seems so healthy—"

"Dorothea is almost a hundred years old, little sister."

Brenna's mouth fell open. Then she closed it. Explanations about Amazons and their bizarre metabolisms and elongated lifespans would have to wait. She realized she was still wearing the blue silk shawl that Dorothea had given her. She moved her shoulders beneath its softness, a hollow ache of loss in her chest.

"Shann, I'm so sorry. You're close to Dorothea."

"Yes, I am." Shann slipped her arm around Brenna and led her toward the caravan forming in the square. "Tristaine has given birth to some extraordinary women, Brenna, and it's been my blessing to know many of them."

"I've already met a few of those." Brenna put her arm around Shann's waist. "Extraordinary women."

"Shann, a moment?" An Amazon draped in soft doeskin loped toward them. "The first wave is set, lady, but now there's some row among the warriors."

"Mercy, imagine that," Shann muttered to Brenna. "We're coming, Siirah, thank you."

It seemed most of the population of Tristaine had gathered in the village square, either to join the caravan or see it off. Brenna followed Shann around the end of the column and saw several women in leather leggings poised on the brink of an all-out clash.

Brenna wasn't sure how she knew that, because no one was waving weapons. But the menacing quiet that gripped the circle of warriors seemed more ominous than shouted curses. She looked around quickly for Jess.

Two warriors faced each other in the middle of the loosely formed ring.

"You sure about this, little girl?" The brawny woman on the left smiled.

"I'm right here, *pendeja*." The second Amazon, a young Latina, balanced lightly on the soles of her feet and made small beckoning motions with two fingers. "Bring your City-spawned ass to Elodia."

"Perry, Elodia, stand down!" To Brenna's relief, Myrine hustled between the two women, her face flushed. "Dyan would throttle you both! Theryn and Shann will settle this tonight—"

"We can settle it here and now, 'Rine." Perry's smile carried a grimness that worried Brenna. "Let's keep it between us warriors. If this young half-breed really thinks she can claim that title."

Shann was already moving when Jess walked into the circle, and at the same moment, the two women charged each other.

Myrine grappled with them for a moment, and then Jess grabbed Perry's collar and yanked her free of the struggle. She tossed the larger woman to the ground, where she fell to all fours, her muddy eyes glittering.

The young Latina shook off Myrine's restraint and charged again. Jess tripped her neatly, then stepped between the two sprawled combatants.

"Jesstin, this *bruja* sneers at Dyan's memory!" Tears sparkled in Elodia's dark eyes as she sat up.

"Raise your hand in anger to another Amazon again, either of you, and you'll clean the stables alone for a week." Jess's voice silenced the circle. "Any warrior who makes another reference to

half-breeds, or mongrels, or City spawn will face me in the arena, one on one."

Brenna swallowed. Neither of the prone Amazons seemed inclined to challenge Jess. The brawny woman glared at the ground, and the girl held her tongue. Camryn shouldered her way between two of the onlookers and helped Elodia up.

Jess rested her hands on her hips and looked toward Shann. The cobalt coolness in her eyes couldn't be more distant from the warmth they carried when she and Brenna were alone. Jess lifted her chin, and Shann nodded slightly.

"No need to make anything heavy out of this, Jesstin." Patana pushed into the circle, and she and Myrine helped Perry to her feet. "It's just a disagreement among sisters. Shann and Theryn can discuss it at the high council meeting."

"Shann has better things to do than settle personal clashes, Patana," Jess said. "This ends today."

The activity in the square had quieted, and several women drifted closer to the confrontation. Brenna felt the tension like a mild current, lifting the fine hairs on her forearms.

Jess addressed the circle of warriors. "Shann's high council meets tonight, so I want a double watch around our perimeter. We muster tomorrow at dawn. Clear?"

"Clear, Jesstin," Camryn called, and she was echoed by several others.

Jess ticked off points on her fingers. "Now, we check the gear of the packhorses of the first wave and make certain our sisters are well armed for their journey. We see them safely to the pass. And we patrol the expanded borders. Questions?"

"Can't ye order us to warm the blankets of our women, Stumpy, between watches?" Vicar called. "To stoke our battle lust?"

"So ordered." Jess grinned at her cousin, and only then did a gust of relieved snickering move through the warriors. "Make a last check of weapons in the packs, adanin. Hakan, prepare to escort the first wave."

Hakan lifted a hand in acknowledgement, and Valkyrie backed up a few steps to put her in position at the head of the column. Noise

began to rise around them again, and Brenna willed her shoulders to relax.

Myrine went to Jess and laid her hand on her arm, but before she could speak, Patana called a gruff summons.

"'Rine, Theryn wants us. Now."

Jess spoke to Myrine, who shook her head. Her hand slid off Jess's arm, and she followed Patana to the caravan.

"Jesstin's grown, Brenna." Shann's voice held a note of pride. "Grown, and deepened. Sweet Mothers, how I wish Dyan could see her. Do what you can to protect her from bitterness, little sister."

Jess reached them before Brenna could form a reply, and Camryn and the Latina warrior were close behind her.

"Shann, Jesstin, may Elodia have a word?"

"Of course, Camryn." Shann took Elodia's hand. "Sister, tell me your thoughts."

"Shann, lady, you don't know what's gone on since you left." Tears were coursing freely down Elodia's thin face. "Our warriors drew lots to see who would stay here and who would escort those leaving with the migration. The drawing was fixed, lady. It had to be. Half the warriors staying are loyal to Theryn!"

"Tristaine's warriors' guild has a hundred and fifty Amazons, Shann." Camryn looked to Jess for confirmation. "Theryn's got twenty or thirty in her party, tops, right? What are the chances that *all* of them made the cut?"

"Slim." Shann's eyes found Jess.

"The draw was fixed to favor Theryn's cult." Elodia scowled at Brenna. "And most of them came up from the City in the last five years, Shann."

"Your queen was born in the City too, adanin," Shann reminded her. "Most of our mothers were. Now listen well." She paused, but they were already attentive. "We can't win this fight divided, sisters. Internal strife has wiped out more Amazon clans than ever rode the forests. It can't happen here, not again. We must be unified if our clan is to survive. Am I clear?"

"Clear, Shann," Jess answered.

"Elodia, thank you for bringing this to our notice." Shann

took her shoulders in her hands. “I’ll ask for your trust in letting me deal with it.”

“You have that, lady.” Elodia nodded to Camryn before trotting back to her sisters.

A piercing whistle sliced the chill morning air. Hakan wheeled her mount and addressed the milling column of women and children. “Amazons, ready the line!”

Two warriors jogged to the high fence encircling the village square. They unlashed the catch of the tall central gates and pushed them open. Behind them, the column was forming: Amazons gathering children, picking up litters, mounting horses, and climbing onto wagons.

Dozens of Tristaine’s hardy mountain mustangs milled in the square now, most laden with provisions. Others carried oak trunks containing Tristaine’s artifacts, its scrolls and history. These chests would be protected as carefully as human life.

“Lady?” Hakan called.

“This part always makes me feel like holy Moses on the mount,” Shann murmured to Brenna.

Jess escorted Shann to a raised platform at one side of the gates, and Shann ascended the stairs. She turned and looked out over the long caravan as Hakan’s whistle sounded again.

Brenna heard music, the chorus of Jade’s guild, singing as the column began to move. Their song was wordless, and it contained a solemn note of ritual. *Jess was right*, she thought. *This is a chorus capable of invoking angels*. They sang a dirge of farewell, sad enough to inspire tears, but it also rang with hope. It was an anthem of migration, a song of passage for an Amazon clan long accustomed to exile.

Shann looked less a queen right now than a mother, watching her children leave home. Her expression was the anthem made human. But her stance was relaxed, and so were the encouraging calls she made to the women who hailed her as they filed past. Laughter began to break out in small pockets in the procession.

Brenna glanced up into Jess’s face and wound both arms around her waist. Her gaze moved over the neat log structures on

the perimeter of the square, including the large lodge that served as the village's meeting house.

She saw Theryn there, a striking figure, leaning against the rail of the lodge's upper balcony. A beautiful woman stood beside her, her glittering gaze searching the crowd below. Her pale and exotic features were set off by the lavender glyph covering half of one cheek. The woman's eyes met Brenna's, and a cold shiver coursed down Brenna's back.

Her clinical training hadn't included a psychiatric rotation. In the City, most chronic mental patients were not housed in richly funded Government Clinics, so she had only limited clinical contact with psychosis. But something in Brenna recognized real madness when she saw it, and her arms tightened around Jess until the woman looked away.

Save for forty warriors and members of Shann's high council, Tristaine's lodges were deserted by dusk.

Chapter Five

Brenna walked through a ghost town. She had worked in the infirmary most of the day. Shann was needed everywhere, so Brenna was entrusted with tending a small series of mishaps and minor ailments. She avoided the casks of dried herbs on the shelves in favor of the conventional medicines she knew well.

There had been nothing major, just the kind of injuries that accompany distraction and stress in large groups. The most serious was a broken wrist suffered by a young boy who held on to a wagon's wheel a moment too long. Brenna had splinted his arm and given him aspirin for pain, which was in plentiful supply, as well as herbal analgesics. She was surprised to see the sophistication of Tristaine's small hospital, in both equipment and medications. According to Jess, these supplies were bartered through Theryn's City contacts.

Now Brenna made her way carefully across the footbridge arching over the river, the echo of her feet on the planks hollow and lonely. She remembered that the Amazons called this rippling stream Terme Cay. *A pleasant name for a river that might become a raging flood,* Brenna thought*, in under ten minutes.*

The village seemed all but deserted, though at least fifty Amazons still lived within its gates. She saw a lone sentry lighting the torches that marked the perimeter of the outer wall. Then other forms emerged, almost invisible in the dusk, standing watch at regular intervals on the catwalk on top of the fence. Night was falling earlier with each day's passing, and the full moon was already edging up behind the tree line.

"Hey, hi." Camryn met her at the foot of the bridge. With the automatic courtesy of Tristaine's warriors, she took Brenna's

hand to help her step down. “Shann sent me after you, Brenna. The council’s gathering in the firepit instead of the meeting lodge.”

“That sounds ominous.”

“The storyfire pit,” Camryn amended. “I think it’s a bad call, but Shann wants an informal setting. To defuse tensions, she says.”

Brenna nodded, folding her arms against the cold as they walked through the deserted square. “Why do you think it’s a bad call, Camryn?”

“The pit’s round. Seating is too equal.” Camryn scowled at the moon. “The table in the lodge is a big rectangle. Shann always sits at the head at high council, and that’s where Theryn and her crowd should see her tonight. Visibly in charge.”

This was easily the longest conversation Brenna had had with Camryn in weeks. She murmured something that might have been agreement, then decided to speak her mind.

“Maybe Shann’s really making a stronger statement by meeting in the pit. She’s showing she doesn’t need physical position to enforce her authority as queen, so equal seating doesn’t threaten her.”

“Hey, that’s what Shann said!” Camryn’s shy grin made her look as young as her years. “You healer types are ganging up on me with your weird logic. Oh, look. Great, dinner’s ready!”

As she and Camryn crested the edge of the storyfire pit, Brenna saw a dozen Amazons seated around the cooking fire in its center, passing platters of fragrant bread.

The crackling flames, ordinarily a bonfire, burned only high enough now to heat the big pot suspended over them. Shann stood next to it, spooning deep wooden bowls full of something that smelled so heavenly, Brenna’s toes curled where she stood.

“That’s Rae’s mutton stew.” Camryn’s tone was reverent. “Rae’s mutton stew and Jocelyn’s bread.”

“I am *so* glad Amazons aren’t vegetarians,” Brenna said to no one. Impulsively she took Camryn’s hand, and she let her keep it as they moved down the risers.

“Brenna,” Theryn called in greeting, “I’m delighted Shann asked you to join us.” She waited for them and smiled charmingly as

she took Brenna's other hand. "Hello, Camryn! Can I get you both some victuals?"

"Thanks, we can grab our own." Camryn stood still when Theryn patted her shoulder.

"Fine, sister, but first, I'd like to introduce Tristaine's newest Amazon to her high council." Theryn offered Brenna her arm before turning to the gathering. "Sisters, adanin! Forgive my interruption of our feast!"

The conversation around the cooking fire faded, and Brenna felt all eyes turn toward them. She sought out Jess and saw her next to Shann, who had paused in the midst of filling her bowl.

"I'm proud to introduce Brenna, rescued from Caster's clutches by our own stalwart warrior hero, Jesstin." Theryn's deep voice resonated around the circle. "Brenna is not only a superb healer and a fine fighter, but she also possesses a rare and specialized talent. She follows Julia, who guides Tristaine's seers."

Brenna had told Theryn nothing about herself, and she wasn't sure how these details had come out. She felt Jess's quizzical gaze. She obviously wondered about Theryn's prescience, too.

"This is DeLorea, leader of Tristaine's tradeswomen." Theryn indicated a small black woman, who nodded a greeting at Brenna. "And Teresias, who guides the guild of mothers. This lovely flower is Opal, who rules over our orchards and gardens. And this is Constance, head of the guild of weavers, and Kas, mistress of our artists."

"Welcome, Brenna." Constance lifted her cup, which steamed with a heavenly aroma of chocolate, mixed with Tristaine's excellent coffee.

"Brenna is well acquainted with Shann, our honored queen and high guardian," Theryn continued. "And with Camryn, our council's youth representative. And soon, I hope, her circle of close friends will include the humble Theryn, who uses her skills as a negotiator to serve Tristaine as liaison with the City."

"Let the kid eat, Theryn." Teresias's tone was teasing. "She needs a little more meat on her. She'll starve by the time you run out of words."

"Teresias is Sarah's cousin, Blades," Shann called, and Brenna was pleased to understand why the remark brought laughter. "Sit down, little sister. Taste this."

Amazons had asbestos tongues, Brenna decided, watching the other women savor the steaming stew. But when she chanced a mouthful, the tender meat, the fresh vegetables, and rich broth filled her eyes with the same prayerful awe as Camryn's. She'd never dreamed of such flavors.

"That's how vegetables taste, Brenna, when they're not poisoned by City pesticides." Opal's smile was friendly as she passed her a fragrant platter of sliced bread. She didn't look much older than Jess, while the other Amazons were closer to Shann's age.

"You'll find Tristaine's Amazons more robust than City-dwellers too, girl." Teresias spooned a creamy slab of butter onto Brenna's bread and topped it with fresh honey. "Mothers raised on this food give the best milk under Gaia's sun and nurse a strong immunity into their young. Or both mother and babe answer to me," she added, to more snickering.

"We've harvested enough fresh produce to last through our own migration to the south meadows," Opal finished, "so you'll get a chance to sample the best Amazon agriculture can offer, Brenna. A few weeks on this stuff, and we'll have you more fit than you've ever been."

"Well, I've noticed your warriors do heal fast." Brenna winked at Jess between bites. "A pretty handy talent." Some part of her floated above the firepit, amazed at the ease she felt among the governing body of an Amazon clan.

"Adanin." The woman named Kas, who headed the guild of artists, stood and brushed the breadcrumbs from her hands. "Before our lady opens this council, raise flagons, please."

There was a rustling of skins and leathers as the assembled women lifted cups of the flavorful tea.

"In praise to our Mothers, for the safe return of our clan's high guardian." Kas's eyes crinkled as she smiled at Shann. "Tristaine thrives tonight, lady, even scattered to the winds, knowing our

queen sleeps safe among her sisters. And Gaia's blessings, too, on Jesstin, and Camryn, and Kyla, and on our newest member, Brenna. *Tervetuloa kotin*, adanin."

Welcome home. Jess mouthed a translation to Brenna through the approving murmurs that followed Kas's toast.

"Our thanks, sweet Kasling." Shann cupped the back of the smaller woman's neck and rested her forehead against hers for a moment. "I'm blessed to have the wisdom of this council for guidance."

She addressed the others sitting around the storyfire. "Please know how grateful I am to all of you for tending Tristaine with such care while I was gone."

"Some with more care than others." DeLorea filled a pipe carved of hickory and scowled openly at Theryn.

Brenna clicked into listening mode, which wasn't unlike the heightened senses and concentration Jess utilized when following a trail. Across the storyfire, Theryn's handsome face remained pleasant, her voluptuous body relaxed against the earthen risers.

"My heartfelt thanks, too, for preserving the sweet harmony that has long enlivened our council debate," Shann added, and even DeLorea snorted laughter. Jess smiled down at her folded arms.

"We'll address the division among us presently." As Brenna watched, Shann pulled that effortless transformation again, changing in seconds from a smiling friend to an Amazon queen. "First, let me recite what I've learned from you and our elders last night and today. I'll want your counsel in anything I've missed."

"Gladly given, lady." Constance fanned away DeLorea's pipe smoke, frowning.

"The City kept Tristaine under constant scrutiny after Jesstin and our sisters escaped from the Clinic," Shann began. "Caster's soldiers patrolled the two paths leading to our village throughout the summer."

Shann walked slowly around the fire circle, making eye contact with each Amazon in turn. "As we've learned, Caster is relentless, and her motivation is highly personal now. Public disgrace has to be anathema for a City scientist of her stature. She wants to redeem

herself by capturing Tristaine, and our warriors stand ready to meet her attack."

Brenna folded her arms against a chill. Jess stepped quietly across the circle and sat beside her, then lifted one long arm around her shoulders.

"The City wants to make Tristaine's Amazons compliant Citizens," Shann continued. "The Government wants our silver, our taxes, and an end to the constant trickle of City women escaping from the beds of their men to seek new homes with us. Caster wants professional salvation and private vengeance. Have I summarized our quandary?"

"Well enough, Shann." Teresias studied the flames, her expression dark with worry.

"Jesstin, I want our warriors brought to full alert, beginning tonight."

Jess nodded. "I'll double the watch, lady."

"As you order, Shann, of course." Across the pit, Theryn looked grave in the red light of the fire. "But according to my sources, we have several days before Caster could possibly launch an assault, perhaps even weeks."

"Possibly," Shann repeated. "But tomorrow marks the end of Tristaine's grace period, according to Brenna."

"Oh," Brenna said in a small voice, as several faces turned toward her. She could feel a flush moving from her collar to her hairline.

Theryn responded as though Shann's sentence made sense, which both relieved and disturbed her. "But, Shann, doesn't it make sense that if young Brenna foretold any immediate danger to our clan, it's more likely to threaten our traveling adanin, rather than the fortified village they left behind?"

"Our sisters who migrate toward the southern meadows will be in our prayers." Shann returned Theryn's gaze evenly. "The majority of our warriors who ride with them are already on highest alert. Bringing our own vigilance to full strength costs us nothing. Jesstin, are we prepared?"

"We are, lady," Jess rose, and her low voice poured over

Brenna's tight nerves like liquid balm. "Vicar and Hakan have done well keeping our warriors fit. We're as battle-ready as we can be, given the advantage our enemy has in arms."

"Thank Anath you're back, Jess." DeLorea's eyes gleamed through the smoke of her pipe. "Short of Dyan herself, there's no warrior better able to guide Tristaine's defense. Will Vicar or Hakan stand as your second?"

"I've chosen Camryn."

Camryn looked from Jess to Shann, clearly astonished.

It was obviously an honor. Brenna beamed, almost as happy for Camryn as she'd been for Sammy when she graduated from high school. Then her smile faded, even as Camryn finally blushed with pleasure. Her younger sister's diploma hadn't brought her closer to the front lines of a battlefield.

"Good choice, adanin!" Teresias slapped Camryn's thigh. "Dyan handpicked this one for our council, Brenna, and we've never regretted it. She's the sharpest of the young arrows in the guild of warriors, I promise you that."

Shann's smile held nothing of maternal indulgence, only approval and respect. "Do you accept the office, Camryn?"

"Sure." Cam swallowed, and Brenna heard a dry click in her throat. "I do, lady, yeah."

"Jesstin." Theryn stood. "I have every faith in your capable protégé, honestly. But given Camryn's youth, I believe you'll want a proven lieutenant. No insult to—"

"Camryn will work closely with Hakan and Vicar, Theryn," Jess said. "They're both well versed in combat."

"And I intend no insult to Hakan, or to your blood-cousin, Jess, but I must mention that Patana has more actual fighting experience than either of—"

"Aye, but only because Patana picks fights with every warrior in the guild. I've made my appointments, Theryn, thank you." Jess nodded at Shann and sat down again beside Brenna.

"Shann." Theryn's handsome face was filling with color. "Will the time come this evening when I'm allowed to complete a thought without interruption?"

Shann nodded and gestured gracefully. “The council is yours, sister.” She sat down on one of the earthen risers.

This abrupt acquiescence startled Brenna. She felt a new intensity in the energy of the women around the fire. Theryn seemed mildly surprised as well, but she rallied quickly.

“Thank you, lady.” Theryn’s eyes met Brenna’s and held them for a moment. “Sisters, my agenda is no secret to anyone here. I call for a truce with the City.”

DeLorea made a rude noise. “You proposed this same truce the last three times this council met, Theryn. I can only thank Gaia that Shann and our sisters are back. Lady, this *Amazon* hoped to force her pact down our gullets before our messenger falcon even found you!”

“Lorea,” Opal reproved.

“It’s all right, little sister. DeLorea speaks truly.” Theryn looked both grave and serene, if such a combination were possible. “We all know I had no luck in persuading Dyan to hear me in this matter last year. We all know our queen is opposed to negotiation with the City, as are Jesstin and Camryn. Yes, I hoped to sway the rest of you to consider it before they returned, for one simple reason.”

Theryn strode into the firelight and turned quickly, so her cloak swirled around her. “I’m trying to force Tristaine’s survival down your gullets, sisters! I am desperate to avoid bloodshed! And frankly, it appalls me that none of you—”

“You’re desperate for a power base, Theryn,” DeLorea spat.

“Peace, adanin.” Shann touched DeLorea’s arm, and the uneasy murmuring that started to rise in the group faded.

Brenna tried to catch every nuance of expression in those seated around the fire. Various shades of emotion were reflected in the faces there, ranging from worry to foreboding to banked anger.

“Higher education and personal prosperity do not make me a villain, DeLorea.” Theryn looked at Brenna again, as if for support. “Amazons, hear me! This *can* be done. I’ve worked with City contacts for years. I can deal with one Government scientist!”

“But to what end, Theryn?” Shann asked. “The concessions required for any pact with the City are unthinkable.”

"With all respect, lady, the destruction of our home should be as well." Theryn's eyes flashed in the firelight. "Washing Tristaine from the face of the mountain can hardly be a suitable alternative to compromise!"

Jess shook her head. "Death is preferable to enslavement, Theryn."

"Enslavement? Jesstin…" Theryn filled her lungs slowly. "The City wants to incorporate our village. Period. Yes, our goods would be taxed. We would be subject to *some* Government laws. But our clan would survive, adanin. We could even thrive!"

Theryn knelt beside Constance. "Sister, the garments turned out by your weavers are sturdy and warm, but think of the glorious tapestries your women could produce if we had access to City textiles! Kas, imagine the creative output of Tristaine's artisans, stocked with real oil paint supplies and decent—"

"The City couldn't possibly offer lovelier colors than our painters mix themselves, Theryn, from plants nurtured in Opal's gardens." Kas threw Brenna a friendly look. "Tell me, little sister, is Theryn correct? Do the finer arts flourish in the City?"

"Well, there's the Federal Youth Symphony…" Brenna bit her lip, thinking.

"You miss the point, Kas."

"No, Theryn, our gentle artist is right on target." Jess stood. Brenna's nerves stretched another notch. "The City has nothing Tristaine truly needs. And under its law, if they chose to enforce it, we would have no queen. We could be forcibly segregated by race and class, as the City's Boroughs are."

"That's ridiculous, Jesstin. Of course they won't expect us to emulate—"

"We'd be denied free worship." Constance folded her arms. "That alone leaves nothing to discuss."

"I'm afraid I agree, Theryn." Opal's tone was compassionate. "I still can't see any mix of Amazons and a Federal Government ever working."

"Shann…" Theryn turned to her. "I appeal to you, lady. Reconsider, for all our sakes! I am confident that if I'm allowed to

negotiate with Caster, I'll be able to secure an agreement we can all live with."

"You have outstanding skills in diplomacy and commerce, sister." Shann rose, forming a triangle with Jess and Theryn that spanned the storyfire. "But I fear your personal ambitions might be shading your judgment."

Theryn's face flushed, and for a moment she couldn't speak. "Lady…Tristaine needs a queen with vision now, capable of seeing beyond the immediate crisis. Please, be that queen!"

"I've looked into Caster's eyes, Theryn. I must guide Tristaine by what I saw there," Shann answered.

Brenna saw a ripple of unease move through the others as Theryn pressed on.

"Shann, all my sisters, you must listen to simple reason! Amazons have always demonized anyone outside our all-holy clan, isn't that true? Just as today, Tristaine's old guard demonizes the City." Theryn lifted her hands again. "We're not waging war with ancient barbarians anymore, adanin! Citizens are not monsters or enemies! We're dealing with an educated, advanced people who can offer Tristaine endless bounty. Technologies undreamed of in our—"

"The City imprisons its rebels, Theryn." Jess's voice was dangerously mild. "It outlaws free expression. It restricts travel, marriage, reproduction. Citizens are arrested for owning the wrong books, for violating midnight curfew—"

"Jesstin," Theryn snapped. "Tristaine would hardly be subject to cur—"

"Their Government executes hundreds of political prisoners every year." Jess stepped closer to Theryn. Brenna saw the set of her wide shoulders, and her internal alarm rose higher. "They fill slave camps with dissidents. They assassinated our queen's adonai and my best friend."

"Jesstin," Brenna whispered. She'd seen that odd light in Jess's eyes only once, in the Clinic, before she attacked Caster. She felt Camryn's hand brush her leg.

"I still stink of the City's Prison," Jess continued, "and its Clinic. I would shed my blood, and that of every warrior left to us, to keep Tristaine free of that stench. And at our lady's bidding, this council will raze our village to the ground, Theryn, before letting Caster set one foot on Amazon land."

"Enough, sisters. I've reached my decision." Shann waited until Theryn and Jess returned to the risers and sat down.

"There will be no truce with the City. We will defend Tristaine against Caster's attack, whether it comes in one week or three. Then, before we rejoin our clan, we'll burn the village, to keep its spiritual legacy intact." Shann spoke with quiet strength.

She smiled at the silent circle of Amazons. "Our council is closed, adanin. Sleep well."

❖

Brenna stared at the pitched ceiling of the dark lodge and played with Jess's fingers. Her head rested on her muscular arm. She found batting Jess's fingers around helped her think. She knew Jess was awake, because her breathing hadn't deepened yet to the slow rhythm that usually lulled Brenna as well.

But sleep was far from her mind at the moment. She was filled with an energy that hummed with anxiety and something else as well—remnants of the muted exaltation first inspired by Shann's address to the village. It would be a while before Brenna recognized this feeling as a sense of belonging.

"Hey," she whispered.

"Yes'm."

"Why did both you and Shann say we'd burn Tristaine down before letting Caster have it? I thought we're all doomed to die horribly in a big flood."

Jess yawned. "Not everyone needs to know about that dynamite, lass."

"Ah." Brenna played with Jess's fingers some more. "Camryn's really young, Jesstin."

"She's seventeen." Jess stretched her stiff back, following Brenna's thinking without effort. "Older than I was when Dyan named me her second."

"Yeah? Dyan saw your potential way back when you were a stoned toddler?"

The moonlight filling the small cabin glinted off Jess's teeth when she smiled. "If I named Hakan or Vicar my second, it would be like choosing myself, Bren. Cam has the grit to make a great warrior, but she's of a different weave than us. Not as strong as Vic, but faster. She's smarter than any warrior I've known, save Dyan. And her courage…the kid's got the heart of a damn lion."

"She does. You're right." Brenna smiled too, remembering the first time she ever saw Camryn and Kyla in the City. They stood behind a barred window in the Prison, defiantly hailing Jess with a shimmying dance, risking blows from the guards if they were caught. "You look after her, Jesstin, if it comes to a fight."

"*When* it comes. I will, lass." Jess's fingers drifted lazily up and down Brenna's arm. "And how much of a fight would you give me, querida, if I ordered you to sit out Caster's attack?"

"Sit out?"

"Stay in the main lodge with Shann and Kyla and the council instead of fighting."

"You won't order me to do that." Brenna yawned too. She was finally getting sleepy.

"I could," Jess countered. "I've both the clout to do it and the reason."

"You might have clout, but no good reason," Brenna snorted, "not unless everything you and everyone else around here ever said about Tristaine is a flat-out lie."

Jess was silent long enough that Brenna lifted her head and looked down at her. "You still insist on seeing me as fragile, don't you? Is it because I froze on the ridge?"

"No. That was a simple phobia, Bren, and you're working on that.You're able enough in drills, adanin, but you've not trained long in the Amazon way of fighting. And Shann's going to need your help with the wounded—"

"Whoa." Brenna kicked off the heavy furs covering them and in one lithe movement, swung her leg over Jess's waist and straddled her. She let her weight drop abruptly. Jess whoofed.

"I plan to help Shann with our injured after the battle. But when Caster attacks, Jess, I'm going to fight as well as I can. I'll follow your orders to the letter, and I'll be fine, because I'm a lot stronger than you think."

Brenna clasped Jess's wrists and lunged forward, pinning them to the quilt on either side of her head. "Which I will prove to you now."

"Fierce Artemis," Jess entreated the ceiling, "look down on yer poor sufferin' servant, in this her time of true tree-vai—"

"Funny, warrior." Brenna dropped full-length on the tall body beneath her to make Jess whoof again. She sought Jess's mouth and drew her into an intense, sucking kiss.

The kiss went on for quite some time.

Jess's bare left foot rose off the bed, hovered for a moment, then dropped back with a thud.

"Sheesh!" Jess gasped, when Brenna finally let her breathe. Brenna knew Jess could have flipped her easily to the floor, and she found it interesting that she chose not to. From her grin, it seemed Jess thought it was interesting too.

"All right, I'll explain," Brenna said. "You're going to let me fight with the rest of your warriors, Jesstin, because Caster is my enemy as much as anyone's. And also because Amazons are allowed to make their own choices."

Jess scowled.

"So. You'll let me watch your back in battle." Brenna still had Jess's wrists pinned on either side of her head. "Just like you're going to let me love you tonight. Because I need it and so do you. Keep your hands there. Please," she added.

Brenna lowered herself again and touched her lips to Jess's taut throat. She released her lover's wrists and let her hands roam hungrily down the lean body. Her palms found Jess's firm breasts beneath her tunic.

"You have to start letting me be a part of this clan, Jess, if

I'm ever going to be." Brenna's low voice matched the rhythmic kneading of her fingers. "I'm only taking on the risk faced by any Amazon who's capable of fighting, right?"

Jess seemed uninterested in answering, much less debating. Her long body was beginning to move beneath Brenna's hands, arching to answer her touch. Her breathing deepened.

"Brenna," she whispered, "I can't lose you."

"Hush, Jesstin. Let me love you."

And Brenna did, for the first time, in that most intimate of ways women cherish each other. She had often been the sated recipient of the warm caress of Jess's tongue and lips, but her lover had never before allowed her to reciprocate.

Outside their lodge, Selene's moon bathed the silent valley in blue light, and the cold waters of Ziwa lapped gently against the dam. In Tristaine's private cabins, women made love with the same blend of intensity and tenderness that swept Brenna and Jesstin.

Brenna lay on her side, curled against Jess, who was starting to breathe evenly again. She stroked one of her arms lightly with a feather-soft brush of her fingers.

"*Hoo*," Jess whispered.

Brenna grinned.

"Th-thanks," Jess added.

"Thank you." Brenna lifted Jess's hand to her lips and kissed it. "Go to sleep, Jesstin. It's been a rough day. Tomorrow's got to be better."

❖

Brenna knelt on the walkway formed by the top of the dam and focused on Jess's form below. Her task didn't call for much strength, as the lines the climbers used were separately anchored by ground ties.

Vigilance was required, however, to keep the ropes from snarling, and Brenna would rather hurtle headfirst off the dam herself than fail another phobia test, as self-imposed as it might be.

Her gaze didn't waver, not even when sweat beaded on her forehead despite the brisk morning air. She knew Jess was in no

immediate peril, and neither were the four other Amazons working with her, all supported by rope harnesses. Brenna was doing fairly well convincing her mind to disregard the drop looming before her, but her stomach was fixated on it.

"Take up your slack, Brenna," Vicar reminded her. "She's steady. Just sing out if she gets snagged."

"Oh, I'll sing," Brenna muttered. She divided her attention between Jess and DeLorea, who was supervising the placement of the dynamite. Working with explosives was never routine, even for modern-day Amazons, but Tristaine's trust in their diminutive chief tradeswoman was well founded.

Camryn, Hakan, and Elodia had helped Jess secure the platform to the dam's main support post and now waited for DeLorea to finish wiring the detonator to the wrapped bundle.

Cam shaded her eyes and called up to the women waiting on the walkway. "Looks like Fugiera and Venore are ready below, Vicar!"

"Aye, youngster, I see."

Brenna threw a glance at the two Amazons assigned to secure sticks of dynamite to the rock shelf above the opening to the silver mine far below. One small figure was waving some signal, which Vicar returned.

Jess tossed her hair out of her eyes to look up at Brenna and sent her an encouraging wink. She smiled back, carefully playing out line as Jess shifted to the far side of the platform.

The waves of vertigo that had plagued Brenna when she first knelt on the walkway had largely subsided, but she'd feel better when the five dangling women were safely topside again.

Besides her and Vicar, four Amazons stood on the narrow ribbon that comprised the top of the dam, anchoring the climbers. Brenna had met them all at least once, but Amazon names were beginning to blur in her mind. They were Jess's warriors, her adanin, and those titles would serve for now.

"We're set!" DeLorea called as she snugged the canvas wrap gently around the explosives. "The leads are fixed. Shann should consider the remote armed as of now."

"She does," Vicar answered matter-of-factly. "Let's bring 'em up!"

Vicar checked the lines of the five climbers as their anchors took up slack, then patted Brenna gruffly on the shoulder in passing. Apparently her efforts to battle her demons hadn't gone unnoticed.

But Brenna barely registered Vicar's touch. The cold air on her face faded, and the rich trilling of birdsong that had formed a constant backdrop to the pleasant morning suddenly dwindled.

"You're about to snarl Elodia, Hakan. Space yourself," Vicar called.

"Aye, space yourself." Jess grinned at the warrior who climbed beside her. "Move yer buttocks, Hakan!"

"Bite my macha black butt, Jessica," Hakan said, panting.

Camryn chortled at both of them, but Brenna heard little of it.

J'heika, rise.

Jess peered upward, winding excess line around one forearm. Brenna was looking beyond the dam toward the village. Jess whistled softly to gain her attention, but Brenna's intense gaze held on Tristaine.

The sound alerted Vicar, who turned back to Brenna, eyebrows arched. "Brenna? What's up?"

Brenna stood up. "Take Jess's line, Vicar."

Vicar moved at once, lifting the coils of rope from Brenna's extended arm.

The other Amazons anchoring the lines exchanged glances, clearly surprised to see Vicar obey anyone other than Shann or Jess without question. Brenna stood with her hands at her sides, balanced on the narrow walkway. "Caster's here."

"Vic?" Jess called.

"Just keep climbing, Jesstin!" Vicar took up the slack in Jess's line.

Hissing tension in the men's voices, small branches snapping in the wake of their swift advance. Vehicles were useless past the foothills, so the last league up the mountain was covered on foot. The tall gates of the Amazon village were in sight.

Brenna watched Jess clamber over the railing of the catwalk. "Tristaine is under attack, Jess. Right now."

"What?"

"Trust me, Jesstin."

Jess looked into Brenna's oddly serene eyes and then whirled, looking for her second. "Camryn!"

"Here!" Cam answered at once, shaking off the rope halter.

"Take Grady and Briggs and meet Venore and Fugiera at the trail to the mine. Approach the village from the west and expect attack."

Cam's eyes widened; then she moved quickly down the walkway toward the descending path without asking questions. The rest of the warriors gathered closer, watching Jess.

"Vicar, Hakan," she glanced at each in turn, "take two warriors each and approach from the north and east." Jess's hand wrapped around Brenna's arm. "Elodia, DeLorea, you're with us. The top priority is protecting Shann."

"Right, Jess." Hakan nodded at two of the warriors. "We'll listen for your signal."

They were moving fast when they first heard enemy fire.

❖

Reaching Shann was never an option.

She refused to stay hidden. Tristaine had virtually no warning of the attack, but Shann managed to launch a swift reactive defense. At least until the canisters of gas exploded in the village square.

The vision that riveted Brenna had vanished. She remembered what she saw, though, and she still felt the certainty behind her words. Figuring out the rest would have to wait. She focused on gripping Jess's hand and racing down a mountain path that had terrified her to walk only the day before.

One moment Brenna could breathe and the next there was no air, just a cloying mist coating her face; then her throat caught fire. She coughed spasmodically and stumbled.

Jess staggered when the gas hit her lungs but kept her grasp on Brenna's hand, and they kept running. Behind them, Elodia

clenched DeLorea's sleeve and hauled her bodily along, both of them gasping and coughing.

Rapid volleys of gunfire splintered the air. Brenna heard cries of shock and men's voices shouting commands. Jess flattened her against a broad pine, then looked around it. She sent a piercing whistle through two fingers, loud enough to make Brenna flinch.

"Stay beside me!" Jess ordered, her voice ragged from the fumes. She gestured to Elodia, who nodded. She pulled a retching DeLorea toward a nearby bank of trees.

Another burst of gunfire pressed them back against the pine. When it stopped, Jess squeezed Brenna's hand, and they ran for Tristaine's southern gates.

Clouds of the noxious gas were billowing through the village square. Through streaming eyes, Brenna saw green-clad soldiers wearing heavy masks that gave them a malignant and insectile appearance. They shoved staggering Amazons toward the stadium. Other women—unconscious—were being dragged along the ground.

Brenna's throat constricted with a rage she had never known, and when Jess bolted for the square, she matched her pace. When the heaviest concentration of the gas hit them, the scene grew surreal in her blurring vision, grainy and shadowed.

She saw Jess duck under a swinging rifle, then dropkick one soldier where he stood. As another spate of bullets tore into the lower branches of nearby trees, Brenna realized that the soldiers were firing into the air. The world grayed out, and she lunged toward Jess, groping for her as her senses faded.

❖

There were things Brenna hated more than throwing up, and as soon as she could stop doing it, she would try to remember them.

She felt Jess's arms around her and she sat up, snarling her hands in the soft fabric of Jess's vest.

"Easy." Jess's voice was reduced to a croak. "Water's coming, Bren."

The mention of water made her aware of a raging thirst, and Brenna blinked hard, trying to clear the tears from her eyes. A sudden and sharp series of hacking coughs bent her double, and she joined the rasping chorus all around her.

Black-booted soldiers moved among the Amazons sprawled in the center of the arena. There were easily seventy mercenaries—of mixed gender and age—encircling the stadium floor. All of them carried rifles, which they used to push the women aside if they fell into their path.

Soldiers had removed the protective masks that had shielded them from the gas, and Brenna saw that the smoke and fumes had cleared. She realized with a queasy start that she'd been unconscious for hours. The weak sun overhead was already coasting down toward the western peaks.

"Here, Brenna. Sip it."

Brenna felt Jess's cold fingers brush her brow, and she accepted the canteen. She held herself to the few swallows Jess would allow, but it took restraint. Her throat was coated with a nasty chemical slime.

"What happened?" she managed.

"The village is taken, Bren." Jess took the canteen and lifted it to her lips.

"What about K-Kyla and Shann?" Brenna asked anxiously.

"Stay here," Jess croaked calmly. She brushed Brenna's hair off her forehead and checked her red eyes. "I'll find out what I can."

Brenna knew an order when she heard one, and she didn't try to stop Jess as she climbed to her feet. Her fierce eyes streamed tears that had nothing to do with sentiment and everything with chemicals, but she seemed to be recovering quickly.

"Hey!" A soldier at the periphery of the group raised his rifle. "Get down, over there!"

Jess ignored him

"Hey!"

"Hold your water, boy." Jess coughed and spat on the ground. "You've taken our weapons. You're safe enough."

Not necessarily true, Brenna thought, but now that she could see, she realized how badly Tristaine's warriors were outnumbered. Three dozen Amazons were scattered separately and in small groups on the hard-packed ground of the arena. Brenna didn't see Shann or Kyla, or any of Tristaine's high council. The retching sounds around her were starting to fade.

Jess walked stiffly over to three of her warriors and crouched to speak to them. Then she rose, her hand on the shoulder of the youngest in the group, and scanned the open stadium.

"Sit down, you big *pendeja* bitch!" the soldier barked.

Brenna saw several rifles rising toward Jess.

"If you were allowed to fire on us, *cabron*, I'd see wounded." Jess scrubbed her forearm across her face. She surveyed her troops. "My sisters look whole enough."

"I said sit *down*!" The man's voice cracked, which scared Brenna.

"Go find your witch doctor, mercenary." Jess spied Camryn and gave her a hand up. She looked her over, brushing off her leggings. "Tell her we want to see our queen."

The soldier tossed his rifle to the woman next to him. "Dana, this is *your* fucking squad. Speak the fuck *up*!" He stalked toward Jess.

Brenna threw herself far enough to wrap her arms around one khaki-clad leg as he strode past. He yelled in alarm, flailing, and the Amazons immediately cheered.

Brenna ground her teeth at the embarrassment of being dragged across the dusty arena by the kicking, staggering soldier, but it gave her enough time to crawl up his leg. Her well-placed fist, midstride, brought both his cursing and his momentum to an abrupt halt. The mercenary toppled like a sack of laundry and lay curled on his side, cupping his testicles.

"Two," Camryn crowed, and the Amazons' laughter, choked and sputtering as it was, heartened Brenna. But more soldiers were moving now, and rifles were coming up fast.

"Stand down, militia!" Theryn's command rang across the open stadium.

Brenna swiveled on her hands and knees, shock sluicing through her.

Theryn's handsome features were congested with anger. She stalked over to the woman the soldier had called Dana and snatched her firearm from her hands. "I just ordered your squad to lower their weapons, you young idiot!"

Waves of disbelief coursed through the Amazons around Brenna as palpably as ocean surf. She stared, aghast, at the small group of familiar faces entering the arena in Theryn's wake. There were about twenty warriors, including Patana, Perry—the warrior who had clashed with Elodia—and the hauntingly lovely woman Brenna had seen on the balcony with Theryn.

And Myrine. Brenna's heart fell when she saw Jess's old friend hand in hand with Patana in the small assembly that gathered around their angry leader.

Camryn saw Myrine at the same moment, and Brenna heard her muffle an anguished curse. Jess's eyes were expressionless.

"Where's Shann, Theryn?"

"Jesstin, Shann is safe. She's right here." Theryn was calming now, and she injected authority into her voice. "Just tell your warriors not to resist, and I promise you, Amazon blood won't stain this—"

"Sow's daughter." At the far edge of the group, Vicar stood. She spoke quietly, but the venom in her tone carried her curse. "Your liver, Theryn, my fist."

An angry murmur went through the women surrounding Theryn, but she quieted them with a wide gesture. Theryn's chin lifted, and she clasped her hands behind her.

"I expected your enmity, sisters. I knew I would pay a heavy personal price for living by my ethics." She paused a moment, then continued. "But I prefer the hatred of Tristaine's old guard to the death of our village. I would have done anything…" Theryn looked directly at Brenna, "*anything* to avoid this. Your high council chose this fate, adanin, when they chose to silence me."

Brenna considered throwing up again, but her need to reach Jess and Camryn overrode the impulse. Hearing a scuffling noise high in the risers of the arena at the door to the review stand, she

took advantage of the distraction and scrambled to her feet. Cam took Brenna's arm and drew her in protectively when she reached them.

She heard hissing rise from the Amazons, and as she focused on the review stand, she saw Shann accompanied by two guards who still wore the bulky gas masks. They pushed her roughly to the railing.

Shann straightened, her patrician features composed. Her arms were tied behind her, and the soft fabric of her robes was mud-spattered and torn. A bleeding bruise capped one high cheek. Her bloodshot eyes sought out Jess and held a moment, then swept across the other warriors below.

Theryn gasped, and even the women with her looked shaken. "Shann, I ordered that you not be harmed! Lady, I swear to you—"

"Really, Theryn. Still your heaving breasts." One of the soldiers holding Shann tittered and released her. "Our barbarian queen here is far thicker of skin than you imagine."

She pulled off her black gas mask and shook out silver hair, ruffling it with long, tapered fingers. The distinguished woman turned to the sea of faces watching her.

"Amazons of Tristaine, good morning!" she called, and gave them a dazzling smile. "My name is Caster."

Chapter Six

Jess's arm braced Brenna, and she felt Camryn's shoulder brush her own, a small gesture of support that warmed her, even through the sick pounding in her head.

Caster's bright gaze coasted over the Amazons until she saw Brenna, and her ebony eyes sparked with pleasure.

"Brenna, Jesstin! And young Camrie, isn't it?" She pressed a well-manicured hand to her heart. "I've worried about you all through this long, tedious summer! Little Kyla is safe and well, you'll be pleased to hear. She's been taken to one of your—bunkhouse things, along with your noble tribal chieftains."

A harsh cry rose. "Release our queen, banshee!"

Jess kept her eyes on Caster. "Stand down, Sage," Jess ordered.

"Why, thank you, Jesstin. Standing down would indeed be a sage decision." Caster's gaze caressed Jess's face. "My, my. And wowza. What a dashing hunk of leathered Amazon you've landed, Miss Brenna! It's quite a thrill to see our brazen warrior here at last, isn't it? In her natural habitat, among others of her primitive ilk! I have literally dreamed of this day."

So have I, Brenna thought.

"And I'm just as pleased to see *you*, young Brenna." Caster's sharp teeth glinted as she smiled at the Amazons. "Ladies, please know my former med tech has a special place in my heart. And I've brought both Brenna and Jesstin souvenirs from the City."

Brenna didn't have to look up at Jess to know that her tears had dried the moment Caster revealed herself. Faced with an enemy, Jess had a warrior's discipline, even over her rebellious tear ducts.

As she studied the scientist she had once respected, Brenna realized she was trembling, but not with fear. It was fury, a fury that heated her blood and put steel in her spine.

A slipstream of images swam through her mind of the Festival of Thesmophoria: Kyla singing the Challenge of Artemis, Shann's address, and the grieving pride of the Amazons as they left their village. Brenna would later describe this moment of rage in her second journal as the beginning of her life as an Amazon.

"I realize how anxious you all must be to hear from Tristaine's attractive lead dominatrix." Caster smiled at Shann. "And I will indulge that desire straight away! We have a great deal of important work ahead of us, Jesstin, and I don't want your warriors distracted with worry."

Shann glanced at the soldier that still kept a tight grasp on her right arm. At Caster's nod, he released her. She looked out over her women and her shoulders relaxed, despite the cruel ropes that bound her.

"I'm not badly hurt, adanin. And last I saw them, neither was Kyla, or Terme, or Cay, or Ziwa, or anyone else on our high council. I can assure you that Tristaine's greatest treasures, the wise women who guide her queen, are all safe and whole."

Shann's voice rasped with the after-effects of the gas, but her remote calm helped ease Brenna's concern for her. She made vague note that Shann was talking in code and hoped Jess would be able to translate it for her sometime soon.

"Our village has been taken without real bloodshed. That tells us Caster needs something from us." Shann's red eyes fell on Jess again as she went on. "For now, sisters, we will not resist."

There was a murmur of disquiet among the Amazons, and the cords stood out in Jess's jaw, but she nodded.

"Shann." Theryn stepped forward and tried to catch Shann's eye. "Lady, I give you my bond that your warriors will not be injured. All Caster wants to do is film a documentary about her—"

"Cooperate as Gaia allows, sisters, and keep fast to the path of our Mothers," Shann continued. "I ask for your patience and your trust."

The same small, detached part of Brenna's mind that was thinking clearly noted that this was the first time she had ever heard Shann interrupt anyone.

"Our trust is yours, lady." Hakan's voice was heard from the back, and Brenna looked around for her in relief.

Caster let the silence linger after Shann finished speaking. Then she gestured to the female soldier who stood next to Theryn. "Miss Dana! Please escort our pagan queen back to her barracks."

The girl grimaced in reply and shouldered her weapon. Brenna caught her eye as she stalked past, and the young woman scowled and looked away. Fascinated, Brenna watched her until she was out of sight.

"Brenna?" Jess's rough hand touched her arm. "You know her?"

"Never seen her before in my life." Brenna hadn't. There were several women soldiers among Caster's mercenaries. She had no idea why this one stood out for her.

The breeze that felt pleasantly cool on the dam chilled Brenna now as she watched Shann being escorted out of the stadium. Jess's arm pressed her shoulders, and she leaned into her, both offering comfort and accepting it.

None of the Amazons around them moved, but it seemed the group gathered closer to them in spirit. Brenna could feel the breath of twenty warriors warming their backs.

"Sit down, Bren," Jess said.

Brenna folded her legs gratefully and let the cold, hard-packed ground support her. She drew in deep draughts of mountain air and watched the remaining soldiers space themselves around their circle. Then she saw Theryn, walking slowly to the front of their gathering.

Theryn's padded shoulders were slumped at first but lifted as she turned to address Tristaine's warriors again. Her stentorian voice rang in the quiet arena.

"Whatever your anger toward me, sisters, listen well! I entreat you to heed our lady's command. Cooperation is your only hope for survival." Theryn paused with a showman's timing, making

sure every eye was on her. “Caster holds your queen and several members of Tristaine’s high council. Because of young Kyla’s injured leg, I’ve arranged to have her stay at Shann’s side. I warn you, any deviation from Caster’s agenda will put *their* lives at risk, as well as your own!”

Brenna was distracted by movement from Theryn’s cluster of followers. The woman she had seen on the balcony broke free of them and ran to Theryn, who lifted her arm to embrace her.

“Who *is* that?” Brenna whispered to Camryn.

“Grythe.” Camryn grimaced. “She’s Theryn’s adonai.”

Flaxen curls billowed around Grythe’s lovely face, and her posture next to her taller mate was fiercely protective. She lifted one arm, adorned with thin silver bracelets from wrist to elbow, and tickled the base of Theryn’s throat with long, ragged nails. Her glittering eyes fell on Brenna.

Theryn raised one arm. “I have succeeded in securing a pact with Caster!” Theryn’s followers gave a supportive cheer, and she waved a benediction over the crowd.

“Caster is a practical woman, and she will convince her Military funders to honor our agreement. Never fear. Now, this is what Tristaine offers the City.” Theryn enumerated the terms of the truce on her gloved hand. “Amazons will become legal Citizens. We will accept a City delegate on our high council. Our silver will be taxed. And that’s it! That is all Caster demands.”

Utter silence in the arena.

“In return,” Theryn continued, “the migration will be recalled! Our sisters will be permitted to return from their exile in the southern meadows. A new high council will rule. And we will be allowed to live out our lives here in Tristaine!”

Celebratory war cries erupted from Theryn’s group, in vivid contrast to the bleak silence of Jess’s warriors. Patana pumped her fist in the air, her hawkish features elated. Brenna saw Myrine close her eyes, looking more relieved than elated. She never glanced their way.

Theryn waited for the cheering to fade, stroking Grythe’s slender arm, which was draped seductively across the base of her

throat. "Now, sisters, let me explain the logic behind our truce. Caster's capture of Tristaine will validate the project she began in the City Clinic. She will prove to the Government that her techniques *can* turn their enemies against each other."

"The City doesn't need Caster for that, Theryn. They have you." Jesstin's brogue was clipped. She looked up at the scientist in the review stand. "My clinical study had nothing to do with turning Amazons against Tristaine, Caster."

"Of course it did, Jesstin." Caster sipped delicately from a canteen. "Or at least it will, with proper film editing and a few payments—a few *silver* coins—in the right pockets."

"Our strategy is this," Theryn continued. "Caster will film our two companies in mock battle." She moved until she was in Jess's line of sight. "*Sham* combat, Jesstin. No one will be hurt."

"Or what, Theryn? Your truce will be null and void?" Jess smiled without mirth. "Caster will pack her expensive toy soldiers and march them back down the mountain?"

Grythe looked at Jess as though she were tasty carrion.

Theryn bent as Grythe whispered to her, then shook her head and straightened. "You and your warriors, Jesstin, and our lady and her high council, will be banished from Tristaine. Forever. You'll be given your freedom to move deeper into the mountains to form that new commune Shann spoke of so movingly in the Queen's Address."

"Our freedom isn't yours to give, Amazon." Jess's voice was low and ominously quiet. "You've struck a deal with a demon. Caster has no intention of letting anyone loyal to Shann leave Tristaine. Not alive."

"Fine with me, bitch!" Patana elbowed Myrine aside and grinned at the warriors sprawled on the ground. "I don't care if we skewer each and every one of you *sisters* and hang your pelts from our lodge poles. I figure it's worth a little carnage if we finally win Tristaine a queen worthy of the name."

"Fucking *pendeja*!" Elodia exploded to her feet. "We *knew* you wanted Shann's throne, Theryn, you bloody *traidora*!"

"We will continue to honor all of Tristaine's Grandmothers."

Theryn raised her voice, obviously trying to tamp down the ire rumbling through the warriors. "And I will maintain our sacred ceremonies—"

"You betrayed your clan for power, *puta*!" Elodia hurtled toward Theryn, but Jess swiveled and caught her attempted rush.

"You want to rule Tristaine, and you want City medicine for your crazy wife!" Elodia could still yell under Jess's restraint. "That sick *bruja,* Grythe—"

Jess's hold on Elodia moved smoothly from a simple hold to punishment, and the girl gasped. Jess lowered her with a distinct lack of gentleness to a seated position beside Camryn. Jess's eyes on Elodia were as cold as Brenna had ever seen them.

"You don't mock an Amazon's affliction, girl. *Any* Amazon. Now stand down and tame your temper." Jess straightened. "You believe you can convince our clan to accept your rule, Theryn?"

"I do." Theryn smiled directly at Jess for the first time. "I'm confident, Jesstin, that the prosperity I bring Tristaine through this truce will soothe any ruffled feelings eventually."

"Let's wrap this up, ladies, shall we?" Caster snugged her parka around her. "We've lost the light for filming today, at any rate. Get these primitives sorted out, Theryn, and lead me to a decent dinner."

"Happily, Caster." Theryn gently freed herself from her wife's clinging grip. She clapped her hands. "All right! On your feet, Amazons!"

No one moved, which seemed to surprise no one but Theryn. Brenna couldn't read Grythe's expression. The woman's face rarely betrayed any emotion other than hate. After a moment, Jess glanced down at Camryn. Cam whistled, and the group of warriors grumbled to their feet.

"I'm not foolish enough to let all your warriors in the ring at once, Jesstin." Theryn braced her gloved hands on her hips. "Pick ten of your best for the war games. Patana and Myrine will have fourteen in their cadre. I'm sure you won't begrudge us the extra bodies. Your fighters trained longer with Dyan."

Hakan frowned, brushing the dust of the arena from her broad hands. "What about the rest of the warriors, Amazon?"

"Don't worry, my violent sister. I'm sure Jesstin won't pass *you* up!" Theryn's face was flushed, either with cold or with relief that this assembly was ending. "The warriors she doesn't select will go into lockdown in the barracks of their guild until filming is complete."

"Oh, Brenna?" Caster trilled.

Brenna was examining Elodia's elbow, badly scraped in their mad dash through the woods. Jess and Camryn both turned when Caster called her.

"I do hope you've picked up some dazzling Amazon combat tricks, my former colleague, because I must insist that Jesstin include you among her warriors." Caster leaned on the railing of the review stand looking at Brenna fondly. "As you might remember, you were rather alluringly displayed in our Clinic films of Jesstin's study. I watch them nightly, like home movies. And I'll want our funders to see you and Jesstin battling together, side by side, for Tristaine's mining rights."

"Caster, I'm not sure that's entirely fair." Theryn measured Brenna with her eyes, while Grythe pierced her with hers. "As you know, this girl is new to our village. And Brenna is a healer, not a warrior. Judging by—"

"Judging by the way she bagged your soldier, Theryn," Hakan called, "she's worth any three of your fighters."

There were a few defiant snorts of agreement among the warriors, and Camryn grinned at Brenna.

"Save your worry, Theryn. Brenna doesn't need anyone's permission to watch my back." Jess's gaze flickered over the twenty warriors around her. Finally, she pointed several times, then snapped her fingers.

The milling women separated into two groups, shivering as twilight fell over the village. Brenna spied the mercenary named Dana coming back into the stadium. One of the soldiers jogged to her, carrying a clipboard. Dana nodded and began rapping out orders.

"Rodriguez, take that group to the barracks east of the stadium. I'll settle this lot in here." Dana raised her voice, which sounded painfully young. "Theryn? We've got five guarding the queen's council, five on watch, and ten each on both Amazon buildings."

"Thank you, Dana." Theryn settled Grythe's thin hand in the crook of her arm. "Lock Jesstin's warriors down with care, please."

"Good night, ladies!" Caster called brightly and waved from the review stand. "Perhaps I should interview your queen this evening about the reported joys of all this inverted Sapphic activity! See you bright and early tomorrow."

Jess gripped Camryn's arm and kept her walking steadily toward the gate where Dana herded them. "She's trying to goad us, Cam. Don't bite."

Jess turned and whistled a complex series of notes between her fingers at the other group of warriors who were being led out of the stadium. One of them raised a hand in acknowledgment.

"Keep moving!" Dana pushed Brenna's shoulder as they passed.

Jess's warriors were being confined in the small stable at the south end of the arena used to shelter Tristaine's horses during tournaments and drills. Brenna squinted, trying to make out familiar faces in the gloom. She saw Hakan and Vicar and Elodia, eyeing the soldiers standing guard at the railing surrounding the stable. Camryn was already directing four other warriors in clearing an area on the wood-plank floor.

As always when needing reassurance, Brenna sought out Jess. The nightmare progression of this day finally seemed to be winding down toward some kind of quiet, and she craved Jess's solid presence. She saw her ducking through the door into the stable. Dana was standing behind her.

"You're Jesstin, right?"

Jess turned back to her. "That's right."

Dana grimaced. "Here's Caster's souvenir from the City." She lifted her sidearm and shot Jess in the stomach.

There was immediate chaos in the stable, but Brenna heard little of it.

The impact knocked Jess off her feet, and she crashed bodily into the three Amazons behind her before falling to the hay-strewn floor, out of Brenna's sight.

"You crazy *cunt*." The soldier named Rodriguez joined the other rattled men at the stable railing. His rifle snapped up to join the line of muzzles targeting the stunned Amazons. "Dana, what the fuck were you thinking?"

"It wasn't my idea, Rodriguez. Caster's direct order."

"You could have given us some fucking warning!" Rodriguez barked.

"Tell the lunatic paying for all this, gonad! She wrote the script, not me!"

"Let me see her," Brenna said.

Dana looked into the stable, startled by the commanding voice.

The hot blonde who had kept staring at her in the arena had just silenced the entire group of Amazons. Caster's notes said the dark woman named Jesstin was commander of the warriors, but there was nothing in her report about this girl—Brenna, was it?—being some kind of leader. One by one, the warriors stepped away from the fallen prisoner and cleared a path.

The tall Amazon with the white hair and bitter eyes eased Jesstin into a seated position against a support post. "She's breathing, Brenna," she said quietly.

Brenna knelt beside her patient. "Camryn, call them down."

Dana watched one of the younger warriors, her face the color of ash, climb to her feet, then look at the rifles and the Amazons beginning to turn their new anger on their captors.

"Amazons, stand down!" Camryn's voice cracked painfully.

To Dana's astonishment, the brutish warriors heeded the girl. A few still lingered close to the railing, staring silent hatred at the line of soldiers, but most turned back to the circle of women surrounding Jesstin.

Dana frowned, rising up on her toes to try to see the unconscious woman. "It was just a taser," she called to the anxious throng, "a strong one, but she's not badly injured."

Brenna had indeed been able to learn that much, and the wave of relief made black sparks flare behind her eyes. She had Jess's denim shirt open and saw the plastic projectile clamped to her pale skin a hand span below her breasts. Four distinct, thin lines of blood wended from its corners, trickling down her lean sides.

Jess's eyes were fluttering. The cold air held the bitter smell of cordite, and Brenna hesitated, her hand hovering over the taser bolt.

"What in bloody hell *is* that?" Vicar was gripping Jess's shoulders with white-knuckled hands.

"Pull it out, Brenna," Camryn told her quietly, her voice having not yet regained its strength. Hakan took her arm and pulled her closer so she could kneel beside Brenna. "It won't hurt you, but it's still shocking her, so hurry."

Brenna steeled herself and gripped the small square of vibrating plastic. She pulled up in one smooth motion and Jess gasped, her back arching as four thin metal prongs slid out of her skin. Vicar stared at the device in revulsion, but Brenna didn't spare it a glance. She handed it to Camryn and cupped Jess's face in her cold hands.

"Jesstin?" Brenna demanded. "Do you hear me?"

"She was woozy for a while the last time this happened." Camryn lifted Jess's limp hand onto her knee. "She'll be okay, Brenna, just weak and sore for a few days."

"They use *that* on prisoners at the Clinic, Camryn?" Hakan asked, shock in her voice.

"There's nothing like this at the Clinic." Brenna raised Jess's eyelid to check her pupil in the dim light. "I've never seen this before."

"They use stunners in the Clinic, not tasers." Camryn smoothed one thumb over Jess's wrist. "Tasers are for the Prison."

"Hey, tasers hurt, but they don't kill, for god's sake!" Dana called. "She'll even be able to fight tomorrow, honestly." After a moment, Dana whirled and stalked toward the arena door. "Rodriquez, as you were, you idiot!"

The soldiers lowered their rifles, grumbling.

Jess's awakening was abrupt. "Brenna!"

"I'm right here, Jess," Brenna said, her voice both warm and stern. "Look at me."

The long muscles of Jess's body trembled, but she relaxed against her cousin, and her dazed eyes found Brenna.

"*Sheesh!*" Jess gasped.

Brenna nodded. "Tell me how you are."

Jess winced, then looked up at her second. "I'll be next to useless tomorrow, Cam."

"Jesstin. Answer me." Brenna's firmness had won out over her warmth, but Jess just shuddered and rested her head back on Vicar's shoulder.

"It'll hurt for a while." Cam nodded thanks to Elodia, who brought a clean dipper filled with water for Jess. "I think we have to just let her rest. There's not a lot we can do. Except make her keep still. Ha ha."

Brenna gauged Jess's breathing. The frightening rapid-fire of her pulse was calming slightly. The voltage of the taser was powerful enough to contract muscle in strong spasms, and the effect was obviously painful. Sweat still beaded her forehead.

Jess filled her lungs with a deep breath. She frowned up at Vicar, still supporting her against the post. "What, Bigfoot, you waiting for a kiss?"

"Hardly, Stumpy," Vicar snorted. "Not unless your healer here packed some fierce antibiotics." Her hands were gentle as she helped Jess sit up against the post.

"Freya, Elodia, Jaye, Shasa." Jess swallowed, and Brenna helped her sip from the dipper of water. Find some bedding, adanin. We'll hold council in the morning."

"So you're all right, Jesstin?" Elodia's arms were folded, but concern softened her voice.

"I'll live." Jess smiled at Elodia grimly. "Have Brenna check that scraped arm again before you turn in, youngster."

Jess's listless wave signaled a general dismissal, and the warriors turned to setting up something resembling bedding. A sullen soldier offered them a medical kit, which they accepted. They

were also offered armloads of scratchy Army blankets, which they declined. The stable held enough hay to warm them through an early winter night.

As twilight gave way to full dark and Selene's moon began her slow climb over the mountain valley, the Amazons were served shrink-wrapped bags of rations, which Brenna informed them were tasteless but harmless.

The captives formed a tight circle in the center of the wood floor. Vicar and Camryn stacked enough hay to provide Jess relative comfort.

The Amazons rotated guard throughout the night, keeping watch while their sisters slept. Hakan finished her stint just as the small generator the soldiers carried clicked on, providing a solitary light. It cast macabre shadows over the cramped space, adding to the stable's aura of bleakness.

Hakan sat beside Jess and studied her pale features, pursing her full lips in thought. She balanced one elbow on her meaty thigh and flexed her fingers, inviting an arm-wrestling match. Jess smiled at her friend and, with effort, raised an extended middle finger and waved it at her. Vicar and Camryn laughed, but the sound was quickly subdued.

Hakan's deep voice was pitched low. "There's no lasting paralysis then, Brenna?"

"No, just a lot of residual stiffness." Brenna's tension tightened her own shoulders. "Your pulse is steady, Jess, and I don't see any sign of shock."

"There's no real damage, lass. I'll be peachy in three days." Jess frowned and shifted against the hay bale. "But in the morning, I'll fight like a bloody crone."

"You mean an older one?" Vicar's rejoinder was automatic, but her expressive features were grave.

"Yeah, we'll need to protect you, Jess." Camryn looked worried as well. "We don't even know what kind of fight we're facing tomorrow. We're supposed to 'sham' fight for some stupid documentary?"

"Shann was right, Cam," Jess said, "This is all about Caster's

redemption. I think Theryn's warriors are supposed to beat us in this film and then pretend to surrender to Caster."

"Is that what this was about? Caster's souvenir?" Brenna laid her hand lightly on Jess's bandaged side. "Do you think that taser bolt was just stupid revenge, or do she and Theryn want you physically rocky for some reason?"

"Good question, Bren. Hey," Jess's brows rose, "we have company."

Brenna heard it too, a muffled cursing in the arena coming closer.

"…and Caster can take *you* with her, fuck you very much, you *pinche* excuse for a City warrior, *get* your sorry hand off me, I've been walking upright for…"

Jess groaned, but she was grinning. Camryn's face lit up, and incredible as it seemed after this day, Brenna found she could smile too.

Kyla ragged the hapless Dana, loudly and obscenely, through the door, down the short hallway, through another door, down six stairs, and up to the penned stable, but then Kyla saw Camryn and her sisters, and she stopped short.

"What's she doing here?" Rodriguez asked, still morose. "Caster's orders again?"

Dana just looked glad to be rid of Kyla. "This one's not on Tristaine's governing board, so I want her here where we can watch her."

She lifted a section of the wooden railing to let Kyla duck into the stable, then trudged wearily to a hay bale in the corner and sat down. "Go back to sleep, Rodriguez."

Kyla's bandaged thigh gave her a pronounced limp, but there was nothing wrong with her sharp eyes. Her gaze zeroed in on Camryn, who rose to meet her. The two adonai met with a passionate embrace.

"Sheesh," Jess sighed. She nudged Brenna. "Remember the good old days when Camryn avoided public displays of lewdness?"

"Oh, hush," Brenna chided Jess gently. She enjoyed watching

the kiss that melded the two young Amazons together from nose to pelvis. A few of the warriors hooted softly in encouragement.

"You're okay, good!" Kyla finally broke the embrace. "And Brenna, you're okay." She limped over to Jess and plunked down hard on the hay-strewn floor beside her. "Well?" she snapped. "What happened to *you*?"

Camryn lowered herself beside her young wife. "Taser, Ky."

Kyla blanched, and some of the starch drained out of her. She lifted Jess's hand to her knee. "Oh, Jesstin. I'm sorry. Are you hurting a lot?"

"It's not as bad as the first time, adanin." Jess used a gentle tone she seemed to reserve only for Dyan's blood sister.

"Uh, hello, it *better* not be as bad as the first time." Kyla looked at Brenna. "Jess got tasered when she was in the City Prison. The night Cam and I tried to break her out."

"We were almost over the wall." Camryn looked at Vicar remorsefully. "We came really close, Vic. Jess hadn't had any decent food in weeks, so she was kind of weak, but she would have made it over. The one lousy guard we couldn't find to bribe had to play hero, and he tasered her. The bolt got her in the butt that time, though," she added, "on the left."

"Your plan butt-fired," Vicar said sadly, and Brenna smiled again.

The warmth of women sitting in close formation comforted Brenna, and she consciously relaxed her tense back. Jess's hand moved in hers, and she looked down and lost herself, as she often did, in her lover's fond gaze.

"How do you feel?" Brenna whispered.

The corner of Jess's mouth lifted, and she shrugged carefully.

"The City must have had a special on mercenaries this week." Hakan jutted her chin toward the five guards slung in various phases of boredom against the railing. "Looks like poor Dr. Caster got shortchanged."

"They're a pretty motley lot." Vicar helped Cam cover Kyla

with enough clean straw to keep her warm. “I’ll sleep no easier picturing these oafs pawing at that dynamite tomorrow.”

Brenna’s back cramped again. She’d forgotten about the dam and the huge lake it held at bay. She imagined the implacable black surface of the water, glinting beneath an impassive moon, less than a mile from where they lay.

These mercenaries might be oafs, Brenna thought, *but surely they could handle removing a few sticks of dynamite safely. Which would also remove the risk of a flood. Which could reach us in ten minutes, if even one of the soldiers fouls up.*

J’heika, rise.

“Shann still has the detonator.” Jess kept her voice low. “Or she knows where it is.”

“She does?” Vicar glanced over her shoulder at their guards and lowered her voice. “When Shann said ‘Terme and Cay and Ziwa’ were safe with our high council, is that what she meant? That we can still blow the dam ourselves if we have to?”

“I think so.” Jess nodded at her second. “Make sense to you?”

“Oh, yeah. Wait.” Camryn’s smile faded. “Won’t Caster suspect that Shann has it, the detonator?”

“Not if she doesn’t know about the dynamite.” Brenna watched dust motes coast down a slow waterfall through a weak beam of light. She felt Jess’s hand on her wrist and realized the circle of Amazons was staring at her. “What?”

“Hey, are you doing it again, Brenna?” Kyla craned forward to see Brenna’s face. “That spooky oracle thing Cam said you pulled up on the dam?”

Vicar frowned as she spoke. “Why wouldn’t Caster know the dam’s rigged? Theryn filled her in, the traitorous shrike.”

“Not on this.” Brenna blinked and looked at Jess. “Don’t ask me how I know that, but I’m sure. Theryn didn’t tell Caster about the dynamite.”

“But the mercs will find it come sunrise.” Hakan seemed to accept Brenna’s statement as fact. “Those tarped bundles are hardly hidden. They’ll see them the first time they scout the area.”

"Which they should have done today, the moment the captives were secured." Jess's eyes glinted, cat-like, and Brenna realized she was starting to enjoy herself. She nodded slightly toward their lounging sentries. "This is a City squad, adanin. If Brenna's right, Theryn reserved an escape route. I don't know why, and tonight I don't care. Just remember it's possible the explosives are securely in place."

"Jesstin?" Elodia's tone was respectful as she approached the group. "What's our strategy here? We need a plan."

"We do," Jess agreed, sitting up with effort, "and I'd like to hear ideas before the morning's council."

"Well, we can't know what Shann and the council would order." Hakan spun a wisp of straw across her smooth cheek. "But our guild's priority is always the safety of our queen, our council, and the vulnerable among us. I say our goal is to get our adanin out of here whole, Jess."

"Aye, and then blow the dam." Vicar's eyes were as cold as her voice.

There was a bleak silence in their circle that Brenna recognized as agreement.

"What about Theryn's followers?" Jess's tone was neutral.

Another moment of silence, this one ticking with tension.

"Take as many as will come," Camryn said, finally. "We'll sort it out with them later."

"But we won't let them stop us," Vicar added, and agreement murmured again through the circle of Amazons.

"Great! We have a plan." Jess smiled like a rogue, which heartened Brenna. "And no bloody idea how to carry it out. We're going to have to play it very much by ear tomorrow. Therefore, it's important that you barbarian ladies follow my lead, yes?"

It was a perfect pitch imitation of Caster's affected speech, and it earned the laughter Jess obviously wanted.

"Brenna." Jess pressed her hand. "It's happening more often now, these flashes of yours."

"I guess. Yeah." Brenna closed her eyes for a moment. "But please, Jess, please don't act blindly on anything I spout off like

that. We still don't have any idea where this stuff comes from. For all we know, I'm a raving psychotic."

"Given," Jess agreed, which coaxed another smile out of her. "But you're proving a damn accurate lunatic, lass."

"No kidding, Brenna, absolutely." Kyla, avidly eavesdropping as usual, chimed in. "You told Shann that Tristaine only had a week of safety, when Theryn claimed Caster would hold off for months."

"And you knew when the attack came today." Camryn was looking at Brenna as if she were a fascinating new breed of horse. "And when it hits you, Brenna, you should see yourself. You do this butch thing, you become this uber blonde."

"Oh, please," Brenna sputtered.

"That's true." Vicar's eyes measured Brenna.

"So, can you tell us anything, Brenna?" Hakan's rich voice was friendly. "I think you'll find our minds open."

Brenna looked around their circle and found attentive faces, but she saw Jess eyeing Vicar as they waited for her reply.

"You guys, I don't have a clue." Brenna slumped her shoulders. "Right now, I don't know any more about what's going on than any of you."

"Good enough for tonight." Jess's voice was still rough from the taser effects. "Get some sleep, adanin. The sun rises early. Keep your eyes on me and Cam tomorrow. Never forget, our primary goal is to find a way to get Shann and the council out of here alive. And as many of the rest of us as we can manage."

A sigh of agreement moved through them, a settling in that signaled an end to this surreal and harrowing day. *Only one day*, Brenna thought. *Yesterday they were free, and tonight Tristaine's daughters chased sleep as captives on their own land.*

Brenna nestled into Jess, feeling her long arm wrap around her waist. She felt them both relax almost at once, which surprised her a little. Well, she reasoned, prophecy, betrayal, mortal terror, rabid rage. All of it was tiring stuff.

"Hey, Jesstin?" Kyla's stage whisper roused them, and Camryn groaned. "Which one of those hairy creeps tasered you?"

"The young hairy creep. The girl." Brenna felt Jess wince as she adjusted her weight. "Her name's Dana."

"I thought so. She's the one who brought me back here. Sweet Gaia," Kyla grumbled, burrowing closer to Camryn under the straw. "I hate butch women who don't even know what side they should be on. I think her bringing me down here was her apology for zapping you, Jess."

"What?" Camryn yawned into Kyla's luxuriant red curls. "Show me the City merc that has that much heart, Ky."

Jess was quiet, and Brenna rubbed her forearm gently. "Hey. Hurting a lot?"

"Not too much." Jess's breath warmed her ear. "Brenna, I want you to be on your guard tomorrow, lass. You heard what Caster said."

Brenna's mind filtered through Caster's file of venomous statements of the day and remembered she had her own souvenir coming. "Caster doesn't scare me anymore, Jess. Try to rest, okay? And you wake me up if you need anything."

"Yes'm," Jess mumbled.

Brenna heard the breathing of the Amazons around them grow slow and deep. She had lied about having no fear of Caster, and doubtless Jess knew it. The City scientist held a wickedly sharp blade to her throat and would as long as she loved the woman warming her back.

Brenna turned her head on the scratchy straw. Wrapped in Camryn's arms, Kyla smiled and blinked at her sleepily. She slid her hand across the space separating them and clasped Brenna's hand.

"I miss Max," Brenna whispered. "I wish he were here."

"I do, too," Kyla answered. "Go to sleep, adanin. We'll all be here when you wake up. That's what Shann says, when she wishes the little ones good night."

Brenna slept.

Chapter Seven

A glowering shiner capped Caster's high cheek the next morning. It would soon be as glorious as a sunset. The Amazons brayed with laughter when they saw it.

Rodriguez frowned and nudged Dana. "What are they cackling about?"

"How should I know?" She rubbed her face. She hadn't slept well. "Just stay alert."

Dana examined the two portable camcorders mounted on tripods at opposite ends of the arena, and a third, braced on the railing of the review stand. They were inexpertly operated by three soldiers who were too clumsy to be trusted to carry carbines.

"How did last night's seduction go, Caster?"

It was Jesstin's voice, and Dana gaped at her. She stood at the head of her small troop of warriors regarding Caster with a brazen smile. Except for the pallor beneath her tan, she looked like a taser had never touched her in her life.

The Amazons were snickering again, and Dana finally got the joke. Caster had made some stupid parting shot yesterday about bedding Tristaine's queen. The woman named Shann hadn't looked like a warrior on the review stand, but apparently Caster's attempt to seduce her had been forcefully rebuffed. Dana smiled sourly at the toe of her boot.

"My, you look fit, Jesstin." Caster's tone was ominously mild. Dana figured she too must have noticed her souvenir from the City had little lasting effect on its intended target.

Caster feigned oblivion to any change in her appearance. She rose from the padded bench in the review stand and smiled down at Jess. "Actually, I'm pleased to see you so robust, dear. In truth, I

really didn't want your fighting prowess in any way compromised today. You know, it's very nearly a sexual experience, Jess, watching you fight."

"Voyeurism might be your safest bet, darlin'," Jess agreed, and the warriors behind her emitted another bark of laughter.

"Careful, Jesstin. I only bend so far."

The note of compassion in Caster's voice made Brenna uneasy. She hated that sound. It heralded the woman's worst instincts. The immediate threat seemed to fade as the door to the review stand opened, and Shann and Kyla were escorted in.

"Shann's fine," Kyla called down to them at once. A frowning mercenary hushed her with a poke of his rifle. Having delivered her message, Kyla offered him a withering smile.

Shann looked better than she had the previous day, Brenna noted with relief. Her robes were clean and mended, and the few marks on her face were countered by the alertness in her eyes. Her gaze found Jess, who made a subtle twirling motion with her fingers. Shann nodded.

She and Kyla were seated roughly at the other end of the long bench, and Caster regarded them with interest. She waited until Shann looked at her, then smiled brightly, winked, and stood up.

"All right, Miss Dana, cameras rolling!" Caster clapped her hands together, an unnecessary bid for attention in the silent arena. "Theryn, we're ready for you!"

A sharp command sounded near the main entrance to the stadium, and Brenna saw a cloaked figure standing by a large gate. It was Myrine, pulling swiftly on the rigging that opened the entrance to the fighting ground. Over the whine of the cameras, she could hear the clopping of a single horse.

Theryn rode into the arena with the kind of solemn grandeur reserved for affairs of state. Swatches of purple silk brought out the intense lavender light in her eyes. The towering bay she rode moved at a regal pace across the hard-pack of the arena.

Behind horse and rider, Theryn's cadre of warriors followed on foot, led by Patana and Myrine. Like Jess's fighters, they wore a generic blend of Tristainian attire—furs and skins that were warm

and supple, along with the modern denim that somehow never seemed incongruous on Amazons. The cameras pivoted obediently as the procession came to a halt at the base of the review stand.

Brenna heard Vicar's dry brogue. "No slave girls tossing rose petals?"

The warriors around her snickered, but Brenna felt another odd wave of disquiet.

Theryn's Amazons, versus those who follow Shann. Evil sisters against good.

That was how Vicar saw it, and Jesstin, and every other woman who followed Shann. But good and evil were never that simple, and only Shann truly understood that. These women were all Amazons. They were all Clan.

Nothing else followed that rather mundane insight, and Brenna was surprised to feel brief disappointment. *Thanks heaps,* she thought to the elusive Grandmothers. *Platitudes are a big help.* It was her first spontaneous prayer to her Guides.

Her hands were freezing, which had little to do with the biting cold of the mountain morning. Brenna had won all-City in the Youth Division in kickboxing, but she'd only been in a real fight once, and that had been last spring, in the foothills, when she'd thrown herself at Caster and brought her down, just before she fired the bullet that hit Camryn's leg.

Please don't let me mess up. Her second prayer. *Don't let me get anyone hurt*. *Including me.* She kept her eyes pinned on Jess's broad shoulders in front of her, suddenly aware of the warmth of the blue shawl Dorothea had given her, seemingly years ago. Brenna had tied it around her waist as a kind of a belt—a shawl not being ideal battle attire—and now she was glad she had. Its warmth felt protective.

Theryn had assembled her troops in a half circle in front of the review stand. Sitting the elegant bay as if born to the saddle, she graciously inclined her head. "Whenever you're ready, Caster."

"Close-up on me, Miss Dana. Tight frame and keep it that way until I tell you to pan back." Caster cleared her throat and adjusted the collar of her parka.

Brenna caught Kyla's eye as she jutted her chin at Caster and twirled one finger rudely around her ear. Brenna glared at her with an older sister's fierceness. The soldier guarding Kyla and Shann could have caught that insolence, but beside her, Camryn snickered.

Dana was peering into the eyepiece of one of the cameras, correcting its focus. "Sound check!" she called.

"Good morning." Caster's voice was full and warm, but not especially loud. Brenna saw her adjust a small clip near her collar and realized she was wearing some kind of mike.

Dana lifted a hand. "You're set, Caster."

"Jesstin?" Caster peered down at her. "You and your bloodthirsty horde are to remain absolutely silent while I speak, yes? Or your queen will have cause to regret it."

From her vantage point at the edge of Jess's group, Brenna saw Theryn frown, but she said nothing. Brenna noticed her wife, Grythe, was not in attendance this morning.

Caster folded her hands on the railing and looked into the camera on her left.

"Good morning." Caster smiled as if addressing old friends, then became somber. "I reference Clinic Study T-714, ladies and gentlemen. Contracted to the Clinic's Military Research Unit, the so-called Tristaine Project involved developing techniques for nonchemical, noncoercive behavioral control. At first, we feared that our efforts had failed." She paused, then smiled again. "They have not."

Caster turned to address the other camera. "The gentle layfolk on our distinguished panel must forgive me for my deceit. I realize you were all told that our Clinic study ended in disaster. That our Amazon subject, Jesstin of Tristaine, miraculously pulled off a daring escape from our top-secret, heavily guarded Clinic facility."

Caster's ebony eyes flickered to Brenna, then returned to the camera.

"As you can see in Attachment 1-C of our prospectus, this so-called escape was very much part of my original protocol! Jesstin 'escaped' at my direction. She was always under the direct monitoring of my assistant, a Government-certified Medical Technician. Jesstin

and my assistant returned to Tristaine in order to lead City forces against these so-called Amazons—per *my* programming."

There was an angry stirring among Jess's warriors, and Dana shifted uneasily as rifles rose around the arena. Jess lifted a hand, and the rustling immediately subsided.

"The film you are about to see records the battles that occurred just as I arrived in this remote mountain village." Caster turned to the last camera, and her expression grew solemn. "The conquest of Tristaine is a harrowing and, in many ways, tragic story. Both our test subject, Jesstin, and my assistant were lost in the gruesome fighting. But, in the name of decency, I have edited out the sordid scene containing their deaths, and I'm pleased to tell you that our documentary *will* offer a happy ending."

Caster raised her voice. "Pan back cameras, please."

Dana scowled, watching the soldier next to her jerkily widen the image appearing in his viewfinder. Theryn appeared in the frame, along with the semicircle of Amazons surrounding her.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the new high council of Tristaine!" Caster's voice rang with pride. She paused as if to accommodate the imagined gasps of surprise in her audience. "All eager to sign Citizenship papers! All willing to abide by City laws! Now…would you like to hear more?" Her voice was almost girlish in its coyness. "Then sit back. I have quite a story to tell!" Caster smiled sweetly at the camera, then nodded at Dana. "All right, cut! Lord, Theryn!" She fanned her face. "How do you stand the horrid stink wafting from that beast you're riding?"

Jess's shoulders were stiff. Brenna looked up at Shann, whose features were an eloquent expression of sorrow.

"I believe we're about ready to begin the filming of the first battle." Caster glanced down at Brenna. "Oh, stop glaring at me like that, my ex-colleague. No one's *really* going to die! But my Military funders will be none the wiser, *and* you needn't worry about your younger sister Samantha learning of your supposed death, Miss Brenna!"

Brenna felt her body tremble. She kept her gaze on Caster, trying to emulate Jess's calm.

"Fortunately, little Samantha won't have to grieve for you, as she was killed six weeks ago in quite a horrific traffic accident. She burned, I believe, along with her husband and the baby she was carrying. I'm terribly sorry, Brenna. I meant to tell you earlier." Caster smiled down at her. "Cameras ready? Remember, this is supposed to be a spontaneous battle! Oh dear, we did forget to talk about those darn rules, but ah, well. Theryn?"

Theryn wheeled her mount. "Amazons, attack!"

The fourteen women led by Patana and Myrine unleashed a chilling war cry and flew straight at Jess's warriors. Brenna was stunned, both by Caster's statement and the abruptness of the attack, and she almost let the small Amazon who raced toward her knock her flat.

Jess shoved Brenna aside, then kicked her attacker away with one powerful sideswipe of her booted foot. "Brenna!" She gripped her upper arms, hard. "Samantha is *not* dead! Now *fight*!"

Then Jess spun, her hair lashing Brenna's face as two of Theryn's best jumped her.

Hand-to-hand combat, Brenna learned long ago, meant different things in the City than in Tristaine. In the City it was a game; among Amazons it could be deadly. But when her opponent picked herself up out of the dirt and lunged for her again, Brenna still wasn't prepared for the ferocity of the attack, and a knee punched into her stomach.

After that she had no rational thought; she just fought.

War cries filled the air from both sides, chilling Brenna's blood. This was no drill, no tournament. She didn't know the young Amazon she faced. While the girl wasn't a warrior, she still had the fighting prowess expected of every able-bodied woman in Tristaine. Her second blow was a fast slice with the side of her hand.

But Brenna had learned much in a summer of tutelage by Dyan's best. She dodged the strike with a deft twist, and it whickered past her. Then she countered with a neat back kick. Breath exploded out of her opponent as she bent double.

At least Theryn's women aren't armed, Brenna thought, catching her breath. If the Amazons commanded by Patana and

Myrine had the advantages of numbers and surprise, at least they weren't allowed weapons.

It was to be a long battle. Small groups of fighters, in twos and threes, had spaced themselves around the field. The strongest warriors in Jess's group, like Vicar and Hakan, fought one-on-one with the best fighters in Theryn's. Here and there two pairs of smaller warriors squared off against each other.

Dana was more unnerved by the war cries and the viciousness of the fighting than she allowed her face to reveal. The mercenaries under her command paced the perimeter of the field tensely, their rifles ready. She frowned. This was not the time for men with guns to get dicey nerves.

Dana was distracted by the sight of Theryn's bay horse, loping riderless through the stadium gates toward the stables. Through the unbelievable racket of the battle, she watched Theryn emerge from the door to the review stand and seat herself next to Caster. The beautiful Amazon with the strange eyes named Grythe was with her.

Watching the expressions of the other two women in the stand, Tristaine's queen and that profane young redhead, Kyla, Dana felt an unexpected twinge of sympathy through her chest.

Brenna finished off her opponent with a well-placed punch that left her gasping in the dirt, then looked around wildly for Jess. She found her grappling skillfully with Patana. To her great relief, despite the lingering effects of the taser, Jess was holding her own.

Brenna scanned the chaotic field. Myrine fought Vicar, and Hakan battled Perry, the big Amazon who had clashed with Elodia. Hakan executed a dazzling flip, kicking the other warrior off her feet. A scattering of lesser-skilled women from Theryn's group ran from pairing to pairing.

Up in the review stand, Caster was watching the action avidly, her chin resting on her folded hands. The bruise beneath her eye was more evident against the excitement that tinged her cheeks.

Brenna gasped as two more of Theryn's fighters headed for Jess. She knew her lover was fully engaged countering Patana's brutal strikes and couldn't possibly see them. Hitting low and hard

in a flying tackle, Camryn cut one of Jess's attackers short. With effort, Brenna took out the other.

The battle seemed to go on for hours. Brenna fought carefully, helping Camryn keep a series of random assailants off Jess. Ordinarily a miracle of stamina, Jess was tiring, her body running with sweat despite the morning chill. Brenna reacted instantly to Cam's every shouted instruction, and, finally, bouts began to stumble to a halt across the arena.

"And that's a *cut*!" Caster gave the railing an exuberant slap. "Ladies, that was utterly magnificent!"

Patana straightened, glaring at Jess with muddy hate. "Stand down," she gasped to her warriors.

"S-stand down," Myrine echoed her. Vicar eased out of her fighting stance and stepped back.

Brenna went immediately to Jess. When Camryn joined them, Jess put a hand on Cam's shoulder and leaned hard.

"Check," Jess ordered, panting.

"No serious injuries, Jesstin." Cam steadied her.

"Tell Shann."

Camryn lifted a hand toward the review stand and twirled her fingers in a complex motion Brenna couldn't follow.

Theryn's voice rang commandingly from the review stand. "Amazons, rest!"

"What she said," Jess managed, and then her legs folded abruptly. They guided her to the ground.

"Hey! Cam, is she all right?"

Brenna saw Myrine across the field. The long scar on her face was livid, and she was still breathing hard.

Vicar intercepted Myrine as she started to walk toward Jess and jammed her muscular forearm against her chest. "Go back to your new *queen*, Amazon." The venom in her old friend's voice froze Myrine where she stood. She turned and went back to join Theryn's warriors.

Jess was fully conscious, but more spent than Brenna had ever seen her. She sat with her head lowered, her soaked sides heaving as she pulled in breath. Brenna knelt beside her and went through the

motions of checking her pulse and respiration.

"There will be a two-hour truce between battles!" Theryn raised her voice to be heard over the harsh breathing of the Amazons below. "Jesstin, your warriors will all be fed. Sisters, if any among you are injured, just signal Dana and you'll receive aid!"

"I stopped listening after she mentioned food," Jess muttered, her eyes still closed.

"It's all right. I'll catch you up when you've rested." Brenna didn't like how long it was taking Jess to catch her breath. "Just sit still for a while, Jesstin. Camryn's getting everyone sorted out."

"Yes'm."

Dana felt as tired as the Amazons looked. Just watching such acrobatic fighting had exhausted her. She ducked quickly into the small stable beneath the arena and brought out as many Army blankets as she could carry.

She tossed a few to one of the soldiers who had been filming the fight, and he frowned. "What am I supposed to do with these?"

"They've been sweating for hours in this cold, you cretin," Dana snapped at him. "Pass these out. Then we need to get some coffee and decent chow in here. Move!"

"Miss Dana?" Caster called from the stand. "Your immediate responsibility is to bring me the footage of this morning's efforts! I plan to keep my new films warm and safe in my quaint little cabin unit. Then you can escort Her Highness, here, back to her tribal chieftains."

Dana ground her teeth and handed off her armload of blankets to another female soldier. "Pass these out."

"Hey, Dane?" The uniformed woman grinned at her. "That was the most beautiful damn fighting I've ever seen. Can we learn that?"

Dana stared at her, incredulous. "Sure, Landolt, I'll set up weekly drills, us against them." She grumbled on toward the next camera, picking her way cautiously between the Amazons sprawled on the field.

Jess had recovered enough to speak, and Brenna brushed her hair back so she could see her eyes.

"Brenna." Jess took her hand and held it tightly. "Caster has all the reason in the world to lie about Samantha."

"She's right," said Camryn, handing Brenna a canteen. "That bitch would lie about anything, Brenna, and she told you right before Theryn's goons—" She glanced quickly at Jess. "Before Theryn's warriors jumped us," she amended, "just to shake you up."

"That's true, she did." Brenna bathed Jess's face with a wet cloth. She was quiet for a moment. "I guess I don't have any choice but to assume Caster's lying, for now. Because if Sammy's dead, I'll go nuts, and I simply don't have time today."

"Bren—"

"It's all right, Jesstin." Brenna kept her gaze on her hands, washing the dirt from Jess's face. "There's no way I can find out if Samantha's alive, at least not right now. Maybe I'll never know. That's the way it is. But I can help us fight Caster today. I can do that much for Sammy, so that's what I'm going to do."

Brenna wrung out the cloth and poured fresh water from the canteen over it again. She looked at Camryn and frowned. "Come here. Is that a broken nose or a bump?"

"It's probably a zit." Camryn felt her nose glumly and shrugged. "Not broken."

Quiet settled over the cold arena as the weak sun centered itself overhead. The review stand was empty, and Theryn's warriors had all limped out of the stadium. Brenna looked for Dana, but she wasn't among the soldiers guarding Jess's Amazons.

"You fought well today, Cam." Jess appraised her. "You're faster than I was at your age."

"When boars fly," Camryn snorted.

"It's only the truth." Jess lifted her arm, wincing, and laid it across Brenna's slumped shoulders. "How's my lady?"

"Tired, scared, worried." Brenna considered a moment. "Hungry."

"I will go make you a tasty pig sandwich."

Brenna smiled in spite of her fatigue and allowed herself to rest against Jess.

❖

Dana was fascinated by the fine carpentry of the footbridge that spanned Tristaine's swift river. She bounced experimentally to test the wood, and the red-haired Amazon turned back and threw her another evil scowl. The girl was gorgeous, but she seemed to carry an endless supply of frowns, for Dana at least.

The woman named Shann walked on, and Dana skipped a step to catch up to her prisoners, cursing herself for the lapse.

Tantalizing smells beckoned from the mess hall. Dana wasn't sure what Amazons called the lodge where they prepared meals. The women of Tristaine's council were cooking for their captive warriors. Dana's mouth watered. City food offered nothing like these alluring aromas.

She almost walked smack into the queen of the Amazons. Shann stood regarding her with curious gray eyes, and she seemed unimpressed by the swift rise of Dana's rifle. She gave a slow, mannered blink, as if too polite to comment.

"She's the one who tasered Jesstin, lady." Kyla waited at the base of the stairs leading up to the mess hall. "Her name is Dung."

"The name is Dana," Dana corrected sharply. She gestured toward the mess with her rifle. "Move on, Amazon."

"The name is Shann," Shann corrected. "Kyla? Wait for me inside."

To Dana's surprise, the insolent redhead turned and started up the stairs. She wouldn't have thought Kyla capable of simple obedience. Dana flushed. Prisoners should not be giving orders. She glared at Shann.

"Let's move on, ma'am."

"No, I need to speak with you a moment. Shoot me, if you feel you must." Shann began rummaging in the soft folds of her patched robes, a task made awkward by her tied hands. She withdrew a small, tattered spiral notebook. "Take this, and give it to the blond healer called Brenna." She held it out to Dana, who looked at it warily.

"I'm not taking that anywhere." Dana swallowed and brought her voice down out of its highest register. "You shouldn't even have it, whatever it is. Weren't you searched?"

"Dana, take this to Brenna. It's important. Tell her she must bring her entries up to date."

Dana was unable to describe the tone of Shann's voice, because she'd never heard anything like it. Her authority felt nothing like Caster's sinister coercion or Theryn's grandiosity. This woman wore a cloak of calm command as natural as a second skin.

"You should give that thing to the redhead to give to Brenna. You know she'll be returned to the stable tonight." Dana stared at Shann, curious in spite of herself. "What makes you think I wouldn't take that notebook and your message straight to Theryn? Or Caster herself?"

"Well…" Shann studied her with those adroit eyes. "I knew within five minutes of meeting Theryn that she was highly intelligent and highly ambitious. Within three minutes, I knew your Caster had no soul. I've watched you for six hours today. And it's important that *you* take this to Brenna, Dana. I'm asking you to trust me."

So Dana took the notebook.

"Thank you." Shann turned and went into the mess hall, and Dana watched her go. Then she looked around and slid the notebook deep into the pocket of her jacket.

❖

"It's a lovely day for a battle!" Caster stepped to the railing and beamed down at Theryn's warriors. "We're ready for round two, Amazons!"

Jess's gaze locked on Myrine as she helped Patana pass out a variety of hand weapons to their line of fighters. Brenna heard an angry rumbling in their ranks, and Jess turned and signaled. Her warriors moved in closer.

"We see what's happening." Jess's alto was calm. We'll be fighting open-handed against armed opponents. We may not get a choice of targets, but you all know your strengths. If you can, match yourself against the weapon you know best."

"Wait a minute." Brenna touched Jess's arm. "They have weapons, we don't?"

"Right." Jess nodded.

"There's nothing in Tristaine's laws about not bullying other Amazons by killing them?" Brenna folded her arms against both cold and fear. "Shouldn't we protest this?"

"No, Bren. You're right, this is unfair, and it's dangerous as hell. But it would weaken our stance to complain, and it would be futile." Jess searched Brenna's face. "This is how Caster wants it. Theryn's willing to go along with it. Clear?"

"Unfortunately." Brenna swallowed.

"Patana's fighters aren't as skilled as we are." Jess raised her voice and addressed them all. "That might make them damned deadly, even if they don't mean to hurt us. Understood?"

"We hear, Jess," Hakan said from the rear of the pack.

Jess nodded. "Camryn, instructions?"

"Uh, watch me and Jess. Remember our purpose. Don't take foolish chances. Take any weapon you can and use it to restrain and confine your opponent. And fight without harm. Brenna, that means defend yourself and try to disarm your target, but don't injure—"

"She knows," Jess said. It was how Jess had fought in the Clinic. "They're not using anything lethal. No crossbows or daggers. Mostly clubs. If we're careful, we can fight without harm."

"Artemis, shield your daughters," Camryn finished, and Brenna heard the phrase repeated softly in at least three different languages.

Jess signaled again, that subtle twirling of fingers that Brenna kept forgetting to ask about. Shann's warriors turned to face Theryn's line.

"Miss Dana, check our cameras, please." Caster primped before opening the afternoon session. She cleared her throat and carefully patted her styled coif in place.

Shann and Kyla, seated again at the other end of the review stand, knew well enough the increased dangers of this second battle. Kyla looked pale, and Shann's remote features couldn't conceal her tension.

"Amazons!" Theryn rose, and Brenna realized for the first time that Grythe was seated beside her in the stand, clothed in finery.

Theryn patted Grythe's shoulder, then joined Caster at the railing.

"The terms of our truce with the City are almost fulfilled. We have two more battles to film. One begins now, and the last will be staged tomorrow. Then our guests will return to the City, and our adanin can return from the southern meadows!"

A cheer rose from Theryn's followers, but a ragged one. Brenna noted that most of the women facing them still looked weary from the morning's strenuous bout. But the weak afternoon sun glinted off their weapons, and Brenna found her sympathy for them was limited.

Theryn extended her hand over those assembled on the fighting field. "Amazons! Fight with no harm!"

"Roll 'em!" Caster snapped her fingers at Dana.

"Space yourselves," Jess called.

A hissing breath escaped Brenna as they moved apart and the battle began, and any sense of time fled along with it. The afternoon became a frightening series of slides that flickered through her mind in rapid succession.

The Amazon named Perry whirled long strips of a rawhide sling over her head and released a stone from its leather cup that flew halfway across the arena where it clipped Vicar's thigh. She staggered, and Brenna ran for her.

Vicar kept her footing, but her handsome face contorted with pain. She recovered quickly, whirled, and raced toward Perry, so Brenna veered off. And promptly dropped flat on her butt. A staff whizzed through the space formerly occupied by Brenna's head, fast and hard enough to do real damage.

She dodged the warrior wielding it by crawling between her spread legs, then rolled free. She didn't mind clownish acrobatics if it saved her a concussion. She took out her clumsy opponent with one neat flip.

After an hour of constant battle, Brenna began to tire, and from the sound of the grunts of effort that rose around her, she wasn't alone. She scanned the chaotic arena for Jess and found her. Brenna scuttled like a crab across the fighting field. It wasn't dignified, but it got her to her lover's side in one piece.

Jess was finishing a match against a woman who swung escrima sticks—two trim hardwood clubs. Jess swept her feet out from under her with a spinning kick; then she almost collapsed herself. Brenna darted to her feet and steadied her quickly.

"How are—?" It was all Brenna could get out, before pulling for lungfuls of thin mountain air. She didn't see how Jess stayed erect. The high planes of her face were the color of old linen.

"Pace yourself, Bren." Jess straightened with effort. "Stay close to me."

"Oh, yeah."

J'heika, rise.

Brenna went still and scanned the dusty field of battling Amazons. Their hoarse war cries faded for a moment and then returned at full eerie volume.

She saw that the lenses of the three cameras filming the war game moved continuously in and out, as close-ups gave way to panned shots. The thirty women who fought in the arena had settled into grim matches that were bound to end more quickly than they had this morning. Weapons and fatigue shortened fights—and increased risk—but kept the action going.

Camryn battled with the small warrior who had attacked Brenna earlier, an uneven match. Cam fought close beside Jess, listening to her instructions and helping watch her back. Jess had just kicked a longknife out of the hand of her new opponent.

At the other end of the arena, Vicar grappled with Perry, both of them snarling, a sound that chilled Brenna. She saw Hakan take a nasty clout to the temple from Myrine's staff, but made herself focus on fighting.

The war cries grew more discordant in Brenna's mind, and for the first time since the battle began, she felt real fear. A swirl of white caught the corner of her vision, and she turned to the review stand. Shann stood at the railing.

Shann's tied hands were clasped on the rail, her eyes narrowed and intent on Brenna's face. She lifted one hand and made a twirling motion with her fingers.

What's happening, Blades?

The words reached Brenna clearly, and for a moment, she was so stunned at hearing the question she didn't immediately realize she didn't know the answer. She knew that her heart was racing, that she was afraid, and that was it. She lifted her hands to Shann in confusion and appeal.

Then Brenna looked across the arena and saw Patana raise a crossbow to her shoulder. The bald warrior took careful aim and smiled. Brenna saw the crossbow bolt and then tracked its intended path. She started to run.

"Jesstin!" A voice rang out across the arena.

It was Shann who called Jess's name, not Brenna. She, too, had finally seen Patana's forbidden crossbow. Out of the corner of her eye, Brenna saw a skirmish in the review stand as the guards there reacted to Shann's unexpected agitation. She ran on.

The twang of the bolt's release reached Brenna above the war cries, as keen and isolated as a note plucked on the string of a terrible harp.

Jess was just turning in response to Shann's cry. Brenna forced an extra burst of speed out of her exhausted legs and threw herself at Jess. She tackled her hard and took her down.

Patana's crossbow bolt whizzed harmlessly past them both and struck Camryn full in the chest.

Chapter Eight

Take me to Theryn."

Dana let out a long breath. "I can't do it, Brenna."

"Tell me how to make you do it."

Brenna was shorter than Dana by at least two inches, but in the tense air of the stable she seemed to be growing, in formidability if not stature.

"Look, keep your voice down." Dana glared at Rodriguez, who watched them from his post a few yards down the railing. "I'm sorry your friend got hurt, but like I said, there's nothing I can do for you. You can use the contents of that medical kit to help her, but that's it. *Caster's* orders," she said for the third time.

"We need to get this woman to Tristaine's infirmary, under sterile conditions, with the right supplies, or she's going to bleed to death." Brenna's lips trembled, but her voice was steady as a rock. "If you can't authorize that, then take me to Theryn."

Dana had heard this girl described as one of the finest Med Techs the City had ever educated, and she also remembered the way Brenna had fought during the war games. If Dana were honest with herself, she wasn't sure she could take her in a fair fight.

But this was not a fair fight, and there was nothing she could do for the wounded Amazon. Dana had to accept that reality, and so did her prisoners. She clenched her rifle in both hands and met Brenna's flashing eyes.

"Okay," Dana said, "come with me."

Dang it! Dana fumed. What is it with these Amazon witches, some kind of damn feminist mind control? She gestured to Rodriguez, who lifted the wooden railing that separated the stable from the soldiers.

Brenna ducked beneath it, then glanced back toward the Amazons gathered around Camryn. Kyla lifted her head and caught her gaze. Brenna had to grit her teeth against the desolation in her eyes.

"You taking this one up to Theryn's lodge?" Rodriguez said. Brenna could smell liquor on his breath as she passed him. The smell nauseated her.

"That's right," Dana answered dismissively. "As you were."

Brenna preceded Dana up the stairs that led out into the deserted arena. Her hands were tacky with blood, her arms streaked red from wrist to elbow. Now that she wasn't tending Camryn, Brenna could feel herself start to shake. When the mercenary named Dana took her arm as they crossed the rough ground of the fighting field, Brenna dimly registered that her hold was supportive rather than cruel.

"Just what do you imagine Theryn's going to do about this?" Dana knew her voice sounded angry, which was fine; she was. She never should have read that fucking journal; she was risking her entire fucking career. "Theryn's no doctor. Caster's the one calling the shots!"

"Shann's a doctor. A good one."

Brenna was walking fast, and Dana lengthened her stride to stay with her. "Theryn is *not* going to let you take that wounded prisoner to the infirmary, and she's *not* going to let that Shann woman come back with us. Didn't you hear me? Caster was real specific tonight."

"I heard you. I have to try." Brenna folded her arms and waited as Dana keyed open the padlock of the outer gate, then went through it and out into the moonlit Amazon village.

Brenna was terrified. She wasn't sure they could save Camryn, even if she and Shann had her in the infirmary now and they had a double line of cross-matched blood donors waiting. But the reminders Jess had whispered to her in the stable rang true. Camryn came from strong Amazon stock. She was young and healthy going into this, and she had a warrior's heart.

Their quick steps sounded over the footbridge that spanned

Tristaine's river, Terme Cay. Brenna glanced down at the black water that swirled beneath the bridge. It looked cold, fast, and merciless.

The silent village was flooded with the blue light of the full moon. If there were soldiers posted as sentries, Brenna didn't see them. She kept her eyes pinned on the lodge Theryn shared with Grythe, one of the larger, more luxurious cabins nestled in the trees.

Adrenaline fueled her up the four split-log steps to the cabin's ornate door. The mixture of fear and dread that gripped Brenna didn't eclipse her professional instincts, and she was grateful for that. Her practical goal kept her focused.

She was on a mission to secure the best medical care possible for an injured patient. The fact that the patient was Camryn, Kyla's adonai and Jess's second, her own adanin…

Brenna knocked, hard.

Dana's stomach hurt, and the ache didn't improve when her prisoner struck the door again, harder. They heard the neat click of a well-made latch, then blinked in the sudden light of the lamps and candles that filled the cabin. Dana was unpleasantly surprised. She hadn't expected to see Caster.

"Well, Miss Dana, I am less than pleased." Caster was dressed in a flowing robe of silver silk, but her stylish hair was as carefully coiffed as ever. Her black eyes glittered as they crawled over Brenna.

"I'm here to see Theryn, Caster," Brenna said.

"Well, that leaves you standing on this quaint little porch all alone, then." Caster turned and strolled back into the cabin. "Theryn and that pretty little lunatic she beds have gone to fetch me a long-delayed dinner. They'll be back presently. Bring her in, Dana."

Brenna hesitated, and Dana had to nudge her gently. They followed Caster into the sumptuous lodge.

Dana closed the door and leaned back against it. She studied Theryn's ornate decor and fine furniture, and let out a low whistle. This was by far the most luxurious cabin she'd yet seen in Tristaine. She wondered if Shann's private unit was this grand. Somehow she doubted it.

Caster left Brenna standing on a fringed rug in the middle of the hardwood floor and reclined heavily on the loveseat. She lifted the jeweled eyeglasses from the delicate chain around her neck and fit them in place. Then she picked up a folded document from the neat stack on the table before her.

"Tristaine's mine yields a much higher quality ore than even City geologists suspected, Brenna." Caster smiled at her over her glasses. "The samples I'm taking back to the City along with my film will please my funders a great deal."

"Camryn has a collapsed lung, Caster. I've stopped the external bleeding and bandaged the wound, but she needs surgery."

"Well, clinical medicine is hardly my first field, but if a chest wound isn't sucking any longer, you've patched any leak, yes?" Caster went back to her review of the mine schematics. "Just treat her for shock, Brenna. The girl will be excused from the filming of the final battle tomorrow, of course."

"She's hemorrhaging internally, and that bolt needs to come out. We need Shann, Caster. She's had years of experience with battle wounds."

"I'm sorry, dear. You know how I hate to lose anyone. But better this young Amazon, than your own dear Jesstin, yes?" Caster tossed the paper on the table and removed the reading glasses to examine her former assistant carefully.

"By the way, I underestimated you, Miss Brenna. You saved the life of your warrior-mate quite handily today. It's regrettable that you can't help poor Camrie now, though. Especially since she'd be fine and dandy tonight, had you not interfered. Does little Kyla blame you, too?"

"Listen to me, you spiteful City shrike." Brenna had stopped shaking, and her voice was low and hard. "I don't care how much you hate me or Jess. I don't care how long we've festered in your corrupt little mind. You're going to get your reputation back, and the City is going to get its silver. That's enough. Our friends don't have to die."

"Oh, sure they do." Caster lifted her eyeglasses. "My killing your loved ones is entirely in keeping with the spirit of the Tristaine

project, Brenna. Isn't that how the Amazons of old avenged themselves, dear? By slaughtering not only their enemies, but their families as well?"

Dana had studied history on the sly even though it was illegal, and she could have told Caster she was thinking of the Mongols, not the Amazons. But she wasn't about to correct her. The air between the two women fairly crackled with danger.

"We must take Camryn to the infirmary," Brenna repeated. "And Shann must do the surgery."

"No," Caster answered simply.

J'heika, rise.

Great, Brenna thought. *If I ever needed coaching from spirits, now's the time.*

But no instructions came, just a slow flood of sadness.

"Theryn realizes she must concede to my wishes in this, Brenna." Caster smiled at her. "She's smart enough and ambitious enough to know when to be flexible with our terms."

Camryn.

"But you're welcome to stay until Theryn returns and try to work your feminine wiles on her." Caster tittered. "I'd love to watch that, Bren! Miss Psychotica Grythe would tear out your heart with her small, misshapen teeth."

Brenna turned. "Take me back," she snapped, and Dana scrambled after her.

The same inner pull that had alerted Brenna weeks ago in the glade, when the boar attacked, drew her to the stable now. But unlike the first time, there was no urgency in this summons. Somehow she found that much more ominous than comforting.

They stepped down the cabin's log stairs and almost walked into Theryn and Grythe.

"Brenna!" Theryn steadied her glowering wife who was, as usual, draped over her arm. Both were laden with covered plates that emitted a heavenly aroma. "Dana, what's she doing here?"

Brenna pushed past the finely dressed couple, upsetting a platter intended for Caster. "Get out of my way, Theryn."

"Wait! Tell me about Camryn."

Brenna wheeled. “Just tell me. Did you order Patana to try to kill Jess, or was that her own bright idea?”

Theryn regarded Brenna with sorrow. “I had no knowledge of Patana’s move against Jesstin, little sister. I promise you.”

“Crossbows were banned from the field, Theryn. Where did Patana get one?”

“I honestly don’t know. She acted without my—”

“Is Patana fighting tomorrow?”

“I have no control over that.” Theryn scrubbed one hand across her face, the first natural gesture Brenna had ever seen the pretentious Amazon make. “I stood before the entire clan this morning, Brenna, and ordered a battle without harm. You saw me, you were there! Now, how is Camryn?”

“Camryn is dying, Theryn. She took a bolt to the chest today. You saw her, you were there.”

Brenna continued toward the arena, and Dana scrambled after her.

“Will you hang on, for crying out…” Dana fumbled with the keys to the padlock on the stadium gate.

Brenna waited until the hasp of the lock lifted, then pushed open the gate.

Dana caught her arm. “Here, take this.”

She was holding out the small spiral notebook Brenna used for a journal. Brenna stared at her.

“Shann says to bring it up to date.”

Brenna grabbed the notebook, shoved it into her pocket, and ran for the stable.

❖

Everything was so quiet, Brenna thought she was too late.

The soldiers were seated in their part of the room playing cards without much spirit.

In the stable, the bloodied straw had been cleared away. Camryn lay cushioned on two blankets and covered by three more. Her head rested in Kyla’s lap, and she was conscious.

Most of the other Amazons weren’t clustered around her any

longer. They stood or sat, in groups of twos and threes, and stared at nothing. The stable was silent. No sobbing, or even anger, and Brenna could sense a feeling of peace and acceptance in the stable. She refused to share it.

Only Elodia, Vicar, Hakan, and Jess still surrounded Kyla and Camryn. These were the faces Camryn wanted to see at the end. When Brenna knelt in their circle, Cam waved her fingers in welcome.

Brenna had seen death. Not a lot of it. She hadn't been working that long, but she'd seen it. She'd even seen violent deaths during her internships, and the death of children. This was unlike any other deathwatch she had ever attended.

It was peaceful, for one thing. There were no life-sustaining measures underway, no alarms, no intercoms that screamed protocols. Camryn was dying in a quiet space, surrounded by women she loved. She wasn't free from pain. Even as Brenna watched, she stiffened for a moment in Kyla's arms. But those moments didn't happen often. Camryn was almost ready to die, and her pain was ebbing along with her strength.

Brenna saw that Vicar, Hakan, and Jesstin all wore similar expressions, a kind of restrained grief. She recognized it as the stoic mask Amazon warriors always wore when their sisters died in battle.

Elodia was the only woman in the circle who cried. Her tears were soundless, but she clasped Camryn's hand and prayed—a soft, subterranean flow of musical Spanish.

Kyla's ashen face was a study in control. She held Camryn with gentle strength, stroking her hair and murmuring to her occasionally. Brenna gazed at her, remembering that Kyla had lost her innocence when her blood sister Dyan was murdered. Tonight, she would leave the last of her youth behind.

Finally, Jess cleared her throat. "Anything else, Cam?"

There was a pause before Camryn answered, and the weakness of her voice told Brenna how very close she stood to the doorway.

"I'm sorry to leave." Cam's unfocused eyes found Kyla's brown ones above her. They filled her sky now. "Bye, Kyla. You be good."

"I love you." Kyla sobbed once, but only once. She wanted to be able to see and hear Camryn while she still lived.

"Me you back, adonai." Camryn rested for a moment. Then she focused on Brenna and grinned. "Thanks."

"Thanks?" Brenna lifted Camryn's cold hand to her knee. "For what, Camryn?"

"You can call me Cam. For saving Jess like you did. You were great, Bren."

"Okay," Brenna whispered.

J'heika, rise.

"Give me the Queen's Blessing?" Cam asked Brenna.

"What?" Brenna didn't know who she was asking for information, Cam, or that spectral voice in her head.

Camryn spoke again, with effort. "Give me the Queen's Blessing, *j'heika*."

Camryn closed her eyes, and Kyla stroked her brow.

"Who is *J'heika*?" Vicar asked Jess, but Jess shook her head, puzzled.

"None of us can give the Queen's Blessing, mi amiga." Elodia's callused hand lay on Camryn's blanketed leg. "But you know Shann will send you a Blessing from the new Tristaine. We'll get our lady out of this, hija, and we'll avenge you. You have Elodia's promise."

"Elodia." Across their circle, Hakan stirred. "Never speak of vengeance at a warrior's deathbed, little sister. You'll be cursed."

"But she should know—"

"The Queen's Blessing on your journey, Camryn," Brenna said softly. Jess and the other Amazons all stared at her. She ignored them and laid the palm of her right hand lightly at the base of Camryn's throat.

"You leave us too early, little sister. The few seasons we had with you were much too brief. Our hearts are breaking, Cam."

All the energy in the stable, possibly all the energy in Tristaine, condensed and spiraled down to illuminate a small space, occupied only by Brenna, Kyla, and the dying warrior they comforted. No one could see this energy, but Brenna's deepest instinct recognized it as

the granting of the Queen's Blessing.

"But along with grieving for you, Camryn, we'll honor you." Brenna smiled, and her eyes overflowed with tears. "You gave your life in defense of your clan. You're a warrior worthy of Kimba's mantle, and you'll be remembered around our storyfires for generations. Now, close your eyes, honey. Let your adanin tell you good-bye."

Brenna's spirit glowed with a gratitude that was almost sacred, and she suddenly realized that was how an Amazon queen bid farewell to her fallen warriors. The gaze of the Amazons around her felt like warm beams touching her skin. Gradually, the women focused on Cam again and started saying their own silent and final farewells.

"You'll find our mothers waiting to welcome you," Brenna promised Camryn, "with a warm fire in the hearth, a platter of venison on the table, a flagon of cold mead in your hand, and the embrace of lost sisters to warm your heart. Camryn, daughter of Louisa, walk with Kimba. She'll lead you home to the real Tristaine. We'll see you again there."

"Thanks," Camryn murmured. Her eyes opened wide a last time. "Samantha's alive, Brenna."

Brenna felt as if she were waking from a long nap. She couldn't speak.

Jess leaned forward. "Are you sure, Cam?"

"Yeah. Brenna's sister is alive."

"But how do you know, adanin?" Jess asked gently.

"I'd see Samantha here, if she was dead." Camryn smiled at them and closed her eyes. "Because I can see Lauren now…"

Camryn relaxed in Kyla's arms. Brenna's palm measured the fading of her valiant heart as it faltered and stopped.

❖

Dana stood against the wall and shivered with a weariness that was tinged by nausea. She tried to stifle the latest in a series of jaw-cracking yawns.

The Amazons had been quiet since they covered the warrior's body with a blanket and carried it to lie in state beneath one of the stable's barred windows. Maybe some of the prisoners slept, because no one had stirred for hours.

Kyla sat beside the blanketed body of her life-mate, her face in her hands. She seemed to be praying, though Dana couldn't hear any words, just soft snatches of song. She had offered to bring the girl some hot tea, but Jesstin had politely turned her down.

Now Jesstin sat in the shadows and watched over Kyla. She got up every hour or so and made a slow circuit of the stable, checked with the Amazon on watch, and made sure the others slept. Then she would fade into the shadows again.

Brenna was the only other prisoner who sat apart from the others. She sat on the woodplank floor, in the one meager pool of light offered by their portable generator. She'd written in that spiral notebook nonstop for the past three hours.

Dana pushed herself off the wall and went over to a stack of Army blankets. She unfolded one, then went to the railing and draped it over Brenna's shoulders.

It wasn't that Brenna didn't notice Dana's gesture. She did feel and appreciate the blanket's sudden warmth, but she hardly glanced up.

❖

It's almost dawn.

I've caught up on everything that's happened since my last entry. From freezing on the ridge—that had to be months ago, but it was only days—to tonight, Camryn's death.

I don't know why Shann wanted me to write all this. If she was hoping I'd vent some pent-up emotion, it's not happening. I can't let myself think about Cam right now, or even about helping Kyla survive this loss.

Jess can't focus on anything but what comes with morning, either. In a few hours, she's got to get everyone through this last fight alive.

Then, somehow, we have to get Shann and the rest of us the hell out of this valley.

Then—please, Gaia, only then—we have to use the remote detonator to set off the dynamite, destroy the dam, and flood the village.

And we thought yesterday sucked.

I'm sorry, whoever is reading this, I'm not being flip. I'm just scared and a little sleep-drunk. I don't know about Theryn's fighters, but we haven't had decent rest in days. Jess isn't sleeping now, I can tell, and she was already running on a long sleep deficit.

I've got to talk to Shann. Who is this "Jaheeka"? No one here knows. This goes on my list of questions to ask Shann, unless we both drown. It will come right after, "Was Cam's death my fault?"

I don't know why I believe Theryn when she says she didn't know Patana was going to attack Jess. For that matter, I'm not sure why I believe Theryn never told Caster about the dynamite on the dam. Theryn's done nothing to earn my trust. Somehow it relates to that all-or-nothing, Good Amazon/Bad Amazon mind-set being wrongheaded…

But I told Jess I thought Theryn was telling the truth. I just don't know how we can use that.

❖

As Brenna closed the notebook she caught a glimpse of unfamiliar handwriting. She opened the journal again and read the lines Shann had written on its last page. She studied the map beneath Shann's entry, then gasped loudly when Jess touched her hair.

"Easy, lass." Jess lowered herself to the straw and winced as her arm draped across Brenna's blanketed shoulders. "We're still sneaking up on you, eh? You look cold."

"So do you." Brenna rested her head against Jess's shoulder. She was aware of Dana and the other City soldiers, but their presence felt immaterial. She slipped the journal into the inner pocket of her jacket and zipped the flap.

They sat quietly for a while. They couldn't possibly say everything they both needed to say in these brief moments of privacy, so they chose the more primitive comforts of silence and touch. Jess scratched Brenna's scalp through her tousled hair, and Brenna snuggled more deeply against her.

Then she remembered Jess's painful wince she had seen earlier and sat up again. "Oh, damn. Sorry."

Jess blinked at her. "What? I'm okay."

"Well, I've learned that's a relative concept. Apparently an Amazon thinks she's 'okay' if no one's yanked out her liver yet." Brenna smiled and rested her palm very lightly on Jess's side, close to the taser's mark. "How's this?"

"Sore." Jess adjusted her shoulders against the railing behind them.

"Anything else that I can't see in this light?"

"I'm just real stiff." Jess caught Brenna's probing fingers gently in her own and held them to her lips. "Rest a while, Bren."

Brenna sighed and settled again against her shoulder. "I need to get you someplace I can look you over, Jesstin. Hakan and Vicar too. They both took some pretty bad hits today."

"We all did, querida, body and heart." Jess rested her cheek in Brenna's hair. "Kyla's taken the worst strike."

Brenna closed her eyes. "How is she?"

"How Shann was, I imagine, right after we lost Dyan. How either of us would be."

Brenna shivered. She squeezed Jess's waist a little.

"You did save my life, lass. I thank you for it."

Brenna nodded. "Cam forgave me, didn't she?"

"Aye, she did."

"All right, Amazons, everyone up." Dana's voice was low, but still jarring in the dawn stillness of the stable. "You'll be given a chance to wash, then you'll be fed. You need to be ready for the arena in two hours. Move sharp, please."

❖

Time started to telescope.

In the middle of the fighting field, Shann's warriors, led by Jess, waited in a rough semicircle, just as they had the day before. Theryn's Amazons, led by Myrine and Patana, faced them from their position below the review stand.

Caster, Theryn, and Grythe sat in the stand with Shann and Kyla and two armed guards.

The cameras were all manned and ready.

Dana was watching her soldiers, and, judging from her expression, she shared Brenna's fears about them. The City mercs looked wired, as if their nerves were drawn tight as bowstrings.

The one difference between yesterday and today only increased Brenna's anxiety. The lower level of the stadium was filled with Amazons. Caster had ordered that every woman loyal to Shann's rule be brought in to witness this final war game.

Brenna saw Constance, Kas, Opal, and Teresias, four members of Tristaine's high council, clustered at one end of the risers. DeLorea and the thirty other Amazons who had been imprisoned in the warrior's barracks were spaced along the other side of the stadium.

More Amazons required more soldiers so, in effect, every human being in the village was in the arena or guarding its perimeter. If tension could be made visible, Brenna knew she would see sheets of it shimmer in the air around her.

Then Caster stood up, and time lurched sickeningly back into place.

"All right, Miss Dana, I'm ready for my close-up!"

The camera lenses whirred as they zoomed in.

"Roll film," Dana called tonelessly.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen." Caster placed both hands lightly on the stand's railing. "I reference, once again, Clinic Study T-714 and introduce this filmed record of the final, climactic battle for Tristaine!"

She paused. "Cut! Patana, distribute the weapons, please!"

Dana saw the bald Amazon trot quickly behind the wall of the stadium. She emerged carrying an armful of swords and crossbows.

"Come on, you lot," Patana called. "Myrine, Perry! Pass these out. I'll get the rest."

Dana's stomach clenched again. Obviously, Jesstin and her warriors were still expected to fight barehanded, only this time, against weapons that could kill. She looked up and saw that Caster was deep in conversation with Theryn, and their talk was growing heated.

Shann's warriors were watching Jesstin.

Jesstin was watching Shann.

Tristaine's queen looked like she had slept as little as Jess and Brenna. Shann sat erect on the cushioned bench in the review stand and held Kyla's hand. Kyla's eyes worried Brenna. They were unfocused and distant.

Theryn's Amazons all held weapons now. Most held crossbows, swords, and daggers, but two of the slightest fighters carried what looked like pistols.

Suddenly Theryn bellowed, "Caster, I forbid it!"

Brenna watched, dumbfounded, as Theryn vaulted from the review stand. She landed awkwardly, but apparently with ankles intact. The uneasy rumbling that had started to move through the watching Amazons in the risers subsided as she stalked toward Patana.

Wake up, daughtera. J'heika, rise!

"Tell me what to do," Brenna whispered. Yesterday, Camryn had been standing so close to her she would have heard the prayer.

"I said stand down, Amazon!" Theryn clenched the bunched fabric at Patana's throat. "I ordered *all* battles be fought without harm!"

"Caster changed that order, and she was right, Theryn." Patana gripped her mentor's arms. "Be honest, adanin, you knew this was coming! How else could it end?"

"What?"

"Let us *fight*, Theryn! Let's finish this at last, and give Tristaine the queen and the high council she deserves!"

Theryn shook off Patana's grip and wheeled on Myrine. "Has Caster poisoned *you* with this bloody swill, too?"

"No." Myrine looked as dazed as Brenna felt. "I mean, no, I didn't know anything about all—Patana, what—"

Theryn pushed Myrine aside and strode back beneath the review stand.

"Caster! I forbid the use of weapons! If we had to sacrifice Camryn, so be it. But I'll not allow *one more drop* of Amazon blood—"

"Your bosom heaves once again, Theryn." From the railing, Caster lifted a placating hand. "Now, think back. We have already filmed you on a horse in front of your triumphant warriors, yes?"

Theryn folded her arms, every line of her body defiant.

"Remember our story?" Caster coached. "A converted Jesstin tries to convince Tristaine to incorporate under the City. But Tristaine resists! Your warriors *defeat* Jesstin, Theryn! Then my protocol converts *your* warriors! Amazons become Citizens! City gets silver! You get throne!"

The mockery in Caster's tone registered with Grythe, who cast a blistering glare at her. Brenna realized Shann was studying Theryn with intense interest.

"Yes, we defeat Jesstin's warriors, Caster," Theryn retorted, "but then, according to our truce, Shann and her Amazons are to be *exiled*. Not murdered! We risk more deaths if any warriors carry weap—"

"Oh, please, you'll have plenty of Amazons to spawn our New Tristaine, Theryn." Caster seemed nettled by the delay. "Remember, all the villagers who escaped us, or *migrated*, as you quaintly put it, will come back. You'll have your own followers down there. *And* you'll even have those Amazons in the stands, the less competent of Shann's warriors. That's practically all of old Tristaine to rule!"

"Everyone lives." Theryn's voice was strained. "Caster, there will be no more bloodshed."

"Just a little bloodshed," Caster corrected. "Just those ten little warriors down there, give or take a few. We did get Camryn's death on film yesterday, but that's hardly enough, Theryn. The film must have *some* carnage if it's to be authentic!"

Caster turned a glowing smile on Shann. "And Tristaine's barbarian queen must see it, if she's to be humbled."

Brenna had never wanted to do anything but heal others, but now she realized she was capable of killing even if she wasn't physically threatened. She would think about that unpleasant revelation later.

"All right, get ready to fight, you people!" Caster snapped her fingers. "Roll 'em, Miss Dana!"

"Wait!" Theryn's cape swirled as she spun and walked toward Jess. "Dana, stand down!"

"At ease!" Dana yelled to her troops. Her mouth was dry. The damn stadium seemed to be teeming with hostile Amazons and spooked soldiers with rifles. "Lower your weapons, I said!"

"Theryn, get back up here!" Now Caster's voice was ominously shrill. "Dana, *I* am paying your commission, not that ridiculous Amazon queen wannabe!"

Brenna moved to Jess's side as Theryn reached her, and she felt that strange spiraling down of energy again.

Theryn hesitated, and her struggle for self-control aged her face a decade. Brenna sensed waves of outrage radiating from her, and something heavier, more like defeat or despair. Jess's own dark energy broadcast her grief and wariness.

Brenna realized with a jolt that she was, for god's sake, *reading energy waves*, and she looked up at Shann. Tristaine's queen stood at the railing now, just as she had yesterday, but try as she might, Brenna could read nothing in her pale features.

"All right, Jesstin." Theryn won her struggle for restraint, and her eyes on Jess were cold as slate. She spoke quietly, so only Jess and Brenna heard her. "I'm going to order my warriors to break ranks. We'll try to keep Caster's mercenaries off you. You and your Amazons, get Shann and her council out of the village. Then blow the dam and send that bitch up there to hell!" She smiled without mirth. "I don't care how many Amazons either of us have to lose to achieve *that*."

"*Theryn*!" Caster's fury was rising. "Get your pagan ass up

here! I *will* order your warriors to attack right now. Don't you *dare* test me!"

"Theryn, slow down." Jess's gaze was locked on Shann. "Things got real hot, real fast. Just watch me and follow my direction."

Theryn stepped forward into Jess's space, and Brenna knew that was not a wise move. "Do you imagine that you and your cohorts are the only Amazons in this stadium who love Tristaine, Jesstin? Sweet Gaia, the gall of the young and righteous! *We have no time to plan*, so spare me your indignation. Caster knows nothing of the dam, Jess."

"All right, Dana! Get those cameras rolling!" Caster was snapping her fingers, rapidly. "And you, you, bald Amazon! Attack! All of you, *attack!"*

Pulsing silence filled the arena.

"I'll get the women I love to safety, Jesstin. You do the same." Theryn's eyes flicked to Brenna. "Once they're safe, Shann can send Tristaine to a cold but righteous sleep. If you have a better strategy, I'm listening."

Jess looked at Brenna.

Brenna nodded. "We can trust her, Jess. She means it."

Then Grythe screamed. It was a raw, ugly sound that ripped the air and triggered the destruction that followed.

Brenna didn't remember Elodia's promise to Camryn until she saw the dagger in her hand. Elodia was racing across the arena toward them, targeted on Theryn. Brenna knew no Spanish and so didn't understand exactly what she was shouting, but one thing was clear. From the names Elodia screamed, she believed killing Theryn would avenge Camryn and free Tristaine's queen.

Time telescoped again.

"Elodia, stand down!" It was Shann's voice, but Elodia was too deep in her thirst for revenge to hear her.

Grythe leapt from the review stand and landed behind her wife like a frightened spider crazed to protect her egg sac. She emitted that soul-shriveling scream again and dashed toward Elodia.

Jess bolted after Grythe, and Vicar and Hakan were on a dead run to intercept them both.

Brenna didn't see which of Dana's mercenaries fired, but the first bullet hit Grythe in the back. Astonishment crossed her beautiful face as she crumpled into the dirt.

Elodia fell a bare second later, shot by at least two different rifles.

Dana was screaming hoarsely, racing from soldier to soldier, yelling orders into white faces. She saved the Amazons from an immediate bloodbath, but it was harrowingly close.

Vicar crouched beside Elodia's body and felt for a pulse at her throat. Brenna recognized the gesture as the formality it was. The girl was dead.

The Amazons on the risers, stunned by the sudden violence, began to step down onto the fighting field.

Caster still screamed orders, but she was largely ignored.

Theryn dropped to her knees beside her wife. Grythe still lived. Brenna could see the erratic lift and fall of her breast, but a small pool of blood was forming beneath her, soaking into the earth.

A surreal silence fell.

"Jesstin!"

Every eye flew to the review stand. Shann was staring down at Theryn, her hand poised over the railing, waiting. Her graceful fingers trembled.

Gently, Theryn let her unconscious wife come to rest on the ground. She got to her feet. She looked at Jess and at Brenna, and then she turned to address the Amazons who followed her.

"Hear me, sisters!" Theryn's voice rang through the stadium. "Caster seeks to violate the truce that would have preserved our clan!"

"Theryn!" Caster screamed. "My right hand to God, Theryn, I will order you shot where you stand!"

"We fight for Tristaine!" Theryn didn't even glance at Caster. She raised one hand to her Amazons. "We fight for Shann!"

Shann's fingers twirled, signaling Jess.

"Amazons, attack!" Jess shouted, and the battle for Tristaine began.

Chapter Nine

Several soldiers fired blindly when the war cries erupted, galvanized by Caster's screamed commands. Four Amazons were hit immediately: three from Theryn's band, who lived, and Ayla, a warrior from Jess's side, who did not.

When Brenna dared throw a look at the review stand, it was empty.

Jess and Theryn led their separate cadres of warriors well, like warhorses pulling Shann's chariot in tandem. After the first outbreak of gunfire, the smoky fighting field was cleared fairly quickly and the wounded Amazons carried to the stadium's inner chambers.

Within minutes, Brenna was with the injured, kneeling between Perry and two other bleeding women she didn't know. She was coated with gore to the elbows for the second time in two days. The part of her that was calm also appreciated the efficiency of the Amazons, who kept her supplied with field dressings and fresh water, even in the full throes of battle.

"They're stable." Brenna turned to Amber, another of Jess's Amazons who had healing skills. She pulled her shoulder down to make sure Amber would hear her over the chaos of war cries and rifles. "Keep them here. This hallway's pretty safe!"

Amber shouted something back that sounded like agreement, but Brenna had already hit top speed on her run back toward the arena. The heart of the battle still centered there, though Amazons and soldiers alike had begun to branch out into the village itself.

Brenna burst out of the stone archway leading into the stadium. Two seconds later she was hit by what felt like a semitruck, and the ground came up and smacked her, hard. A bullet whistled above her

head to careen off a far wall, and Brenna realized the semitruck was an angry Amazon.

"Brenna, you brainless dolt!" Vicar snarled in her ear. She was lying full-length on top of Brenna. "You do *not* race pell-mell onto a flaming battlefield!"

"Well, excuse me, Vicar!" Brenna twisted over onto her back. "This is only my *second* flaming battle! I don't know all the rules yet. Where's Jess?"

"She sent me after you. Move with me, now!" Vicar clamped Brenna's wrist in one hand and hauled her to her feet. They ran together, in a half-crouch, toward the side wall of the stadium, and then Vicar hauled her bodily around a high log partition.

Brenna coughed dust and smoke out of her lungs; then she could see the five women gathered in the shadow of the log wall. Vicar patted her on the back until she recovered. She seemed a bit chagrined at her earlier roughness.

"Over here, Bren!"

Brenna saw Jess. "Ah, man." Her shoulders sagged in relief, and then she saw Shann and Kyla. "Ah, *man*," she repeated, and walked into Shann's open arms and hugged her, hard.

"You all right, Brenna?" Hakan was peering cautiously around the log wall, keeping a close eye on the still frenetic activity in the stadium.

"I'm fine." Brenna's pulse began to settle again as she went to Kyla and studied her face. She was still drawn and pale, but her eyes warmed for a moment as she took Brenna's hands.

Shann said, "Jesstin, report, please."

"Tristaine's high council is safe. They're under Amazon guard in the stables." Jess put her arm around Brenna's shoulders. "Our warriors fight side by side with Theryn's. They're holding off Caster's mercenaries. We're still outnumbered and outgunned, but the soldiers are a mess. No organization."

"We need to blow the dam, lady." Vicar ducked as another shot whined through the air to strike solidly into the arena wall yards away. "But we need to get you out first."

"Yes, well, here's the problem." Shann rummaged in a pocket of her robes. She held up a cracked plastic box and sprung wires.

With an unpleasant jolt, Brenna realized it was the remote detonator.

Jess's jaw dropped. "What happened to it?"

"I hit Caster with it." Shann sighed. "We're going to have to set off the timer by hand, Jesstin."

"You *what*?"

"I had to hit her with something."

Jess raked her hand through her dark hair, twice, before she could speak. "Shann, our detonator, the detonator you called Tristaine's greatest treasure, you used it as a *club*?"

"Caster went down like a sack of beets," Shann insisted. "She's still out, for all I know."

"Lady, I'll start the timer," Vicar volunteered. "I can run faster than any of us."

"That's debatable, Vicar," Hakan said.

"Later," Jess broke in. "Vicar, I need you and Hakan to get Shann and our council out of the valley. Take as many of the others as possible. Where shall we meet, lady?"

"The large glade, south of the pass," Shann answered at once.

"Shann, we need to warn as many of the City soldiers as we can." Brenna felt compelled to say it. "A lot of them are just poorly paid kids. This isn't their fight."

"Agreed, Blades." Shann nodded. "Good point. Vicar, I want you to find Theryn before we leave and have her spread the word. Tell her they must use every minute to get out before Jesstin triggers the blast."

"Jess is blowing the dam?" It was the first time Kyla had spoken. "Are you steady enough on your feet to do that, Jesstin? You look like hell."

"It won't be a matter of fitness or speed, adanin." Hakan's immense hand was gentle on the girl's shoulder. "Once Ziwa is freed and her waters join Terme Cay, no Amazon on Gaia's earth could

outrun them. Jess won't have to rely on her own spindly legs." She inserted two fingers in her mouth, and an amazingly sharp whistle cracked through the air.

Before Brenna could ask what they were whistling at now, Shann drew her aside. They stood close together, and that veil of privacy fell around them again.

"On the stand, Blades, when I said I had Tristaine's greatest treasure, I didn't mean the detonator."

"I know. It's right here." Brenna patted her inner pocket. "I'll keep it safe, I promise."

"Thank you." Shann smiled. "Now listen carefully, Bren. Go with Jesstin. I've already convinced her that it's vital you do. Leave your journal by the dam, out of reach of the flood, but protected and somewhere *visible*, adanin. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I do."

Shann's eyebrows lifted. "You're not going to argue with me? No questions?"

"Probably, just not now." Brenna grinned. "We'll see you at the glade, lady."

Shann's smile acknowledged that Brenna had used her title for the first time. She kissed her forehead, then went to Kyla and took her hand. "Little sister. Do you want to bring Camryn with us?"

There was silence again in their small party. Even the war cries and shouts of the battle around them faded as they waited for Kyla's answer.

"Once we wash Caster off this mountain, our valley will be sacred again." Kyla's eyes were clear and tearless now. "Let Camryn rest here with the bones of Dyan and our other lost sisters."

Shann nodded. "As you wish, Ky."

"*Omboleza*, adanin," Hakan added.

"My sorrow," Jess translated softly for Brenna.

Brenna was startled by a drumming of hoofbeats, and then Hakan's beautiful warhorse, Valkyrie, loped into the arena. Another sharp whistle from Hakan turned the huge mare toward them.

"We're decided, then?" Shann waited to hear any dissent.

"We're ready, lady." Hakan steadied her big horse.

Shann looked at Jess and lifted one eyebrow.

Jess turned to Brenna and grasped her cold hands. "Hakan was right about the route we'll take, Bren. After I set the timer on the dynamite, we'll have twenty minutes to ride back through the village and get out of the valley. You've never been on a horse in your life. This is going to be pretty high drama, querida. You ready?"

"Of course not, but you have the hard part, Jesstin. All I have to do is hang on." Brenna went up on her toes and quickly kissed Jess. "We'd better hurry."

Without further ceremony, Jess ran three steps across the ground and jumped gracefully up onto Valkyrie's back.

Brenna's mouth fell open.

"You can get up there like a normal person if you prefer, little sister." Hakan grinned and offered Brenna her arm.

Being lifted to the broad back of an Amazon warhorse felt like cresting a mountain. A warm, hairy mountain that breathed. Even Vicar looked short from this height. Brenna wrapped her arms tightly around Jess's waist, careful to avoid the taser marks.

I could be in the Clinic's pharmacy filling out prescriptions for Caster, she reminded herself. She didn't know if her inner voice sounded relieved or incredulous. She thought she might be a bit hysterical.

"Remember, Jesstin." Shann's voice carried sure and certain command. "I consider both of you *irreplaceable.* Understood?"

"Aye, lady."

"Ride bloody fast, Stumpy." Vicar handed Jess a coiled rope and nodded at Brenna. "Find us at the glade tonight."

Jess leaned down to accept Shann's hand. "Your blessing, lady?"

Brenna watched the Amazon queen inhabit their elder sister again in the blink of an eye.

"Jesstin, Brenna, you ride for Tristaine. May Artemis shield you. Come home safe. Now *hurry*!"

Shann released Jess's arm as the big mare leapt forward. Brenna had thought there'd be a need to kick a horse to make that happen. Luckily, she was stuck to Jess's back like a burr.

She looked over her shoulder, and just before Shann and their sisters disappeared behind the log partition, Brenna saw Kyla lift her hand in benediction.

As they rode out of the stadium, Brenna had time to notice that it was almost twilight. The short winter day had given way to the golden sunlit hour that sometimes blessed the mountains just before dusk. Tristaine's village square was beautiful in the honeyed light.

But in jarring contrast to nature's peace, the scene was anything but serene. Shrill cries and shouts still split the cold air, and figures ran everywhere, both Amazons and City soldiers.

"Jesstin, no! Go that way!" It was an Amazon Brenna didn't know, one who had fought on Theryn's side. She was crouched in the grass at the east corner of the neat log infirmary, pointing. "Toward the lodges of the trades guild! The barracks of the warriors is overrun!"

"My thanks, Frost!" Jess nudged Valkyrie with one knee, and the mare charged back around the stadium and past it.

Brenna adjusted quickly to Valkyrie's even gait. There was something both alien and familiar about the horse's rhythms beneath her. She loosened her arms around Jess and found it easier to balance sitting upright.

"You all right?" Jess called to her as she hitched the coiled rope higher over her shoulder.

"I'm having fun!" she called back and spit a flying tendril of Jess's hair out of her mouth.

She heard Jess laugh as they rounded the first of the four long lodges used by Tristaine's tradeswomen.

Valkyrie was fast. They pounded down the grass strip that ran between the weavers' lodge and that of the woodworkers, heading toward the river that ran through Tristaine.

Toward Terme Cay, Brenna amended. It was beginning to look as if they would make it through the confusion unchallenged. Then, as they rounded the last lodge, she realized she was looking down the barrel of a rifle pointed right at them.

Rodriguez held it, the mercenary Brenna had introduced

herself to with a punch to the genitals. She started to shout a warning to Jess, but the words died in her throat. A dagger appeared, as if by magic, buried to the hilt in the man's chest. Rodriquez dropped the rifle, and blood exploded around the embedded blade. Brenna stopped watching.

"Briggs!" Jess saluted the warrior who had thrown the dagger, as Valkyrie carried them on a dead run past her.

"For Shann!" Briggs called, and Brenna heard several scattered Amazon voices echo her shout of fealty.

"Oh, lordy."

Brenna's stomach hadn't quite been ready to cross the footbridge. She trusted Tristaine's carpenters, but this was a half ton of horse carrying them across, and then Terme Cay was behind them, and Valkyrie churned up the low rise that led to the Amazons' private cabins. She felt for the journal in her pocket and was reassured by its solid presence.

They rode up the mountain now on the broad path that led to the dam. It *was* broad, at least, when you were walking on it alone. But even alone, it had terrified her only days ago. When riding an Amazon warhorse at top speed, possibly to your death, it was…

Bloody harrowing, Brenna thought, narrating the action in her head to record later in her journal. For the first time since she had left the City, Brenna barely noticed the natural beauty of her surroundings. There was little room in her mind for the colors of the rugged canyon off the path to their left, or even the dark blue glory of the lake that loomed ahead. Brenna could focus on only three things: following Jess's instructions, obeying Shann's command, and making sure they both got out of there alive.

When they reached the lake, Valkyrie slowed to a walk, steam puffing into the cold air. They studied the dam's shadowed surface and the small platform secured to its main support. The neatly wrapped bundle of dynamite looked undisturbed.

Jess lifted one knee over the horse's neck and dropped to the rocky ground. Brenna accepted her assistance with her own dismount, which felt like sliding off the roof of a building.

"Do you need me?" Brenna asked.

"Always." Jess's eyes sparkled at her. "But do I need you immediately? No, not until I'm finished on the platform. I'll make it back up faster with your help."

"I'll be there in five minutes. Jesstin, do *not* get hurt!" Brenna ordered.

"Yes'm." Jess shouldered the rope again and jogged toward the catwalk that topped the dam.

Then she turned around and jogged back. "Lass?"

"What, is anything wro—?"

Jess bent Brenna over one arm and kissed her, long and sweet and deep. Then she set her on her feet again and tapped her nose with one finger, gently.

"Wanted to make sure we took time for that," Jess explained, and jogged back toward the catwalk.

"Good. Thanks. Yes. Good idea. Okay." Brenna closed her mouth, unzipped her inner pocket, and scanned the rocky area around her. "Somewhere safe," she muttered.

She looked out over the lake, an ominous blue expanse in the twilight, then at the dam. This ground where she and the horse stood now was out of the projected path of the flood. Brenna spotted a sapling that seemed pretty well anchored to the bank.

She opened her journal and checked the last page to read Shann's note again, then scanned the map below. She made sure the folded paper was carefully inserted and wrapped the notebook in Jess's waterproof jacket. The bright red color would be eye-catching. Brenna fit the bundle securely in a "V" of branches and tied the sleeves tightly around the strongest one.

She took a step back, whiffing her bangs off her forehead, and studied the parcel that contained Tristaine's greatest treasure. It looked safe, and it was the best she could do. Brenna whispered a benediction of her own as she turned toward the lake.

The catwalk that spanned the top of the dam looked perilously narrow, and Brenna found, to her displeasure, that the urgency of their mission hadn't zapped her hatred of heights. Hatred, she reminded herself, as she trotted toward the center of the dam, not

fear. She just didn't understand why Amazons who could design pyramids couldn't build a simple railing on a catwalk.

Jess was crouching on the platform halfway down the dam's face. She shaded her eyes to see Brenna above her. Brenna knelt and checked the rope that tethered her to the catwalk.

"We're set, Bren," Jess's voice echoed strangely in the silence. "Say a prayer, please."

"What? What prayer?"

"Doesn't matter. We're drowning our land, lass." Jess knelt and touched the switch of the timer. Then she looked into the canyon before her—the channel of the flood to come—and beyond it. They couldn't see Tristaine from here, but Jess gazed in that direction.

Brenna waited, in case any spectral voice wanted to whisper the right words to her. She couldn't hear what Jess was saying to the valley and to the village that was her childhood home. No words sounded in her mind, but she found she didn't need coaching.

"Thank you," Brenna whispered, "for Jesstin and for giving me this life with her."

Jess flicked the timer's switch. She climbed to the top of the dam in record time and without incident with Brenna's help. Jess still looked like she hadn't slept in a week, but she moved as efficiently and gracefully as ever.

"Twenty minutes until the blast?" Brenna took Jess's hand as they started back for the bank. "Then ten more before the flood hits the village?"

"More or less," Jess replied, and Brenna almost throttled her.

They walked the dam's catwalk quickly but carefully.

"Are you sure you can't be just a wee bit more specific about that timer?" Brenna asked.

"Shann and the others should be out of Tristaine by now," Jess said. "But not out of the valley. So aye, querida, we're counting on a solid twenty minutes."

Brenna didn't see the quarrel from Patana's crossbow, but she heard it. It fell short, shattering the edge of the beam an inch from Jess's boot. Jess stiffened instinctively and lost her balance.

Jess barely had time to shake Brenna's desperate fingers loose before she toppled off the dam and fell fifteen feet, to hit the cold water of the lake below.

"Jesstin!" Brenna almost followed her off the catwalk.

The deep lake swallowed Jess whole for a horrifically long time. Then she burst up heaving for air, and Brenna remembered winter, and mountain lakes, and hypothermia—

Another crossbow quarrel ricocheted off the face of the dam, yards from Jess's right arm. Brenna whirled and saw Patana at the other end of the catwalk, already inserting a fresh bolt into place. Her small eyes were pinned on Jess, her square jaw clenched.

Jess surged up out of the water; her hands scrabbled for any purchase on the smooth surface of the dam.

J'heika, rise!

Brenna swiftly tied the rope to one of the brackets on the side of the catwalk and tossed the other end down to Jess. She would become too weak to climb if she stayed in that water another second. She could be too weak even now, but Brenna had to stop Patana before she could worry about that. Once the rope left her hands, she shot to her feet and ran.

Patana didn't even glance Brenna's way at first. She fired another quarrel, then finally looked up. A wave of shock passed over her flushed face, and she flipped the crossbow into the sling on her back and faced her.

A calm voice whispered to Brenna. *Don't worry about Jesstin now, lass. You've achieved your first goal. Your enemy stopped shooting. Now, listen well.*

Brenna ran, staying to the center of the narrow catwalk, and listened. *Take her down. You can't win standing. She'll knock you off your feet. She'll fight to keep from falling off the dam. You fight to get her down and hold on to her until Jess can reach you.*

It wasn't the same inner voice that kept calling for J'heika, but it offered the sanest, most thorough advice she had received from Wherever yet, and Brenna intended to follow it. She adjusted her speed, aimed for Patana, and just kept going until she plowed into her.

Patana barked in surprise and flew backward to land on her back on the catwalk. Brenna sprawled on top of her and held on, and, so far, she was letter-perfect.

But Whoever was advising her should have taken into consideration that Patana was the second-best wrestler in Tristaine.

Grunting, Patana flipped Brenna off her with a sharp jerk of her hips and used the momentum to wrench her to one side. Brenna scrambled in terror, already feeling the abyss of the canyon that yawned below.

Patana kneed Brenna in the stomach and kicked her over the side.

Brenna finally stopped falling off the catwalk when she was caught short by a vicious jerk around her waist. The blue shawl Dorothea had given her had snagged on one of the catwalk's cleats. She dangled by it, the edge of the catwalk a good two feet over her head.

Stop kicking, young dolt! The voice roared, but Brenna's primal mind ignored the brilliant advisor who had gotten her into this. She flailed in helpless terror, expecting any second to hear the sickening rip of fabric tearing, then her own scream as she plummeted.

Stop kicking, the voice suggested calmly, and Brenna forced herself to hold still. She could hear the dry creaking of her makeshift sling. She stared down at her boots, rocking back and forth above the dizzying drop.

"This is *not* how to get me over a fear of heights!" she screamed to no one.

Brenna heard footsteps come to the edge of the catwalk, and Patana's breath rasped above her. She couldn't see her, so she didn't know if the Amazon had reloaded the crossbow. She assumed she had.

"We'll all die in a few minutes, *bruja*." Patana was breathing hard. "I'm just sending you and, more important, your smug bitch of a wife into the arms of our Grandmothers a bit early. I'll give you a moment. Tell your gods you're coming, Brenna."

Jess's face flashed through Brenna's mind, and then Shann, Kyla, Camryn, Sammy. But Brenna had no more time for preparation

or anything else. She heard the distant twang of a bowstring and tightened spasmodically as she heard the arrow strike home.

She didn't know it was an arrow instead of a crossbow bolt until she heard Patana's guttural cry. She toppled off the catwalk and fell past Brenna, the feathered shaft of an arrow protruding from her neck.

Brenna instinctively lunged to try to catch Patana before she vanished forever, and the shawl securing her to the bracket ripped. She dropped a full three inches before very cold, wet fingers snatched her wrist.

"Brenna." Jess grunted with effort as she caught her full weight. Soaking wet, she was lying on top of the dam, one arm extended, her fingers locked like a vise around Brenna's slender wrist.

Jess is alive. The second bolt Patana fired didn't kill her. She's out of that freezing water. Brenna registered all of that first. She wondered, briefly, who had shot the arrow that killed Patana since Jess had no bow. But, mostly, she clung to Jess's wrist and turned to brace herself as well as she could on the surface of the dam. There were virtually no footholds. She looked up and saw Jess's white face.

"I've got you, Bren." Jess sounded insanely calm. "I won't let go."

"Good," Brenna gasped. She resisted a powerful urge to look over her shoulder at the canyon below. "C-can you? Hold on? But you can't pull me up, Jess."

"Help's coming," Jess said. Myrine's ashen face appeared beside her.

Myrine lowered herself to the catwalk beside Jess and reached down to grasp Brenna's arm. "All right, Jesstin, pull!"

Together, the two warriors pulled Brenna up, by inches. Gasping and struggling, Brenna made it over the top of the catwalk and sprawled on its cold plywood surface beside them.

Brenna groped for Jess and found her, then folded her into her arms.

Myrine got to her feet and looked down at them silently, her eyes filled with tears. Then she stepped to the edge of the catwalk

and gazed down into the canyon below. For a horrible moment, Brenna thought she would jump.

"I knew why she was coming here when I saw her ride out of the village," Myrine said quietly. "I followed her as soon as I could find a horse."

Brenna looked past Myrine and saw two other horses cropping grass beside Hakan's Valkyrie.

"Myrine," Jess said. "Adanin—"

"Patana loved Tristaine, Jesstin, in her way." The scar on Myrine's face was livid against her pallor. "She loved me, in her way."

"Myrine," Brenna murmured, "I'm so—"

"We have fifteen minutes tops!" Jess yelled.

Myrine helped them up and they dashed for the three horses.

By the time they rode back into Tristaine, Brenna figured they had less than five minutes before the blast. She was plastered against Jess again, and no doubt her arms squeezed far too tightly, but Valkyrie's speed coming back down the mountain had been almost as frightening as dangling off the catwalk.

No. Untrue. Nowhere near.

Rifle fire still rose from the village, but the volleys were becoming more isolated. Brenna saw people running. Too many people. Some were Amazons, and her stomach did a sickening flip. Most of Tristaine's horses had gone with the migration. It was too late to get out of the valley on foot.

The flood would kill more than animals and trees.

The three horses clattered into the stadium, Myrine leading Patana's mount. The arena was all but deserted, but it wasn't empty. Brenna saw Theryn just as Jess veered Valkyrie toward her. She knelt in the dirt of the fighting field beneath the empty review stand. Grythe lay before her, covered to the chin with a beautiful blanket, her limbs peacefully arranged.

"Theryn, come on!" Jess pulled Valkyrie to a dancing stop. "Patana is dead. Take her horse!"

"Caster's alive, Jesstin." Theryn looked up at them. "She's probably in the main lodge, directing her mercenaries from there.

Some of her soldiers left, but some stayed. Some of my Amazons stayed, too, to fight them. And some of yours."

"Theryn," Jess was obviously struggling to match her calm tone, "we have no time! Get on your horse."

"If by some miracle Caster makes it out of here, you know she won't give up, Jess." Theryn rose and gazed down at Grythe's wild, beautiful face, peaceful at last in death. "We can't risk her survival. Caster would come for Shann, no matter how deep in the mountains she builds our new Tristaine. I'm staying to see Caster dead."

"Oh, Theryn, *please* don't be an idiot!" Brenna realized she was being less than diplomatic. "You'd be throwing your life away!"

"My life is over." Theryn looked down at Grythe. "I won't find a new one, not in Shann's Tristaine, where I'd be reviled as a traitor."

A flat, ugly percussive sound reached them. It was faint, but it shook Brenna to her core.

"Jesstin…" she whispered, and Jess's cold hand covered her own.

The dam was crumbling. Ziwa was free.

Brenna saw it happen, in her mind's eye.

The impact of the explosion shattered the main support beam and blew a substantial hole through the dam. The massive lake began surging through the breach in the wall that had held it back for generations. The crushing velocity of the water widened the hole, then shattered most of the dam, surging into the canyon below.

While the blast of the dynamite was faint, the death of the dam, and the release of Ziwa herself, were not. The riotous clamor of that initial first wave faded at first, but it did not disappear. It would grow deafening soon, as the flood reached Tristaine.

Behind Brenna, Myrine barked, "Jesstin, get out of here!" She slipped off her horse. "Seeing Caster dead is worth drowning for."

Brenna felt Jess's shoulders slump in pain. "Myrine—"

"Remember what I said, please, young Brenna." Theryn smiled grimly at Myrine as she joined her and took her hand. "If you ever write about the death of this village, little sister, be sure

you record the truth. Shann and Jesstin and their followers were not the only Amazons who loved and honored their clan."

Brenna's eyes were filling, so it was hard to see them, but she nodded.

Jess still couldn't move, and finally Myrine sighed harshly. "Give my adanin my love, Jesstin. Now get your adonai out of here. *Go*!" She slapped Valkyrie's rump, hard.

Brenna felt the warhorse lunge for the exit, and Jess didn't stop her. The crashing of the flood grew closer. She gave her physical survival entirely over to Jess and did what she could not to throw off their balance.

Terme Cay was still calm as they clattered back over the footbridge, but Brenna's worst nightmares told her this was just the prelude. She heard cries of terror rising behind them, and more gunfire.

Jess wove the horse through the private lodges of the Amazons at a quick trot. "We're almost out of rifle range, Brenna. It's time to run. Can you hold on?"

Brenna rested her face against Jess's dark, wet hair. "Absolutely."

She remembered enough of that wild ride to record a chilling account in her next journal, and she didn't have to exaggerate a word.

Brenna and Jess rode the warhorse out of the darkening valley at a dead run, chased by impending doom in the form of a ravenous wall of water. Valkyrie leaped over a shallow but wide ravine, and Brenna almost lost her seat. Jess snaked one arm back to brace her, and she steadied herself. She buried her face again in Jess's hair and squeezed her eyes shut. That ravine marked the boundary of the valley.

They were out of danger now, but she could still see it happening. And not just see it…

Brenna smelled it first. A flood through a mountainous forest washed a gust of air before it, a cold wind filled with the stench of the dying. She smelled that wind first, and then she felt it, a foul buffet of air in her face.

She was standing on the arched footbridge that spanned the village's river. She'd heard the flood for several minutes now, and at any moment, the first crashing waves would course down Tristaine's peaceful stretch of Terme Cay. Brenna couldn't believe the growing roar could grow louder before the flood finally appeared, but it did.

Terme Cay was a river, and then she was a rushing wall of water, forty feet high. Anyone standing on Tristaine's footbridge would see a shadow, and then they'd see their death coming. The screams were everywhere by then, and Brenna heard them.

She shut down. *Really*, she prayed, *please, that's all I can take*. And to her vast relief, the images and sounds and smells all stopped. Brenna didn't have to watch the village drown.

They met Shann and the other survivors of Tristaine in the southern glade before the moon rose.

Chapter Ten

Dana sat cross-legged on a blanket in the grass, close to one of the campfires. Several such small blazes dotted the glade around her, in areas cleared for that purpose. She had been fed and left alone for the most part, which is what she fervently wanted at this point.

She thought about thirty Amazons had escaped the flood, counting Jesstin and Brenna. Those two had ridden in an hour ago, on the biggest animal she had ever seen. A circle of Amazons had surrounded them at once. They appeared to be all right, thank god.

So far, no one seemed inclined to take Dana on for tasering Jesstin. Dana remembered watching Brenna tend Jess after it happened. She remembered thinking no one had ever touched her with such love.

She was the only City soldier among the Amazons. She wasn't the only mercenary to escape the flood, but all the others had insisted on their own stubborn course, down into the foothills. She had almost gone with them.

Shann, the Amazon queen, and dozens of her followers, had run past Dana on their way out of Tristaine. Shann stopped and called to her. Dana had hesitated, and in the kind of split-second decision that changes lives, she ran to her.

She still wasn't sure why.

Soft laughter filtered through the circle of women around Jesstin and Brenna; then they began to get up and drift back toward their blankets. Dana could see the queen kneeling beside Jess, her palm on her breast to monitor her heartbeat. Shann straightened and smiled at Jess, then looked straight at Dana, as if her gaze called to her.

"Dana, come join us, please."

Shit fire. She felt a jolt of unease, certain the Amazons had decided to kick her out. She put on a neutral expression and shuffled over to the group.

Dana recognized the two big Amazon warriors, Vicar and Hakan. They both looked like war goddesses this close up, one black and one white. They sat protectively on either side of young Kyla, and Dana noticed neither of them looked at her as she joined them. She settled stiffly beside Jesstin and avoided her appraising eyes.

"I'm glad to see you." Brenna leaned across her reclined lover to touch Dana's knee. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm okay." Dana cleared her throat and finally met Brenna's friendly eyes. "How about you two?"

"I wish we had some bloody proof, Jesstin," Vicar broke in. She had her long arms coiled around one raised knee. "None of us will sleep a full night until we see that witch's corpse."

"Vicar? Courtesy, please." Shann nodded at Dana. "Yes, little sister. Given rest and warmth and decent food, Brenna and Jesstin will both heal and be well."

Little sister? Dana's brows rose.

"I know you have to be exhausted, Dana. We all are, so I won't keep you long." Shann curled her legs gracefully beneath her before continuing. "We're assuming Caster is dead and her vendetta is over. The silver the City wanted is gone. We feel the Military won't bother to pursue our clan if we establish our new holdings deeper in the mountains. Do you agree?"

"Me?" Dana was puzzled. "I'm not in on any Military plans, Shann. I'm not a Government soldier. Uh, I mean Queen Shann."

Hakan and Vicar and Jess all snickered, and Shann raised an eyebrow at them.

"Shann will suffice. I know you can't give us inside information, Dana. We're just asking your opinion. You've lived in the City more recently than any of us, so you know the atmosphere down there even better than Brenna."

"Oh." Dana wished mightily that everyone would find something to look at besides her face. "Well, let me think. The City

paper did mention the closing of Caster's program at the Clinic this last summer. But it sure didn't mention any escaped prisoners or Amazons. Tristaine is hot gossip, but that's nothing new. So there won't be any public pressure, or even public knowledge, that you guys still exist. I guess I really don't see any big advantage for the Military in coming after you."

"After us," Shann corrected. "Good, Dana, thank you. Those are our thoughts, too."

"Ma'am?"

"Yes?"

"How high, exactly, into the mountains will we be going?" Dana asked.

She saw Shann smile at Brenna, for some reason, the lines around her eyes crinkling.

"Our first stop will be the southern meadows, where we'll join the sisters who migrated a few days ago from our mountain village. We'll pass the winter there, then begin the search for our new home in the spring."

A low, chanting music filtered through the chilly air, and Dana peered over her shoulder into the glade. She saw the other Amazons gather into a circle around the largest of the campfires. They were humming something, a melodic, lonely sound.

"Sisters, join the storyfire," Shann urged them. "Give me a moment, please, with Kyla, Jesstin, and Brenna."

"Lady." Hakan got smoothly to her feet. She clamped one broad hand on Dana's shoulder and pulled her up, too. "Come on, youngster, and stop looking like a skittish hare. Vic and I will keep the others from spitting you on a mesquite branch and roasting you for dinner."

Dana smiled weakly and stumbled after Hakan toward the storyfire.

"So…" Vicar unwound to her full height and put her hands on her hips. She nudged Jesstin's foot with her own. "You need anything, Stumpy?"

"Shorter, more humble cousins," Jess grumbled. She was nestled against Brenna. "Nice work tonight, mate."

"You too. Both of you." Vicar winked at Brenna and followed Hakan and Dana.

"Kyla?" Shann held out a hand, and Kyla obediently shifted closer to her. Shann put an arm around her shoulders and looked down at Jess. "I think you'll be fine to travel in the morning, Jesstin, if we make it a light day. Are you in much pain?"

"Yes," Jess growled. "My back hurts, my belly hurts. Also my left shoulder, and my entire right arm. Also my left knee."

"I've been talking to Jess a lot about being a little less stoic about her injuries," Brenna explained. She ruffled Jess's hair. "Unfortunately, I don't think she's exaggerating."

"A plant called talwin grows between here and the southern meadows." Shann pursed her lips. "We may need to dose all our warriors with it. Your women fought well, Jesstin, and you all have the bruises to prove it. Why would I want to be careful, Blades, with a tea boiled with talwin leaves?"

"Because talwin has a mild narcotic effect, so it can be addictive," Brenna answered, and then she and Jess both blinked. "How did I know that?"

"How did you know Patana would try to assassinate Jesstin yesterday?" Shann asked. "Or that Caster's soldiers had ambushed Tristaine? Or all the sacred promises made in a Queen's Blessing? Really, honey, how much more proof of your sight do you think you're going to require?"

"You did tell me about the Blessing yourself, Shann." Brenna had also known when Camryn began to die, but she couldn't say it aloud.

And my voices…Brenna was afraid she was starting to sound psychotic, even in her own mind. *The voices didn't warn me before Elodia snapped or before Patana got off that first shot on the dam.*

"Bren…" Jess ventured, watching her. "You in there?"

"I'm right here." Brenna smiled and brushed Jess's tumbling hair off her brow.

"And what about you, little sister?" Shann's arm was light around Kyla's slender shoulders. "How are you?"

Kyla smiled, but it hurt Brenna's heart to see the effort it took. "I'm broken up inside. But I'm alive. And I'm real glad we got almost everyone out." Her eyes closed for a moment. "So many faces are gone, Shann."

"Yes…" Shann rested her lips on Kyla's pale forehead for a moment. "We have mourning to do. And a new Tristaine to build come spring."

"What's next for us, lady?" Jess stared up at the dazzling canopy of stars overhead. "Our clan has been diminished, and there'll be no more new Amazons from the City. They wouldn't know how to find us."

Shann glanced at Brenna and smiled before she answered. "Well, if our line is meant to die out at last, Jess, then it will. I have a feeling Gaia has other plans for us."

"Yeah?" Kyla looked almost hopeful. "You do?"

"I do. For one thing," Shann said, "I have a feeling Gaia might want us to finally learn the lesson She set before all Amazons a thousand years ago. Not a single generation of Tristaine has learned it, under any queen. Including me, it seems, at least not yet."

"I'm sorry?" Brenna asked. "What lesson was that?"

"'Amazons must be unified, if the Clan is to survive,'" Shann recited to them. "That's one of the challenges our Seven Adanin left us, Blades. Sounds simple enough, doesn't it?"

"Aye, but another challenge was, '*All women must live free,*'" Jess responded from her relaxed position against Brenna. "Remember what Dyan always said, Shann. It's never simple for a clan to live with both unity and freedom."

"You still quote Dyan at Shann all the time, Jess." Kyla's smile wasn't as forced this time. "Except when it suits you. Dyan also yelled at you to take less risks when you fight."

Jess winked at her, but her eyes on Shann were grave. "Lady, Theryn's betrayal wasn't your fault. You worked yourself to death in high council last spring trying to bring her faction around."

"I'm not blaming myself, Jesstin." Shann patted Jess's shoulder. "My own particular challenge has always been Jocelyn's

favorite, '*Don't push the river,'* so that's what I intend to practice. Now, let's listen to the dirge for a while. They're singing for Camryn and the other sisters we've lost."

They fell silent, and the low, musical chant of the larger circle reached them. Brenna felt her heart fill with a deep, pure sadness. She looked at the Amazons seated around the distant storyfire and watched as Dana lowered her head.

Dana's eyes kept filling with tears, which mystified her, because she rarely cried. Given her choice, she would rather *not* bawl in front of dozens of Amazon warriors.

Some of the faces around her wore stony expressions as they sang. Some mourned only with their chant, while others wept openly. They all grieved for their lost village, Dana knew, and for the Amazon warriors who had died. She just didn't understand why *she* cried, too. She didn't even know these people, so why was her throat so tight with grief?

The dirge eventually wound down. The storyfire in the center of the circle finally burned down to glowing coals. Dana got up to limp off to her blankets, and she glanced toward Shann and the others.

Jesstin dozed, her head pillowed on Brenna's lap. Kyla had fallen asleep, leaning against her queen. Shann's fingers drifted through the girl's auburn tresses. She smiled at Dana, who waved vaguely, then lay down and pulled a blanket over her face.

"Um, lady? A question," Brenna asked, her voice low so as not to disturb Jess or Kyla. "Do you know who they are? These voices I keep hearing? They're the Grandmothers? I guess that's three questions."

"Yes, I believe you're hearing Amazon voices." Shann sounded pleased by Brenna's question. "I've never heard them in the way you do, so I can't say who any of them are. But they may be our Seven Adanin, as well as other sisters from past generations of our clan."

"Shann." Brenna cleared her throat. "Did Dyan speak with a thick brogue?"

"Thick as maple syrup." Shann looked surprised. "Why, Blades?"

"Because I think I heard her on the dam," Brenna said. She didn't know if this would be painful news or simply absurd.

But after a moment of silence, Shann sounded excited. "That's wonderful, Bren, honestly! Yes, it might have been our Dyan. What did this voice say?"

"Duck, ye young dolt," Jess burred softly, in what sounded like a spot-on imitation of the voice on the dam, and both Shann and Brenna stifled laughter.

"Ask Shann about that name, Brenna," Kyla said sleepily.

"Oh, good, thanks, Ky," Brenna said. "Shann, who is Jaheeka?"

A line appeared between Shann's brows. "What did you say?"

"Ja-heeka? Was there such a person? I've heard a voice calling her for days now."

"So did Camryn," Kyla added. Her shadowed brown eyes were focused on the flames of the fire. "Camryn said that name right before she died."

"Are you sure, Ky?" Shann's voice was quiet, but something in her tone made Kyla look at her.

"Are you all right?" Brenna asked. In the flame's low light, Shann had grown pale.

Alarmed, Jess sat up, as did Kyla. "Shann?"

"You're sure that Camryn said the word 'j'heika,' before she died?"

Kyla nodded in confirmation. "Yes, lady. She said it to Brenna when she asked her for the Queen's Blessing."

"I hear that name every time I hear the Grandmothers." Brenna realized her throat was dry. Shann's expression was an extraordinary mixture of surprise and consternation, and much else that Brenna wasn't sure she could interpret. "Shann, who is J'heika?" Concern colored her question this time.

"Brenna, sisters, everything's all right." Shann let out a long

breath. Brenna found her shoulders lowering as Shann relaxed. “I’m sorry. I was just a bit surprised. Brenna, there’s something you might need to know.”

“Are you sure?” Brenna swallowed. “Judging by your look, maybe ignorance would be better.”

“Ignorance is never better,” Shann corrected, and pressed Brenna’s hand. “J’heika isn’t a proper name, Blades. It’s an honorific, a title.”

They didn’t sleep for a very long time.

Nine Months Later

“Amazon Lake.”

The reverence in Lee Ann’s tone would be understandable, Karen figured, even if this beautiful lake had no spiritual legends behind it. They had never seen anything as flat-out gorgeous as all this mountain scenery in their lives.

Karen rested her foot on a stump and gazed out over the lake, a wide expanse of twinkling blue, dotted here and there with small, inviting, islands—the tops of hills, she realized, when this had been a valley. Only last fall. Only last fall, there might have been a village here, some kind of women’s community. She shivered and turned away.

Attuned as always to her shifts in mood, Lee Ann squinted up at her. “What?”

“It’s a beautiful graveyard.”

“Well, yeah.” Lee Ann looked out over the lake again. “Women did die here, if they couldn’t get clear of the avalanche in time. Think of it, Karen, those women were Amazons, if this was really Tristaine. This lake is a shrine, honey.”

“Yeah, well, trespassing here is two years in Prison, honey.” Karen’s teasing was kind. She knew how much this illicit trek meant to Lee Ann, who had dreamed of Amazons since she was a girl. “The place looks completely deserted, so I’m fine with camping here tonight. But we shouldn’t stand out here in the open, okay?

Just because there's no Military patrol around now doesn't mean there won't be."

"I don't think anyone's been through here in weeks." Lee Ann accepted Karen's hand up and slapped the dust from her jeans. Karen helped her with that, too, ending with a lecherous pinch that made them both grin.

Then Lee Ann stepped away and scanned the ground curiously. "Look, love. There's only one path in here, and the only footprints I can see were made by the three of us. It hasn't rained that much this month. There should be more tracks, shouldn't there?"

"Well, maybe the paper was as bullshit inaccurate as ever, and patrols never come here." Karen scanned the empty blue sky overhead for copters, nonetheless. "I still don't want us to take any chances. Where the heck did Sly go?"

Lee Ann nodded toward the largest hill. "She took off up that way. Want to see what she found?"

"Sure." Karen drew her close for a quick kiss before taking her hand.

It was a pleasant day for a romantic stroll. The warmth of summer had reached high enough into the mountains that shedding clothing seemed feasible. "Any chance Sly might lay her sleeping bag a bit farther away tonight?"

"I will make that request." Lee Ann smiled.

Karen liked Sly well enough, but if she was going to travel with them, they were going to have to put their foot down about a few things. Her smoking, for instance.

Karen knew what Lee Ann's friend had been through in the Prison, and no one could begrudge her a few vices. But it wasn't just the stink of the smoke. Sly was starting on a real hacker's cough, and she was barely twenty. Both Karen and Lee Ann were trying to get her to cut down.

She saw Sly up ahead, reaching up into a smallish tree that stood on a bluff looking out over the lake. The view on either side of the bluff was breathtaking, and Karen had to keep coaxing her dazzled lover on with gentle tugs of her hand.

By the time they reached their taciturn friend, Sly had seated herself in the grass at the base of the tree. She was unwrapping a swath of red cloth.

"Hey, what's that?" Lee Ann crouched, her lively eyes sparkling. "Where did you find it?"

Sly gestured vaguely up into the tree. Her rough hands slipped a worn spiral notebook out of the red cloth and held it for a moment. She looked up at them, her green eyes wary, then opened the notebook. A folded piece of paper fell out, and Karen knelt and retrieved it.

"Is that a note, Sly? Is it from *them*?" Lee Ann was making an obvious effort to sound casual, but Karen's hands were trembling as she unfolded the paper. "A map? You're kidding. Is that a *map*?"

"Yeah." Karen held the sheet up to the fading light. "It looks pretty readable. I think. From what I know of mountain maps, which is nil."

"Where's that trail go, the one that's marked?" Lee Ann leaned over Karen's shoulder.

"Uh, south. Right? It goes somewhere south. That's the best I can do."

"The map leads to the southern meadows." Sly had been skimming through the spiral notebook, and her gaunt features were expressionless as she read the last two pages. "Whatever the southern meadows are," she added.

"It says that in there?" Lee Ann crouched beside Sly. "Who was that notebook left for, Sly. Do you know? And who left it?"

"It's a woman's diary. It was left here for anybody who finds it, I guess." Sly turned to the last page and read aloud.

> *If you have searched long enough to find this journal, you can find Tristaine, wherever we rebuild Her.*

"Oh, lord." Lee Ann sounded breathless. "Lord, Karen, the Amazons left this! We were right. Some of them *did* survive."

Read this notebook, and guard it well. Bring it with you to the southern meadows. You'll find another map there.
But, first, you must make a copy of this first map and leave the original here. Return it to its hiding place for other lost sisters to find.
Follow us if you will.
Shanendra, daughter of Elaine

"This was brilliant," Lee Ann said softly, accepting the worn notebook from Sly at last. "That second map the note mentions must lead us to wherever the Amazons have gone. But how did they know anyone would find this one?"

No one answered her, but the question was forgotten as Lee Ann and Karen pored over the notebook's first entries.

Sly got stiffly to her feet and limped to the edge of the bluff to stare down at the lovely, placid blue of the lake. She unshouldered her heavy pack and knelt to rummage through it. "Are you two game?"

"Oh, *hell,* yes." Lee Ann's voice held that overtly reverent note again, but Karen was so excited about the journal, she didn't care. "Are you kidding? Of course we're going. Sly, we didn't even hope for something like this!"

"There's definitely nothing in the City we have to stay for." Karen looked up when Sly made no reply. "The same is true for you, Sly, right?"

"That's right." Sly zipped up her pack.

"Hey, pal." Lee Ann touched Sly's shoulder. "You're still coming with us, aren't you? You know you can't go home."

"Yeah, I'll come along." Sly fished a pack of cigarettes out of her breast pocket. "Why don't you two set up some kind of camp down by the lake? This bluff is kind of exposed. I'll help after a quick smoke."

"Sheesh, you're right. Anyone could spot us up here." Karen flushed, mad at herself. She closed the notebook like it was a sacred

tome and secured it inside her shirt. “Don’t stay on this bluff too long, Sly, okay?”

She waved and blew out smoke in agreement; then Karen and Lee Ann made their way quickly back down the hill.

Alone, she gazed down at the lake once more, then around her at the timeless beauty of the surrounding mountain peaks. She took a long, satisfying pull, which helped mask her constant companions, pain and loss.

Sammy hadn’t seen her sister’s handwriting in over a year. Funny how the sight of that slanted hand in the pages of the notebook brought Brenna’s face back to her. She’d stopped being able to picture her at all in Prison.

She rocked slightly with her eyes closed and moved her hand across her belly in a desolate caress. She had named her daughter for Brenna. Matthew hadn’t lived to see his baby born, and Samantha knew she would never see her again. Prisoners were not allowed to parent, and the child had been taken at birth. She was told the baby died soon afterward.

When they were young, Brenna had been all she knew of safety. Her older sister had been her shelter and protection, and now, again, she was the only family Sammy had. In the stark chill of her grief, she still yearned for the early, familiar comfort of Brenna’s voice. She had brought Sammy through a nightmarish childhood; then she brought Caster into their lives.

It seemed she might see Brenna again. She tried to feel happiness.

She rolled the map carefully and wrapped it in the slick red cloth. She ground her cigarette out beneath her boot heel, then went back to the tree. After reaching up and replacing the package securely in the branches, “for other lost sisters to find,” she walked down the hill to join her friends.

EPILOGUE

Article in that week's *City Gazette*
Section D, page 4, June 30:

Natural Mountain Lake

Formed By Avalanche

Rumors of clandestine activity in the mountain range east of the City proved categorically false last week. Government surveillance teams have confirmed that a large lake, newly discovered high in the range, was formed by natural processes. An avalanche caused the collapse of an earthen shelf holding back a river, which drained into a valley, forming the lake. Citizens are reminded that any unauthorized travel beyond City limits is punishable by imprisonment.

Scarred fingers reached for a pair of scissors and painstakingly clipped the article for a scrapbook.

BOLD
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TRISTAINE RISES

TRISTAINE BOOK THREE

by

Cate Culpepper

2006

TRISTAINE RISES

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DEDICATION

In memory of my friend Elaine K. Allen

Beyond our ideas of right-doing and wrong-doing,
there is a field. I will meet you there.

– Jelaluddin Rumi

Chapter One

Motionless, it watched the two Amazons. Bitter drool overflowed its withered lips and dripped to the stone floor. Acidic steam rose where spittle hit rock. It hadn't fed in generations.

❖

Jess's scruffy mustang shifted beneath her, one hoof clocking against the stony ground. She soothed the horse and scanned the deserted village. Her fingers drifted to the hollow of her throat and the light, welcome weight of the turquoise pendant resting there. Brenna's gift. A beautiful, rough stone the color of cold seawater, secured by delicate copper wire to the thong about her neck. Touching it eased the tightness in Jess's shoulders.

Bracken pawed the rocky earth again, grumpy in the twilight stillness.

"Shut up, ye crab. We're about done." Jess tousled her mount's thick mane. She released a low whistle and a moment later heard the distant trill of Vicar's response. She nudged Bracken into a canter toward the center of the village to meet her cousin.

"Nothing." As fair as Jess was dark, Vicar sat her tall roan with a lazy ease that bespoke years astride Tristaine's mountain herds. "This camp is deserted, Jesstin. Nothing on two feet has tracked over this ground in our lifetime."

"Get patrols to search every cabin." Jess eyed the stone altar that seemed to mark the mesa's geographic center. "And Shann and the others come no closer until we check the woods on all sides."

"Aye, easily done." Vicar grinned and crooked a blond eyebrow. "You think madlady Artemis has forgiven her tiff with Tristaine at last, Jesstin? Amazon luck is changing. Call the odds of finding this village. Even made by our own kin, by the look."

"But what clan?" Jess narrowed her eyes in thought. "Amazon archives don't mention any of our sisters settling so high in these mountains."

"Jess, our glyphs are everywhere."

That much was true. The village square was surrounded by rough log cabins of various sizes, in mixed states of repair. Crude Amazon glyphs were carved above the threshold of each.

Jess felt her gaze drawn again to the small stone altar. Carved deep on its craggy surface were the same timeless symbols of war, hunting, mothering, creation, and worship common to all clans claiming Amazon blood.

"I count enough lodges for most of us." Vicar uncorked her canteen and took a generous swig. "And enough timber on these hills to build more, once the snows lift. Plus a strong stable. It'll be hard labor, but we'll need that by spring thaw. We'll be restless."

"I'll be content to get us through the winter alive, Vic." Jess shook her head to decline the canteen.

"We're not likely to find better shelter." Vicar leaned over and spat delicately. "And none too soon. We'll be up to our silky butts in snow by next moon. Amazon luck, Jesstin. Changing at last. Our Brenna deserves the credit. She finally charmed Tristaine's spirit guides into sending the dream that led us here."

"Ah. She's *our* Brenna now, when she finds us an abandoned village. She's only *my* Brenna when she dumps a haunch of venison in the cooking fire."

"Aye, then she's yours."

"You've warmed to her, then." As always in their private conversations, Jess heard her own brogue deepen to match Vicar's more pronounced burr. "I wasn't sure you would, adanin. You're stubborn about City girls. Among all other things beneath Gaia's moon."

Vicar shrugged. "By my lights, your lady's earned her lodge with us, City-born or not. Brenna saved your neck in our last battle, Jesstin. She's a good healer, a decent seer. Horrific taste in lovers, but a strong heart."

"That she has." Jess shivered and pulled the high collar of her sheepskin jacket against the back of her neck. The sensation of being watched was as palpable as cold fingers drifting up her spine.

"What?"

"I still feel eyes." Jess shook her hair off her forehead. "I know we've covered the mesa twice and found nothing."

"Then what's the…?" Vicar sighed. "No. Go on, Jesstin. Dyan swore by your instincts, and you've proved her trust. I want to mind your gut."

Jess nodded toward the circle of small cabins ringing the square. "What happened to the Amazons who built this village? Why did they leave the mesa?"

"Plague?" Vicar scratched her scalp and shrugged. "One harsh winter too many? We'll never know, Jess. But it's perfect for Tristaine." She swept her arm in a slow arc. "These forests are flooded with game, and a mesa's easy to defend. Care was put into its design, and it was forested well." She pointed toward the expanding circles of poplar, aspen, maple, and oak that surrounded the village. "It's a natural fortress."

"Aye." Jess sat still for a long moment. "We've seen

enough for now. Let's find an easier trail up that rise. Something wide enough for the wagons."

❖

It watched the light woman canter after the dark one, the hooves of their horses kicking up the sparse dust of the square. Its dripping eyes followed its prey until it was out of sight, and the hunger in its blood surged.

The love between these two mortal Amazons ran deep, but it was more than equal to the challenge. The stronger the bond, the more devastating the betrayal. It gathered its sleep-logged energies and reached out.

❖

The mesa looks like the top layer of a round cake, with trees for candles, plopped down in the middle of a valley, Brenna wrote. She sat cross-legged on a small hill overlooking the pasture, her journal balanced in her lap.

We've laid camp in the field I dreamed about, surrounded by thick forest. The mesa looks out of place here, in the midst of all this open land. It seems pathogenic, like a raised birthmark that might prove malignant. The Amazons find it strange too, and I trust their instinct over mine. But they think this odd landmark might be some kind of blessing from their goddesses, a gift to our weary clan. I'll have to take their word on that. I never left the City limits before I met Jess, so my knowledge of divine intervention and mountain terrain is pretty nil.

As I remind Shann every time she insists on relying on my bizarre dreams to guide us through these stupid mountains.

The Amazon word for mountain is "hill." Much like Jess calling that canyon we leaped over to escape the flood a "ditch." When Shann said we'd have to go deep into the hills

to find a new site for Tristaine, she meant hauling six hundred women, kids, and assorted livestock over a bloody range of sheer cliffs.

Brenna had already filled half of her notebook with the chronicle of that journey, which had taken all summer. The clan had endured long weeks of pure, grueling effort climbing a harrowing series of mountain passes. Moving always higher, farther from the City and the watery grave that drowned their last village.

Her journal described Shann's calm leadership throughout their migration. Even when a fast, cruel fever swept through their tribe in high summer, taking some of Tristaine's youngest children and vulnerable elders, Shann's courage kept her women's spirits kindled with hope.

Shann's authority was tempered by her humanity. Brenna remembered watching tears pour soundlessly down Shann's face as she cradled a dying child, her refined features fixed in an eloquent expression of grief. The image had stayed with Brenna, and she'd sketched the two figures at the bottom of one page in her journal.

She focused again on her entry.

It'll be dark soon. We've finished laying camp, so I can sit here for a few more minutes, imagining disasters. Bracken threw Jess and she fractured her skull. She and Vicar have been jumped by grizzlies. They've been ambushed by a City patrol. Unlikely, I know, but they should have been back hours ago.

What other horrific fates can befall two Amazon warriors on an uncharted malignant birthmark? Caster came back from the dead and turned them to stone. Homicidal bandits captured them, or a swarm of rabid bats chased them off a cliff.

I used to panic when my little sister was ten minutes

late from school. I'm not sure my nerves can stand a lifetime married to an Amazon warrior.

Brenna scanned the pasture below her, a waving blanket of silver in the twilight. She willed two small moving dots to appear at the base of the shadowed mesa, but the vista remained stubbornly empty. Blowing her bangs off her forehead, she bent over the lined notebook again.

I last saw my sister just days before I helped Jess escape from the Clinic—sweet Gaia, over a year ago. I wish I remembered the last thing I said to her. I do remember the last thing she said to me—that sisters shouldn't treat each other the way I was treating her. Sammy was four months pregnant. If she's alive, I'm an aunt by now. But if Caster was telling the truth, Sammy is dead.

Brenna rested the pen gently on the notebook. Her hands ached to cup Jess's shoulders, their broad strength always a source of comfort. The atonal humming of crickets rose around her, and she shivered in the cool evening air. As if on signal, a warm cloak plopped over her head like a tent. She smiled in the sudden green darkness. "Gee. Thanks, Shann."

"Don't mention it. I'm used to chasing foolish children who sit out in cold open fields, wearing no cloak to speak of, with night coming on." The queen of Tristaine was well into her fifth decade, but she curled onto the ground next to Brenna with the grace of a girl. "Stop worrying, Blades. A thorough scouting takes time. They'll be back soon."

"You're right." Brenna pulled the cloak off her head, static electricity crackling through her hair. "Did you have a chance to talk to Kyla, lady?"

"She helped me serve the stew." Shann leaned back on her hands, her gray eyes thoughtful. "There wasn't much talking.

She's still not able to speak of Camryn without tears."

Brenna nodded. Images of Cam's death still tightened her own throat without warning.

"But it seems Kyla's grief is taking a normal course, Bren. She's young and resilient. Her stillness doesn't worry me. She'll have time to heal, be it weeks or decades."

"You've been there, lady." Brenna watched the other woman's face.

"Oh, lass, I was a royal mess." Shann's smile held a note of resonant sadness. "I walked around like a zombie after Dyan was killed. I was all but unable to function, and the clan knew it."

"I don't think I could rule a tribe of wild women after a loss like that." Brenna pulled the cloak around her shoulders, trying not to imagine grizzlies or compound fractures. "Much less think clearly enough to get them through a crisis."

"An Amazon queen rules when she must, adanin." Shann's fingers brushed through Brenna's hair. "Whether or not she feels she's capable of it isn't usually a consideration, I promise you."

Let's not go there tonight, Brenna thought, her eyes closing at the gentleness of Shann's touch. Then a quiver of relief ran through her, and she sat up.

"Finally!"

"What? Ah." Shann smiled and stood. "Yes, here they come! And look, Brenna, both of them are dressed warmly. Fancy that."

Vicar and Jess loped through the high grass, riding shoulder to shoulder across the open field. Brenna stood next to Shann, brushing pine needles from her journal. She could feel Jess's exhilaration, even at this distance, in the rhythm of Bracken's swift rocking beneath her and the expanse of sky overhead. She wondered, not for the first time, how her lifemate had survived months of imprisonment in the City.

The Amazon cousins were incapable of riding side by side without racing, so they indulged in that pleasure for the last quarter league. Vicar's roan, Talos, edged out Bracken with a small but undeniable lead, and held it long enough to claim victory.

The horses were still nearly at top speed when Vicar reined sharply, then threw herself off her mount. She crashed bodily into Jess with enough force to knock her off her horse and hurl them both into the high grass.

Brenna felt the impact in her teeth, and for a moment she was immobile with shock. Then she jumped to her feet and raced down the gentle slope of the hill, reaching automatically for the stethoscope that hadn't draped her neck since she left the City Clinic. She heard Shann bark out an order behind her toward the camp.

To her immense relief, she saw Jess rise unsteadily from the waving grass, her hand clasped to the back of her head. She took a staggering step and dropped to her knees, and Brenna's heart jagged painfully in her chest. But then she was close enough to see she was kneeling by Vicar's still form.

"Hey." Panting, Brenna came to a sliding halt beside Jess and clenched her arms tightly. "You all right?"

Jess nodded vaguely, her eyes on Vic. "What the bloody hell happened to her, Bren?" Jess was breathless and a little pale, but seemed basically intact.

"Let me see." Brenna nudged Jess gently aside and laid her hands on Vicar's sides. Her breasts rose with shallow but steady breaths, and her pulse beneath Brenna's measuring fingers beat a rapid cadence.

"There's no blood." Jess scanned the field for any threat and clenched her cousin's collar with unconscious force.

Brenna was relieved to see she was right. There was no bleeding or other obvious signs of trauma. She felt the back of Vicar's head carefully, then bent closer. "Vic, can you hear me?"

"Vicar!" As usual, Jess opted for a more assertive approach. "You open your eyes. *Now*!"

Vic stirred beneath Brenna's hands, and her eyes opened. She blinked up at Jess's pale features.

"I'm in hell," Vicar croaked.

Jess blew out a breath. "Perverse wit intact. She'll be fine, Bren."

Shann reached them just as Vicar was lifting herself on her elbows.

"Blades? Are they—?" Shann stopped short, relief in her eyes. "Well, it seems they're still among the living. I expected to find one of you poleaxed, at the very least!"

"I'm all right, lady." Jess got to her feet, and Brenna watched her with a hawk's sharpness. Her own heart was only now calming from tympani speed to a more bearable rhythm.

"Aye, me too." Vicar winced and accepted Jess's hand up. "Beat you by more than a head, Stumpy."

"Move slowly, please." Brenna steadied her. "We want to make sure everything's still attached, so hold on to me until your head clears."

"Did Talos misstep?" Shann looked past them at Vicar's trembling roan, who stood only yards away.

"Is he hurt?" Vicar craned to see past Jess. "Why's he shaking like that? No, lady. Talos didn't throw me. Something knocked me flat."

"Aye, me too." Jess scrubbed the back of her neck. "You."

"Come again?" Vic frowned.

"You smacked me butt over beanie, mate. You sure Talos didn't find a gopher ho—"

"I don't fall off horses, Jesstin." Vic shivered hard and shrugged her leathers around her shoulders as she looked around the darkening pasture. "I told you, something hit me. Felt like a bloody elephant."

Brenna met Jess's troubled gaze.

"Whatever this force was, it's disappeared as suddenly as it arrived." The calm assurance in Shann's tone soothed Brenna. "We'll scout the field thoroughly at first light. For now, Blades, let's get these bruised wanderers to a warm fire."

"I'm for that, lady," Vicar grumbled. "It's colder than Caster's tit out here."

"Shann!"

They turned to see two Amazons on the low hill at the edge of the camp carrying a pallet between them. One held a smoking torch over her head, and Brenna realized it was fully dark.

"Stand down, sisters. We're all right." Shann's clear voice carried well in the pure mountain air. She slid her arm through Vicar's. "Come on. We'll want a closer look at you both before we ply you with Aria's excellent stew. Your report can wait until after you've eaten."

Brenna waited, shivering a little while Jess retrieved the reins of the two horses. She put her arm around Brenna's shoulders as they followed Shann and Vicar up the grassy rise to the camp.

"You're sure nothing's bent?"

Jess grinned down at her. Given her penchant for risking life and limb, the greeting had become a joke between them.

"I'm fine, querida."

"Kind of odd about Vicar."

"Well, Vic's odd."

"Jesstin." Brenna squeezed her waist. "Seriously. She hit you with a full body tackle. I saw it happen."

"Aye, I felt it happen." Jess turned to look back toward the mesa gleaming in the moonlight across the field.

Brenna nodded toward the mesa. "Did you find anything bizarre up there?"

"No." Jess frowned and brushed Brenna's upper arm

with her rough palm. “But it’s a damn eerie village, Bren.”

“Really?”

“Deserted, as far as we could tell. Very old. And… strange. That’s the best I can do.”

“Lovely. A haunted village. We’ve had so little excitement.” Brenna rested her head on Jess’s shoulder as they entered the camp, craving the bonfire Shann had mentioned. It wasn’t really cold enough to justify her shivering, but she couldn’t seem to stop.

❖

It had a terrible patience, born of silent decades craving Amazon blood to slake its thirst. It sensed that the generations of waiting were drawing to an end at last.

The passion uniting these mortals would be rendered poison. That’s how it would conquer them, how it had defeated two other clans, long before these women were born. It would make them spiritual cannibals, preying on their own kind, as their sisters did.

It had turned the light one against the dark one effortlessly, even at this distance. That was its particular genius, corrupting the love between women into a toxic weapon. These Amazons were ripe for it. Its time was coming again.

It settled into its coffin and slept.

❖

“I can’t restrain myself, lass. It’s yer cute poutin’ lips—”

“Jesstin.” Brenna blew her bangs out of her eyes and glared into Jess’s blue ones, inches above her. “These tents are made of paper!”

"Grrraded canvas." Jess's brogue twirled the words. "And it's a *prrrivate* tent." She bent her head again to kiss her.

"Squished up against fifty others." Brenna put a finger on Jess's nose to stop her. "And sound carries."

The journey into the hills had been difficult in more ways than one. Whenever Tristaine settled in one place for more than a few days, they laid camp to provide reasonable privacy. While traveling, however, safety took precedence over comfort, and the entire clan was assembled in one half of the large meadow. Brenna had yet to adjust to anything extremely personal in close quarters.

"Just who do you fear might be listening, lass?"

"Everybody."

"Who do you think would possibly object? Half the tents in the camp are rocking on their pegs, any given night."

"I *know*," Brenna muttered. "That's how I know sound carries."

"Welp, we'll get drowned out in the roar of the orgy, then."

Jess timed it well, her lips meeting Brenna's before she could respond, and after a moment, she began to relax beneath her. Her shoulders eased back against the blankets as Jess tasted her, a soft, sweet exploration of lips and tongue.

Then Brenna let her head fall back, and the kiss ended with an audible, wet pop.

"Look, remember, I lived alone in a single unit for five years, okay?" She tapped Jess's chin sternly. "I'm still not convinced that civilized people engage in wanton carnality in communal settings."

"Ach, City girls." Jess groaned and toppled sideways, sprawling on her back. "May Gaia grant the deprived wenches more carnality, please."

Brenna rolled on top of her long, lean form, and Jess

whoofed in protest. “Maybe we should keep looking, Jess.”

“You’re still fretting over this mesa, Bren? I doubt we can justify that, not with snows coming.” Jess blinked at her. “Are you picking up anything clear about the village?”

“You make me sound like a metal detector.” Brenna sighed. “No, nothing clear. Just a vague uneasiness. Like I’ve tried to tell Shann, I’m not sure when I’m sensing something or just having a fit of the creeps.”

“It was your senses that helped us escape the valley with our lives, adanin.” Jess’s long fingers brushed through Brenna’s hair. “You saw the flood before it wiped out our village. You saw Caster’s attack before her soldiers found us. You saw a crossbow bolt headed for my chest and saved my life before it struck.”

“I didn’t see it in time to save Camryn,” Brenna murmured. She laid her fingertip on Jess’s lips. “I know. I just get nervous with Shann basing all her plans for Tristaine on what I *think* I see. I dreamed about this mesa, and we found it right where I thought it would be, but…what if it turns out to be a dormant volcano that goes undormant or something?”

“We’ll pitch Vic in. A sacrifice to appease the gods.” Jess’s hands coasted over the planes of Brenna’s back, then moved beneath the thick quilt to cup the swells of her hips.

“It would just be nice if Tristaine could stay put for awhile.” Brenna rested her chin on Jess’s sternum, shifting slightly as strong fingers began to knead her shoulders. “We don’t want to go through all this again next winter.”

“Tristaine has always been a wandering tribe, Bren.” Jess tickled the backs of her thighs, and she tittered. “Amazons have always moved deeper into the wilderness as the Cities spread and grew. On this continent and others.”

“You know, almost everyone in the City still believes Amazons are a myth.” Brenna smiled, and Jess lowered her head to nuzzle her throat. “Lord knows I didn’t believe in you

guys until a certain criminally insane Amazon warrior was assigned to my ward."

"Better watch out for us psycho-butch Amazons." Jess lipped the smooth skin between Brenna's neck and shoulder, warming it with her breath. "We can be bloody irresistible."

"Jesssssss…" Brenna felt her nipples rise, two volcanoes nowhere near dormant. She listened to the quiet night around them, biting her lip. Maybe the women and children in the surrounding tents really were asleep, but they might just be eavesdropping in courteous silence. "You know how… enthusiastic we get. And loud."

Jess rolled again, carrying Brenna with her, and resumed her neck nuzzling from above. "I promise, lass, I'll restrain meself."

"It's not—*hoo*—it's not you I'm worried about…"

"I'll restrain you too." Jess laid a wet line of kisses along the taut skin of Brenna's throat, then moved lower.

"Jesstin. Jesstin. Honey? You know I'll…oh…*Hoo*! You know I'll do *that*. Jess, come on, everyone will hear."

"Brenna." Jess lifted her head and peered down at her. "You're really telling me I can't make love to you because you're afraid you'll make too much noise?"

"Will you lower your voice, please? I have been *trying* to tell you that for—"

"*Ah, sweet goddess, yes*!" Jess yelled. "Brenna, *yes,* more, you wild *banshee.*"

"Jesstin!" Mortified, Brenna struggled beneath her, trying to clamp a hand over her mouth.

"Yes, there, *again*!" Jess pinned Brenna's flailing arms and bayed, "*Yes, again*, there. Ah, Brenna, you hot-blooded *demoness o' loove*…"

"Mmrf onna ill oo!" Brenna bucked like an outraged dowager, then heard a swift footstep outside their tent. She froze in horror.

"Everything all right in there?" Hakan's deep voice projected clearly as she rapped one knuckle on the tent's support pole. "Jesstin, you need help?"

Brenna could picture the master of Tristaine's stables waiting outside—grinning, her white teeth flashing against the beautiful ebony of her skin—then ducking neatly when Jess's boot flew out through the opening in the canvas and sailed over her head.

They heard Hakan snort laughter as she strolled on through the sleeping camp, continuing night watch. There were some faint claps and one sleepy whistle from the adjoining tents. Jess was chuckling, too, until Brenna clamped her fingers around her throat.

"I am so close to widowhood," Brenna snarled, her heart pounding hard between her still actively volcanic nipples.

"I'll comfort you, ye bereaved bairn." Jess kissed her again, smothering her squealing protests.

Brenna thrashed for a while, almost sincerely. No was no, after all, and Jesstin had just subjected her to public mortification, but, oh sweet lord, now she drew her tongue into her mouth and possessed it, sucking gently.

The strong length of Jess's body eased down onto Brenna, pinning her to the thick quilt. The hands that gripped her wrists slid them to either side of her head and held them there. Her thrashing slowed and became a sensual twisting so subtle Brenna was barely aware she was doing it.

Jess obviously felt the change, however. She could be a tender lover, and often was. She could also be aggressive and was then, blending power with gentleness, her hands moving thoroughly over Brenna's languid body. Winter clothing impeded her progress somewhat, but mountain Amazons were accustomed to undoing laces with cold fingers.

And after all that fuss, Brenna uttered hardly a sound beneath her lover's practiced touch. She crested in near silence,

so robbed of breath that crying out was never an option. Her sighs merged with the natural rustlings of the sleeping camp, and Brenna fell asleep with Jess's breath warming her hair.

By the time Brenna watched Selene coast in full glory across the skies three nights later, the women of Tristaine were settled for the winter on the forested mesa.

Chapter Two

Hakan, *get* your broad black butt out of my face!" Similar cheerful taunts rang through the closely packed forest as two hundred Amazons ran the perimeter of the mesa. Vicar and Jesstin were hardly alone in their penchant for competition. The daily training of Tristaine's warriors often ended in a mad two-mile race around the boundaries of their new home.

Small round leaves nicked at Brenna's face as she darted through a copse of aspen. She raced up to another dense shrub, lengthened her stride, and cleared it easily.

"*Karaki*, stepped right in *pendeja* moose shit again," someone yelled off to her left, and Brenna heard raucous laughter. She mentally added attack by moose to her list of certain calamities.

The pace was brutal and she was tiring, but it was one of those glorious late-fall mountain days that still dazzled her after twenty-odd years of breathing City smog. She wouldn't have thought it possible to sip pure oxygen like wine, but on days like this Brenna felt drunk on it. Now her lungs pulled in great cold gusts of air, and vapor plumed between her lips.

The first time Brenna saw leaves turn with such startling beauty was last fall when she had entered the village of Tristaine with Jesstin for the first time. That lush valley now lay at the bottom of a vast mountain lake, and its Amazon daughters were exiled to the high hills. But even if the Amazons

of Tristaine were as cursed as legends claimed, they seemed an inordinately fortunate clan now.

Brenna's foreboding about their new home still lingered, but she seemed to be alone in her misgivings. Even Jess shared the clan's general sense of relief and weary celebration now. Tristaine was starting to claim this land as her own. Forests were sacred to Amazons, and the rings of trees encircling their village were seen as a protective blessing.

The greenery Brenna ran through was thick with fragrant conifers and held a diverse and flourishing population of small game. She heard the rustle of escaping vermin all around her. Chipmunks and rabbits, she hoped, rather than some species of rabid mountain rat.

She slapped through the last few hanging willow branches and emerged, gasping for breath, into the village square.

"You bested half the guild, Bren!" Jesstin slapped her on the back, nearly toppling her to the thick grass. Brenna knew Jess kept her pride in her growing physical prowess low-key most of the time. As Shann's second and leader of the guild of warriors, Jess had to appear impartial.

Brenna perched her hands on her knees and panted like a spent hound as the rest of the field came jogging in from the forest behind her.

"Do you need to throw up?" Jess asked politely.

"Stay c-close. I might." Brenna hooked a finger in Jess's belt so she'd be sure to hit her boots if she did. All of this escaping from the oppressive City to live among free Amazons was nice, but it seemed to involve nausea-inducing adventures on a regular basis: getting gassed by City soldiers, dangling from a torn sash over a gaping chasm. Stuff like that.

Still bending, she saw two beaded doeskin slippers step into her field of vision. "Hello, Hakan."

"Young Brenna." A large hand patted the back of her head. "Drop something?"

"Ha and ha," Brenna gasped. "I like your slippers."

"A birthday gift from Kas," Hakan said. "I came to tell you the storyfire's lit, adanin, and Kyla's calling the tale tonight."

"Aye, sister, thanks." Jess smiled. "We've missed Ky's voice."

"That we have."

They moved toward the throng of Amazons gathering in the center of the square. The sun was just touching the timbered horizon to the west, throwing warm, golden light over the village.

Shann had said they were taking root again, drawing sustenance from the beauty and peace of the mountains. Brenna tried to share that optimism. For the life of her, she couldn't put a finger on her own nebulous worry about their new home. She kept sifting through her journal each evening, returning to the sketch she'd made of Shann cradling a dying girl in her arms. But sad memories aside, Brenna could find no new cause for alarm.

Vicar seemed none the worse for wear. She still maintained some phantom power had pitched her off her horse, and Brenna had no problem believing that. Vic had no earthly reason to attack Jess. Their bond was rock solid. And lord knows Brenna had learned to be a little more receptive to the whole arena of phantom powers. But perhaps now she could stop chasing demons that weren't there and relax a little.

"...and next time I will, you City sewage."

The venom in the voice made them turn. Brenna recognized Sirius, one of Jess's best archers, surrounded by a circle of warriors. An immensely powerful Amazon the color of burnished mahogany, Sirius looked rigid with anger.

Jess walked toward them, her step unhurried, and the warriors parted at once to let her in. Brenna followed, noting the palpable and growing tension in the group.

"Sirius, I ran nowhere near you."

Brenna lifted herself on her toes to see over Jess's shoulder, and her heart sank. Dana, the City mercenary new to their clan, faced down Sirius's angry glare with a look of sullen weariness. Both women still panted from the training run, and their breath shot bursts of steam in the chill air. There was a sudden flurry of motion, and Brenna saw Dana stagger, propelled by an abrupt shove.

"Kimba's bile," Jess grumbled, and moved so quickly Brenna almost fell. Jess darted between her two warriors and strong-armed them apart.

"Cool off, Amazon!" Hakan shouldered her way into the circle and swept one long arm across Sirius's chest, keeping her clear of the silent City soldier.

"Keep Caster's lapdog out of my path when we train, Jesstin!" Sirius shook Hakan off and spat into the dirt between Dana's booted feet. "Or I'll kick her into a ditch myself."

"You'll stand down, Sirius." Jess jutted her chin toward Dana. "What's this about?"

Dana returned Jess's appraising gaze without comment.

"This little girl almost kicked Sirius's legs out from under her, Jesstin," a warrior called from the back of the group.

"Oh, demon's bile, Lucia. She did not," another voice called. "Jess, if anything, Sirius lunged into Dana. I was right behind—"

"I've no interest in hearing children take sides in a playground spat." Jess's tone was calm but withering, and the circle quieted again at once. She turned to Sirius and regarded her silently for a moment.

"This is unlike you, sister." Jess rested her hand on the back of her powerful neck. "Dyan was always able to look to you for a cool head. I count on that now. We all do."

Sirius dropped her eyes, and the rigid lines of her body relaxed. "I hear you, Jesstin."

Brenna sighed softly, but kept her gaze on Dana. She had been a soldier under Caster's command when Tristaine's mountain village was taken. Her last-minute defense of the Amazons had earned her a home among them.

But just as Brenna herself had not, at first, been welcomed by every Amazon in the clan, there were warriors who couldn't forget Dana's past. The part of Brenna that still felt like a newcomer ached at the lonely pride in the young City woman's features.

"Tristaine lost nearly twenty daughters in the flood, adanin." Jess lowered her voice, which had the effect of drawing the ring of Amazons closer to her.

"We saw sister turn against sister. The bond between kin severed. Amazons shedding Amazon blood." Jess shook her head. "The waters cover that sad history now, and we'll not relive it here. Understood?"

"I hear." Sirius raised her eyes again, her dignity restored. "I do. It won't happen again, Jess."

Jess nodded and swept her gaze over the watching women. "Go on, you gawking horde. Join the storyfire before your butts freeze."

The small group dispersed as quickly as it formed, talk and laughter rising among them again. Brenna wrapped an arm around Jess's waist as she joined her.

Women and children, dressed warmly in soft skins and robes, were gathering in the center of the village square. The music of a dozen accents calling greetings to each other filled the night with a friendly warmth.

Brenna had learned to relish Tristaine's diversity of race and language, a blending of ancestries unheard of in the sterile homogeneity of the City. The clan's medley of ethnicities was matched by the complexity of the Amazons' faith. They worshipped an array of deities, all unique manifestations of the Feminine. Tristaine's culture blended the histories and folklore

of a dozen nations, and her lifeblood was richer for it.

Women were spreading furs and thick rugs on the sparse grass around the storyfire, which crackled brightly in an open space near the ancient ebony altar. Kyla stood alone next to the shooting flames, and Brenna felt her throat tighten.

The Kyla she had met after escaping from the Clinic had still been very much a girl in her endless optimism and the buoyancy of her spirit. Kyla's delicate features still carried an almost fey beauty that belied the new stiffness in her slender frame.

The first night Brenna entered Tristaine, Kyla had sung an Amazon dirge of such beauty, she still effortlessly recalled every note. The woman who waited for her sisters to gather tonight had aged far beyond her years.

Her voice hadn't lifted in song since her wife Camryn died, and she wouldn't sing tonight. She was a spinner of tales now, and apparently the crisp fall air called for something ghostly.

"Her ravenous spirit rose again from the dank and sour mists of the underworld," Kyla began, her melodic tone quieting the square. "Called to profane life, the eater of Amazon souls…the Banshee's dark and more sinister sister…the queen Botesh."

Eager murmurs rose around the storyfire's circle. This was one of the clan's favorite ghostly legends.

Brenna settled against Jess with a sigh, her warmth welcome against her back. Like many of the Amazons around them, they sat on thick blankets that shielded them from the prickly grass of the square.

She turned her head on Jess's breast and saw a toddler nestled in her mother's arms a few blankets over. The little girl's eyes widened as Kyla continued her recounting of the increasingly gruesome tale.

"Before her pitted soul joined the leagues of demons,"

Kyla chanted, "Botesh walked the earth as ruler of an Amazon tribe. Queen of betrayals untold, she sucked the spirits of her own clan dry and left her sisters' lives in ashes. She shed the blood of her warriors in torrents, all in service of her depthless craving for dark power."

Brenna felt a chill trickle down her spine. Dyan's blood sister was a natural storyteller, and the fanciful spell she wove scratched at the comforting shields of logic. Even Brenna's City science-trained logic, which was formidable. Something in Kyla's dreamlike expression disturbed her, and she glanced over at the toddler hiding her face against her mother's arm.

"Hey, this is child abuse." Brenna nudged Jess. "That poor kid's gonna have nightmares for weeks."

"Probably." Jess nuzzled Brenna's hair with her nose.

"Really, Jesstin, it's not cool to scare little kids." Brenna had firm opinions on this subject, sculpted from her own childhood in a City Youth Home.

"There are things in the world our little sisters need to fear, Bren, so we can teach them to defend themselves." Jess stroked Brenna's arm. "Maybe not demons, but there will always be enemies who seek their blood. Our young should learn about them here, in the safety of their mothers' arms. Amazons have never had the luxury of pretending we offer our daughters a sane planet."

Brenna's eyes burned a little from the smoke, and she closed them for a moment. At least half of Tristaine had gathered in the circle of the storyfire, and the comforting presence of other Amazons was proving Jess's point. An assembled clan offered safety.

She looked sleepily from one face to the next as Kyla's melodic voice washed over her. The names came easily to her now, after a year among these women. She made a mental note to tell Dana that she once thought she'd never match histories and faces.

She saw Hakan, who had trained beside Jess under Dyan's tutelage. Hakan sat across the circle holding the hand of her wife, Kas, both of them obviously entranced by Kyla's tale.

Closer to their blanket, Vicar's handsome head rested in the lap of her adonai, Wai Li. Brenna remembered Wai had chosen the name of one of Tristaine's seven founders, a common practice among Amazons. The spirits of those ancient grandmothers lived on in the seven stars of the clan's constellation, just becoming visible overhead now, as the sun faded behind the western ridge.

The first Wai Li had founded Tristaine's guild of mothers, and Brenna smiled at the infant in the arms of Vicar's wife, who slept with the peace of one who knew he'd chosen his parents wisely. Both Vic and Wai Li would probably choose to leave the clan for a period of years when their son entered puberty. He would go with his parents to a rural settlement or a small town open to peaceful neighbors. The City was no longer an option for resettlement, so they would scout the mountain regions for smaller colonies.

"She rises still, when the ghost fog creeps over an Amazon village, blanketing it in silence. Dozens of clans have vanished down the insatiable maw of Botesh," Kyla droned to an utterly silent audience. "She who betrayed her Goddess, she who thirsts for the blood of the adanin, lingers yet. Look for Botesh in the sudden shadows across your path...in the brief chill that sweeps through a fire-warmed lodge, the thick, foul fog swirling fast through a sleeping village..."

Brenna shifted against Jess and picked out Dana's pale features across the fire circle. Her dark eyes were rapt on Kyla's face, in an unguarded moment of longing. Brenna honestly didn't know if Kyla returned Dana's yearning, or was even aware of it. Or much else, besides her grief for Camryn.

Kyla used to sing beautiful songs from Tristaine's past,

Brenna thought. Now she told horror tales of phantom Amazon blood drinkers.

As always when wanting reassurance, Brenna pulled Jess's arms tighter around her and sought out Shann's face. She saw their queen seated gracefully among the older children of the clan, her eyes sparkling as she savored Kyla's tale. In the week of craziness settling on the mesa, there hadn't been time to see much of their lady, and it was good to know she was near.

Brenna felt a small nudge of misgiving. Shann's refined features seemed sallow, even in the rich gold light of the storyfire. There were fine lines bracketing the queen's extraordinary eyes that Brenna had never noticed before, even in times of high crisis. She should waylay Shann when this was over and see if she was on another of her weird ritual fasts.

Jess's breasts pressed against her back, her nipples rising into hard nubs Brenna could feel even through her cloak, and she smiled. In spite of her inherent modesty, Brenna took a certain pride in her ability to arouse Jess at unexpected times. Then Brenna realized Jess was probably responding to the compelling music of Kyla's voice as she reached the climax of her tale.

"Botesh *strikes*," the girl hissed, her auburn hair shimmering in the firelight. "Sharp tongue, sharp talons, sharp fangs, sharp—"

Jess goosed Brenna in the ribs, and she shrieked like a crazed harpy. Heads whipped toward them, and a few of the younger children yelled too, enjoying their fright.

The Amazons snorted laughter into the warm circle. Kyla's look of surprise dissolved, and she grinned and applauded with the others, recognizing the perfect cap to a ghost story when she heard one.

"Spontaneous human combustion." Brenna twisted to glare at Jess, who had one hand plastered over her mouth to

stifle her grin. *Another theory disproved*, she thought, and later wrote in her journal, *If people were actually capable of bursting into flames, I would be doing it. And then I would do it to Jesstin.*

❖

As the storyfire was allowed to burn down to embers in the village square, Dana and Hakan walked home with Brenna and Jess. Dana had elected to bunk with the rest of the guild of warriors in one of the larger lodges on the southern rim of the mesa, and the cabin Hakan shared with her mate lay in the forest beyond it.

A white glaze of frost was already beginning to form on the hard-packed dirt path. The mountains at night held a quality of deep silence Brenna had never experienced in the City. The void of sound could be harrowing, comforting, or awe-inducing, depending on her mood, which was pensive at the moment. Jess's arm felt good around her shoulders, as naturally balanced and relaxed there now as an extension of her own body. The pine scents around her were fresh and tantalizing, and her belly was full of a savory broth. The air was fresh and crisp on her face after the warmth of the storyfire. Perhaps it was just Kyla's ghostly tale that kept the nape of Brenna's neck prickling.

"Is this, like, a royal command?" Dana's voice drifted to them. "Shann says I have to be on this high council or, what, I get sold to slavers?"

"Shann requested your presence at our next council. She didn't command it," Hakan corrected. She strolled easily beside Dana, her large hands clasped behind her. "And Tristaine never barters with slave traders. Slaughters them, but never barters."

Brenna smiled. Like Shann, the courteous Hakan always

answered every question thoroughly, regardless of ironic overtones.

Dana had stopped walking and was staring at Hakan's broad back as she continued down the path with Jesstin and Brenna. Then she ran a few steps to catch up.

"Slavers? I was kidding. These mountains have slavers?"

"Shann means to honor you, Dana, by naming you to her council." Jess glanced at her over Brenna's head. "She wants to add a fresh voice from outside our clan. A new perspective."

"And she sees something in you she trusts," Brenna added.

"Sheesh." Dana scowled, slapping at the underbrush with the long stick she carried. "Either you guys...sheesh."

"What?" Brenna prompted before they parted briefly to walk around a towering pine.

"Nothing," Dana grumbled. "Just trying to keep my status straight, here. Either you Amazons trust me too much, like your queen, or no one trusts me at all, like Sirius and everyone else around here. And none of you know me from jack, either way."

"Stop sulking, youngster." Hakan gave Dana's shoulder a friendly tap, which would have spun her face-first into a tree if Brenna hadn't steadied her. "Keep in mind that the first time most of our sistren saw you, you were tasering Jesstin in the gut."

Jess's hand brushed unconsciously across her lower side, and Dana dropped her gaze. Brenna frowned at Hakan and touched Dana's forearm.

"The first time Hakan and Vicar met me," Brenna confided, "I was about to pitch fanny-first off the side of a sheer cliff and take Kyla and Camryn down with me. This will be written up in the annals of Tristaine history as the worst introduction any woman ever made to her sisters. Yours is a

close second, though." Brenna smiled. "I'm just saying give it some time, Dana. Settling in can be tough."

Jess caught Dana's eye for a moment and winked. Dana's grin restored her to the handsome young woman she was, and she jogged to catch up with Hakan.

After Hakan and Dana disappeared into the trees, Brenna and Jess angled toward their small cabin, which stood in a thick copse of pines to the right of the path.

Brenna leaned into Jess's warmth. Selene flew in full ghostly glory above them, bathing the quiet woods in cool blue light.

"Shann looks tired, Jesstin."

"She does?" Jess guided her around a snarl of shrubs in the path. "Ah, lass, Shann's got the strength of ten."

"Maybe." Brenna shrugged. "Maybe I just can't remember that Shann's almost fifty, when she looks and moves like she's half that. But she does seem tired these days." She tapped Jess's side. "And so do you, my tough friend."

Jess stopped midyawn and rubbed the back of her neck. "It was a long migration, Bren. Getting this village set up took a lot out of all of us."

"Not really. What did we have to set up? There were almost a hundred empty cabins here, ready for us to just walk into. And a half-dozen bigger lodges to house our guilds. Jesstin, that's another thing."

Brenna hopped in front of Jess, then turned to face her, walking backwards. "This still seems way too perfect to me. I mean, how often does an exiled Amazon clan just stumble onto a ready-made village, way the heck up in the boondocks?"

"It may not be as miraculous as you'd think, lass." Jess grinned and took Brenna's arm, turning her so she could see where they walked. "The City has always bred defectors. Who knows how many little castoff communities have settled in these hills in the last hundred years?"

"But this mesa is old, Jesstin. Shann said this village is much older than the City, and it's definitely Amazon. But even she doesn't recognize those markings all over that creepy altar."

"What's your point, Bren?" Jess's tone had taken on a slight edge, and Brenna blinked up at her.

"I also notice that some of our warriors are growing a wee bit testy." Brenna smiled. "Kyla's seeing it too. She mentioned it the other—"

"You and our little sister Kyla worry too much, young Brenna." A roguish smile touched Jess's lips, and she pressed Brenna back against the smooth trunk of a white aspen. "About our adanin. About a queen's weariness and a toddler's nightmares…"

Brenna's eyebrows quirked through her spiky bangs. "What are we doing?"

"I am reassurin' you, so you will not worry no more." Jess pressed against Brenna's softness and untied the laces that held her cloak closed at her throat.

"Aha. This is why you're tired. Our serial ravishings." Brenna smirked and tapped her fingers lightly. "What is it with you these days, Jesstin? You're insatiable."

"Ye drive me mad with desire, wench." Jess nibbled on Brenna's throat, and her hands began taking liberties, rubbing over the fabric covering the taut mounds of her breasts.

"Jess." Brenna pushed her back. "Hearth and home are only about twenty yards, thataway."

"I want ye here." A familiar growl roughened Jess's low voice, one Brenna usually welcomed in the privacy of their blankets. She liked it less under a tree on a cold night. After ghost stories about evil spirit cannibals. "I'll take ye here and now."

"Well, sorry. Flattered, but sorry." Brenna felt her smile fade as Jess's touch grew harsh. One callused palm snuck into

the opening of her shirt and scrubbed across one breast, then squeezed it. “Jess, hey. Stop it.”

“You talk too much, City girl.” Jess didn’t ease Brenna back against the tree; she pushed her against it and ripped her shirt open with one brutal yank.

“Hey! *Jesstin*!” Brenna slapped her, hard. Her palm cracked against the side of her face like a rifle shot, and the force of the blow actually forced Jess back a step.

Jess glared at her, and, for a moment, a frightening tinge of silver entered her eyes. Then the silver light faded, and she was Jess again.

“*What?* Crikey, you have my attention.” Jess rubbed the side of her face, scowling. Then she blinked and stared at Brenna. “You all right, Bren? You’re half-naked out here in front of Gaia and everyone! Did I do that?”

“Yeah.” Brenna tied her shirt closed, her heart hammering. “Are you all right? Tell me how you feel, Jess.”

“Cold,” Jess answered promptly. She took a step and rubbed Brenna’s arms briskly, and this time the strength in those hands comforted, as it always had. “You’re shaking, Bren.”

“Of course I’m shaking. You’ve never touched me like that before.” She stilled Jess’s hands and studied her face. “You really don’t remember, do you?”

“What’s to remember? Kyla’s tale has you seeing ghosts, lass.” Jess slid an arm around Brenna’s waist. “Let’s get you home and warm, querida. I’ll not bed an icicle tonight, no matter how cute.”

Brenna cast one last look over her shoulder toward the village square. The rings of trees that separated their cabin from the storyfire pit were spaced, with odd perfection, to allow a clear view of the altar in its center.

She shivered again and tightened her arm around Jess.

Chapter Three

Far from her Celtic homeland
She sleeps bereft of hope
Goddess grant her peace

Brenna studied the odd inscription on the gravestone as Hakan read the words aloud. She was grateful for Hakan's solid warmth on her left and Kyla's on her right. The wind on this desolate hill blew in cold, fitful gusts. Winter was coming, Brenna remembered, and graveyards made such random thoughts feel ominous.

Tristaine's scouting party had come across the old cemetery just as the sun crested midday. The large yard, encircled by a low rock fence, lay almost a full league from their mesa, on a barren slope deep in the forest. Flat oval stones of every shape and size canted at angles all over the burial ground. Every grave held an epitaph and, apparently, the earthly remains of an Amazon warrior.

"I thought Amazons preferred cremation." Brenna studied the variety of glyphs etched in the markers and folded her arms against a chill breeze.

"Tristaine does, most of us." Hakan's hands were clasped behind her back, a respectful stance. "But several of these stones bear the language of my country and the dialect of its Eastern clans. Their customs are different. At any rate, sisters, it's sacred ground."

"With strange and sacred flowers," Brenna murmured. She knelt and studied the small plants that adorned several of the surrounding graves. They held spiked leaves and glossy gold berries, and she'd seen nothing like them in Tristaine's new village.

She almost reached out to pull one free of the hard-packed earth, wanting to see what Shann made of the species and whether they could test it for medicinal qualities. Brenna paused, then lowered her hand as she got to her feet. Tearing a plant's roots from a burial mound felt wrong to her, a violation of the dead warrior's rest.

"But what's a graveyard doing out here, this far from the mesa?" Kyla glanced at one of the oval markers, half-submerged in the marshy earth, and shuddered. She took a sidling step and brushed her arm against Brenna, who lifted hers around Kyla's shoulders with the ease of long practice. "These are the graves of the clan that built our village, right?"

"I guess they have to be," Brenna agreed. "There couldn't have been that many Amazon clans running around out here." She felt Kyla shiver against her and strengthened her protective hold. Kyla had only begun turning to her for comfort again recently, and Brenna welcomed the contact.

There had been an easy warmth between them from the beginning. Unlike Brenna's bond with Camryn, which had taken time to run deep, she had loved Dyan's young blood sister almost at once. Of course, that wasn't a fair comparison. Minutes after Camryn met Brenna, she had decked her with a roundhouse right.

Brenna smiled sadly at the gravestone and rubbed Kyla's arm to warm them both. With the innate protective courtesy of Tristaine's warriors, Hakan took Brenna's and Kyla's hands as they made their way carefully among the worn stones. Brenna noted that the placement of the graves was not random. They formed vaguely circular patterns, much like the rings of trees surrounding their mesa.

Almost every grave held an epitaph, but Brenna saw no numbers that might mean dates on any of them. Oddly, all of the stones seemed equally weathered, as if this desolate cemetery contained the dead of one dreadful mass burial, a hundred warriors all laid to rest the same long-ago day.

What kind of enemy could wipe out an entire Amazon army in one battle, Brenna wondered, leaving a paltry few to bury their sisters, before scattering to the winds themselves? She heard the distant twang of a bowstring as they stepped through the last rows of graves.

"A fine cleavin' of yonder tree, Dana." There was amusement in Jess's voice, and Brenna turned to see her squinting at Dana's arrow, which still vibrated in the trunk of an aspen twenty steps away. Vicar and Jess were conducting archery practice during this break, and Dana was always eager for training.

"You're trying too hard to breathe through the release, adanin." Jess stepped behind Dana to adjust her grip on the red-oak bow. "Relax and let the arrow leave its rest as naturally as the air leaves your lungs."

Brenna loved Jess's voice under any circumstances, but especially at times like this, when she was teaching. That low, friendly, patient tone had introduced her to a dozen new skills—and coaxed her awake from many a nightmare.

Dana was scowling, looking from the arrow in the aspen to the dead stump to its right, her intended target. She set another feathered shaft to her bowline as Jess went to retrieve the first.

"See to it we don't have to memorialize that aspen there, youngster." Vicar was chewing on a long piece of grass, and her tone held its usual ironic edge. "Amazons honor trees. Don't go skewering that one again."

"I've loved trees since I was a kid," Dana grumbled. "Lots of people love trees in the City. We just don't have many

of them. You don't have to be an Amazon to love trees."

Brenna realized her palm was sticky with pinesap, and she scowled, wiping it on her jeans. "Sometimes it helps, though."

"But an Amazon would never *murder* a tree, Dana," Kyla called. "The sharp end of that thing points *toward* the stump now."

Brenna would have given her younger sister a nudge to remind her of her manners, but suddenly her head was full of the terrible screaming of stallions in mortal combat. She clenched her hand, still sticky with sap.

"I know which end points toward the stump," Dana sighed. "Come on, a little credit. I've had three years of military train—"

Dana's breath was forcefully punched from her lungs as Vicar lunged and shoved her hard enough to knock her off her feet. Brenna heard the impact of Vicar's palms on Dana's shoulders, which was almost as loud as her crash to the rocky ground, the bow and its arrow falling harmlessly with her. Jess whirled.

"*Vicar*! Sweet Artemis!" Kyla cried as Vic swung one booted foot over Dana's waist and straddled her, her hand on the dagger in her belt. "What's the matter with you?"

"Never point a drawn bow at a woman, idiot, unless you intend to kill!" Vicar's fair face was flushed with anger.

Dana blinked up at her, obviously trying to pull enough breath into her lungs to respond.

"Vicar, back off," Jess barked, tossing the first arrow aside. "Her bow was at rest."

Vic's eyes flashed. "You determined to give her another crack at you, Jesstin?"

The battling stallions bugled fury in Brenna's mind, sending a bolt of pain through her head.

"Hakan, wait," Kyla yelled just as Hakan began a

graceful running dive and plowed bodily into Vicar, knocking her off Dana.

What began badly quickly grew worse.

"I'm tired of your bullying, Vicar," Hakan snarled. The soft mahogany of her eyes had gone muddy with malevolence. She and Vicar both jumped to their feet and began circling each other in a controlled but deadly dance.

Their expressions stunned Brenna, who still stood frozen, the screaming stallions an ongoing roar only she could hear. Kyla ran down the small rise to Dana and helped her up.

"Bloody *pendejas*!" Jess jumped between her two warriors, and Brenna unfroze and darted down the rise.

"No, adanin!" Luckily, Kyla was both alert and nimble. She caught Brenna's arm as she ran by and held on to it. "It's dangerous down there. Let Jess handle this!"

"You go too easy on your cousin, Jesstin. You always have," Hakan spat. "Dyan would never abide this woman's—"

"That's enough, Hakan," Jess snapped.

"Don't invoke Dyan, Hakan. I knew her far better!" Vicar's handsome features radiated hatred, her long fingers stiff and clawed. "Why do you defend this young City bitch, Jess? She almost killed you!"

Jess's mouth opened, but then Hakan dived again, so Jess did too. She caught Hakan in midair and threw her back. The big warrior's arms pinwheeled madly as she staggered on the rocky ground, her braids whipping around her head, but she kept her footing.

Jess turned and very nearly caught Vicar's forearm in the throat as she bolted past her. One hand snuck out and caught a handful of blond hair, and Jess, snarling, hauled her taller cousin back.

It became a brutal dance. Hakan charged at Vicar, and Jess intercepted her and shoved her back. Then Vicar attacked

Hakan, and Jess pivoted, caught her, and threw her in the other direction. Then Hakan charged again.

Brenna was about to do anything in her power to get Kyla to let go of her arm. She would regret it later if she bruised Kyla, she really would, but if she wasn't allowed to get to Jess—

"Whoa, *whoa*!" Brenna lunged as Dana started past her, apparently having similar thoughts. She caught Dana around the waist and held on, yelling for Kyla. Introducing Dana to the combustible trio below now would be disastrous.

"Dana, you stay *here*!" Kyla's voice could fill Tristaine's village square, and now it rang quite clearly amid the restless dead around them. "What *is* it with you City women, Brenna? You have *no* common sense at first, *zero*, none!"

Now Vicar and Hakan were nose to nose, or would have been, were Jess not sandwiched between them, and Jess roared, "In Dyan's name!"

Abruptly, finally, it all started to pass—the rage of the warriors and the screaming of horses in Brenna's mind.

Hakan and Vicar stood motionless, still in defensive stance. No one had drawn any weapons, but that was no comfort to Brenna. All three Amazons were capable of killing with their hands.

"Stand down," Jess panted, and they did. Vicar and Hakan both straightened and stared at each other. That frightening light had left their faces, leaving only the flush of exertion and cold.

Jess braced her hands on her knees, still watching her two warriors carefully, taking deep, even breaths, her breath pluming out in clouds of steam. "Someone tell me," she growled, "what the bloody hell that was all about."

"She raised her bow, Jesstin." Vicar's tone was subdued.

"She did not." Jess straightened slowly. "Hear me, Vicar.

Dana's shaft was down. I saw it. Dana?" She turned toward Brenna and the others, who waited up the small rise. "Speak for yourself, girl."

"Yeah, Jess." Dana's voice was strained, and she cleared her throat. "My arrow was down, and the bowstring was lax."

Vic rested her hands on her hips and spat at the rocky ground, but her downcast eyes now looked more troubled than defiant.

"I've never seen you go off like that, Hakan." Kyla's voice was a bit unsteady. "This big blond bully with the brogue, I can understand, but *you*?" She went to Vicar and took her hand without fear, patting it in loving reproach.

Vicar sighed. Kyla was one of the protected few who never felt the bite of her temper. "Aye, little sister. You're right. My blood runs too hot sometimes, and I make an ass of myself. I know it." She regarded Dana evenly and extended her hand.

Dana accepted Vicar's apology, clasping her corded wrist, but her eyes were still wary.

Some of the tension melted out of Brenna's spine as she scratched a small circle between Jess's shoulders.

Vicar caught Hakan's eye, and Brenna saw a dozen communications fly silently between them.

"I forgot Dyan's teaching," Vic said at last. In Tristaine, there was no more eloquent admission of fault and human frailty.

Hakan nodded, and warmth crept back into her dark eyes.

Brenna swallowed and heard a dry click in her throat. That nerve-fraying sound of battling horses had faded but still lingered, a sibilant horror in her inner ear. Brenna moved into the circle, peering closely at Hakan, then Vicar. She took Vicar's pulse at the wrist. "Do you feel anything strange, Vic?"

"Aye, my cousin's adonai is coming on to me. That is strange," Vicar droned.

Jess's lip curled, which relieved some of the residual tension.

"Otherwise, nay, lass."

"These cretins were too clumsy to do any real damage, Bren." Jess clawed her wild hair out of her eyes, then checked the passage of the sun. "Let's head back by way of the river. It's a sunny ride. I've had more than enough grim shadows for the day."

"I'm with you." Dana sighed.

They gathered their weapons and headed for the stand of trees where their horses stood, ground-tied.

Brenna snuck her arm through Jess's as they passed the last of the gravestones, the sparse pines overhead sighing in farewell. None of them looked back.

❖

"This is humiliating, I've decided." Brenna's face was warm now against Jess's denim-clad back. She rode behind her on Bracken. "Sticking to your back like lint on a sock. Teach me to ride, Jesstin."

"You're serious, querida?" Jess's hair swept across Brenna's face as she turned her head. "I'd be most pleased."

"I have to learn to ride. Mountain Amazons ride horses." Brenna stated the fact much as she would a medical reality, like "teeth decay."

She loved horses, especially Bracken—and Valkyrie, that huge, beautiful beast of Hakan's. But she also maintained that even Jess's strong little mustang, the shrimp of the herd, was far too high off the ground.

She watched their shadow move like a two-headed centaur over the sunlit trunks of the trees they passed, followed by their four sisters on their own mounts. Now that the strange Amazon burial ground was well behind them, the weak sun stood a better chance of banishing the chill.

Brenna surveyed the passing scenery, glorious in late autumn, and remembered the journal entry she had made last night.

If the people of the City could see the real beauty of these mountains, Caster and her Governmental ilk would stand no chance of holding them behind electrified walls. No wonder art and poetry featuring nature are so regulated there. And travel has always been fiercely restricted in every City, along with most other freedoms that threaten Homeland Security.

The Amazons rode a natural path that flanked the eastern side of a broad river that ran west, about a quarter league from their mesa. Its roaring currents were stoked by a summer of melting glaciers higher in the hills. Their path back to the mesa followed it closely, but rose and dipped to fit the contours of the hillside. Jess was right. It made for a beautiful ride. They had never explored this far downstream.

Jess's callused fingers warmed the back of Brenna's hand. "You're still cold, Bren."

"I know." Brenna tightened her hold on Jess's waist. "The graves got to me, I think. All those lost warriors. Then Vicar jumping Dana—and, worse, Hakan going after Vic. Did you see their faces, Jesstin?"

"I did." Jess glanced back up the trail to check their privacy. Their four sisters rode together several yards behind Bracken. "That's twice Vicar's gone odd on us since we found this mesa."

"Vicar's not alone," Brenna pointed out.

"Aye, I'm not forgetting Sirius."

"It's hitting you too, Jesstin. Whatever it is. You really scared me the other night."

Jess's shoulders tensed. "Brenna, for the life of me, I don't remember—"

"I'm hearing the stallions again, Jess."

Jess turned her head sharply, and Bracken whickered at

the sudden movement. “You heard them today?”

Brenna nodded and shivered. “Fighting to the death. It started just before Vicar went at Dana.”

She let Jess absorb this unwelcome news. In the past, visions of horses had warned Brenna of real dangers threatening Tristaine. As portents, they were grimly reliable, but maddeningly vague. After a moment, Jess let out a long breath.

“All right, Bren. We’ve got too many questions to answer alone. Gaia knows we have reason to abide by your instincts. Shann’s high council meets tonight. We’ll talk to our lady about these concerns before our sisters gather.”

Brenna kissed the back of Jess’s shoulder, then rested her head against her again and closed her eyes. Jess’s warmth was banishing the last of her chills, and she relaxed into Bracken’s steady, rocking gait. She heard Kyla’s light tone as the other riders caught up to them.

“Dana, you’re still mixing up your terms. You should have had all this down months ago.” Kyla clicked to her horse, and he caught up to Bracken. “Remember, Blades? The first day we met, I taught you the difference between adanin and adonai.”

“Yes, I seem to remember that.” Warmth rose in Brenna as she savored the memory.

“When was this, now?” Jess asked, speaking loudly as they rode near the river’s fast, noisy current.

“It was after the four of us escaped from the Clinic.” Brenna patted Jess’s stomach. “But before Shann found us in the foothills. You told Kyla and Camryn that I was your adanin, so they had to accept me, too.”

“It was a struggle,” Kyla added, “but we managed it.”

“You two were incorrigible,” Jess grumbled. “I’ve never seen such a capacity for *talk.* A flood o’ words! Camryn and I thought we were going to have to drug you both just to save our sanity.”

"Really? To save yer sanity, missy?" Kyla mocked Jess's brogue in dead-on imitation. "And you'd drug us both, eh? You and Camryn and what army, Jesstin?"

Brenna felt a touch of relief. Kyla had spoken the name of her dead wife naturally, for the first time in recent memory. And the gradual return of her banter with Jess was encouraging as well. Shann said the bond Jesstin and Kyla shared could not be severed by anything short of a chainsaw, and Brenna believed it.

"Hold up." Jess touched her mustang's neck, and their column halted.

"Is that a bridge?" Dana lifted a hand to shade her eyes and pointed at the neat split-log structure spanning the wide river up ahead on their left. "Well. Duh. I know it's a bridge, but who built it?"

"More to the point, who's on it?" Jess murmured, and Brenna craned past her to look.

It took a moment to see what Jess's sharp eyes had detected. A slender figure stood in the center of the bridge, arms resting on the waist-high railing, facing downriver, away from them. It clearly wasn't one of their sisters. Gender was impossible to determine at this distance, and the figure stood so still it didn't seem alive until a breeze generated by the churning waters lifted a scrap of light brown hair.

Brenna tried to quell her first instinct that was, as always, to scream to her sisters, "Run!" A stranger in their midst didn't have to mean disaster, but whoever this person was, there were questions to answer.

"Vicar, Hakan." Jess lifted one long leg over Bracken's neck and dropped lightly to the ground. "I see no weapons. No need to scare him, or her. But let's go make our introductions."

"Aye, Jess." Vicar and Hakan dismounted, and the three women took a moment to check their arms.

Brenna chewed her lower lip. She hated suspense. She kept her eyes trained on the distant figure. There was no menace or distress evident in the stranger's posture. Brenna could see white hands on the log railing, and the shoulders—slender, probably female—looked relaxed.

J'heika, rise.

"Uh oh," Brenna whispered.

Jess looked up at her curiously.

Ride, Brenna, now! You've no time!

She felt a moment of panic. It was obvious no one else was hearing this imperious command. *Me, ride?*

Save the girl, or she'll destroy herself!

"Brenna?" Jess squinted at her, frowning.

Brenna heard the concern in Jess's tone, and she would have answered her, but suddenly, in one smooth motion, the figure on the bridge leaped over the railing. There was a final flick of light hair, then a small splash over the roiling din of the current.

Jess cursed, Kyla gasped, then things happened very quickly.

Hakan and Vicar broke into a run for the bridge.

The voice roared, *Brenna! Ride!* Brenna scooted forward, grabbed the horse's reins, and kicked him as hard as she could and still be sure she wouldn't hurt his furry sides. Bracken wasn't used to Brenna's touch on his neck, but he knew the friendly feel of her legs, and he shot down the trail like a guided missile on the hoof.

"Brenna!" Jess bellowed behind her. "Get back here!"

Under certain circumstances, Brenna acknowledged, as she clung to Bracken's plunging neck, certain people might argue that Jess had just given her a direct order. But she had no time to explain herself—or, rather, explain that an invisible banshee with a brogue was ordering her around—so she had to believe that Jess would just trust her and come quickly to

save her butt, because Brenna had all she could do to stay on Bracken's back and out of the river.

Then that malted burr sounded in her mind again. *Can you swim?*

Which actually made Brenna a little mad as well as terrified as she and the mustang thundered closer to the log bridge. *Why does everyone,* she thought, *even mysterious voices, always assume that all women from the City are puny and hopeless?*

My own adonai was City-born, ye daft girl, and so was that poor bairn up there, but neither of them can swim! Can you swim?

"I'm an *athlete.* Of course I can *swim*!" Brenna yelled.

Don't speak astride, in full gallop, young idjit. You'll break yer teeth! There's the girl, see her?

Brenna summoned her courage and lifted her head to peer between Bracken's large ears as they galloped past the bridge and continued downstream. The wind of their passage swept her hair into her eyes. Blinded by the sun sparking off the swirling rapids, for a terrible moment, she *didn't* see her. And then she did. Her close-cropped head was bobbing above the surface of the deep water in the middle of the swift-moving river. "Yeah, she's there!"

Jump!

"What?"

Great crikey, how will we face what's coming if you can't follow simple orders? Now, jump!

"Into the *river*?"

Are you deaf as well as mouthy? I said jump*!*

So Brenna did.

She didn't think; she just gathered herself on Bracken's sturdy back, drew a deep breath, and hurled herself up and sideways over the bushes lining the steep bank of the river and smack into the water, blue as Jess's eyes and colder than Caster's heart.

It closed over her head. The shock of chill punched the air out of her lungs, and for a sick instant Brenna flailed helplessly in the current, head over heels. Then instinct caught up with her, and she began to move with the force of the water rather than resist it.

Sight the girl. Keep your eyes on her. Jesstin's coming.

She had no time to look over her shoulder to see Jess thundering along the side of the river on Hakan's huge horse, but knew with certainty that is what she would see. She also realized that, at full gallop, he ran faster than the current, but the river had a lead on him and Jess, pulling both Brenna and the woman inexorably westward.

Brenna finally sighted the drowning woman. *Thank Artemis, there she is*, she thought, *or thank Gaia, or whatever goddess an Amazon should invoke while trying to rescue a stranger from a suicide attempt*. She could see pale, thin arms flail and hear the woman's weak gasping as she drew near her.

Finally, Brenna snagged her heavy, waterlogged cloak.

"Leave me alone!"

It was a ragged cry, and Brenna ignored it. She let an eddy of water surge her against the flailing figure and wrapped one arm around her tightly from behind.

"Shut up!" Brenna gasped. "I'm saving your life! Hold on! Help's—" she choked on a throatful of melted glacier. "Help's coming!"

"Brenna!"

Apparently if Jess was also hearing a spectral voice telling her not to talk while at full gallop, she was ignoring it, too. Brenna chanced a quick glance over her shoulder as she spun with the small woman in her arms and saw a flash of dark hair as Jess stood on Valkyrie's back and dived over the embankment into the river. Brenna almost gave herself whiplash trying to track her fall, and her already hammering

heart gave a nasty lurch until she saw Jess's head burst through the swirling water.

Jess's strong arms pulled her to them in seconds, and she grabbed the woman's trailing leg. She barked at Brenna, "You all right?"

Brenna's energy was fading fast, so she just nodded, and they began the arduous trek to the shallows of the riverside, swimming hard against the current. The woman lay limp and unresisting between them. Her cloak covered much of her face, but her parted lips were blue. The sight of them scared Brenna, and she kicked hard in the water to stay in place and felt for a pulse. It was there, faint, but fast and steady.

They reached the embankment and were pulling the slight form out of the water when they heard the sound of horses. Vicar and Hakan jumped off Vic's roan on the path above as Dana and Kyla trotted up on their own mounts, leading Bracken.

"Dead?" Vic called, sidestepping down the bank to receive the unconscious girl from Jess's arms.

"No, but check her breathing," Brenna gasped. She let herself slump to the grassy bank, suddenly and completely spent.

Then she was suddenly and completely lying on her back, her hands on either side of her head, and Jess was kneeling over her, her eyes inches from her own.

"Explanation," Jess barked.

"Let me breathe first," Brenna got out, and Jess relented and gave her time. The tenderness in her touch as she brushed Brenna's wet hair off her forehead belied the sternness in her voice.

"How is she, Jess?"

Jess raised her eyes to the path. "Vicar?"

"The girl's sound enough, Jesstin!" Brenna heard Vicar call from above. "She's coming around. You two okay?"

"Peachy," Jess shot back, and glared down at Brenna. "Well? You ignored my direct command. You may not be pledged to the guild of warriors, lass, but *no* Amazon can—"

"Unless guided by greater access to information," Brenna panted. She squinted up against the weak sun to see her lover. "I heard another voice, Jess."

"Oh." The anger drained out of Jess's face. "Whose?"

"Jesstin, Brenna, you'd best come!" Hakan was looking down at them, her hands on her knees. "This bairn says she knows you! She escaped from the City Prison."

Brenna and Jess exchanged a stunned glance, then moved as quickly up the embankment as their stiff legs would allow.

The young woman was wrapped in a blanket, reclining in Dana's arms as Kyla massaged her thin legs. This simple Amazon technique for treating shock was more effective than any chemical intervention. The girl's hair was damp and stringy against her pale forehead, and her eyes were closed.

Jess knelt beside her and lifted her hand. "My name is Jesstin, lass. You're safe with us. No one here will hurt you. I promise."

The girl's eyes fluttered open, and she gazed at Jess. "Not you." She shivered, hard. "I don't know you." The green eyes sought out Brenna's face. "There you are."

Brenna's heart stopped. "Sammy," she whispered.

Chapter Four

Hello, Samantha." Her smile friendly and warm, Shann glanced over her shoulder at Brenna. "I believe she's back with us, Blades."

Brenna tossed the cloth she'd been drying her hands with and went to the bedside. Shann made room for her, and Brenna sat carefully on the bunk's edge, noting how Samantha's shadowed eyes tracked her movements.

"Hey, you. Try to stay awake." Brenna lifted her sister's cold hand onto her knee and took her pulse at the wrist. The beat was slower, more even, not the fast, feathery pace that had alarmed them earlier. Brenna frowned, concerned by the glassiness of Sammy's stare. "Sam, you know me, right?"

It took Samantha a few moments to reply. "Yes, sure, Bree."

Brenna found a tremulous smile when she heard the old nickname, but it faded fast. Samantha's voice was hoarse, and she looked much older than her twenty-one years. In the eighteen months since Brenna had seen her, she had dropped a good twenty pounds. Her eyes were bracketed by lines, and her fair skin seemed stretched across the delicate bones of her face. Her complexion held an unhealthy, waxy pallor. The vibrant red-gold of Sammy's hair, her glory in childhood, had faded to a lank brown, cut short against her neck. Brenna let her hand hover over Sammy's flat waist, then settle on the fur covering her.

"You're in a safe place, Sammy." She brushed small circles over Samantha's stomach. "We were worried about hypothermia, but you seem to be coming around just—"

"They took the baby. She died."

Brenna stilled her hand. "What?" she whispered.

"The baby," Samantha repeated. Her unwavering gaze was fixed on Brenna's face. "I only saw her once. She was born in Prison."

"Sam." Brenna clenched her sister's hand.

"And Matt's dead, Bree."

"Ah, no." Brenna hunched her shoulders beneath these blows. She didn't know which was worse, the news of Samantha's terrible loss, or her utter lack of expression as she reported it.

Brenna felt a light touch on her head and looked up to meet Shann's compassionate gaze. "Matthew was my sister's adonai, lady," she explained softly. "Tell me what happened, Sam."

"Caster happened." Samantha closed her eyes and settled more deeply into the softness of the furs beneath her. "Water?"

Shann's hand rested on Samantha's hair. "We can do better than that." She fit a cup of steaming liquid into Brenna's numb fingers.

"Careful, it's hot." Brenna held the tea to her sister's chapped lips and supported her neck while she sipped it. Sammy seemed to need rest after this brief exchange, and Brenna was grateful for the silence.

The story emerged in fits and starts. Brenna had already grasped the sickening highlights. After she and Jess had escaped from the Clinic, Caster couldn't believe Brenna hadn't told her only blood relative about the plan.

"I couldn't believe it either," Samantha said.

She had been arrested on a conspiracy charge. Her

husband, Matthew, died in a fiery car accident trying to evade Caster's pursuing agents.

Samantha's baby was born in the Prison infirmary. She had held the infant only once before it was taken. Sammy was told she died days later.

"I got to tell her that her name was Brenna," Samantha finished. "Matt and I agreed to that as soon as we knew she was coming. We didn't get a chance to tell you before you disappeared."

"Sammy." Brenna's throat was painfully tight. "I'm so sorry."

"You could have warned us." Samantha's tone was mild.

"Sam, honestly, there was no time—"

"It doesn't matter now." Samantha's eyes were drifting closed again, but she forced them open, and for the first time they carried a spark of feeling. "Bree?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad you're okay. I was scared for you."

"I love you so much, kid."

Samantha nodded against the pillow, her voice fading, "...love you back."

❖

Brenna stepped outside the cabin that served as Tristaine's healing lodge and leaned against one of the oak posts supporting its deck. She rested her forehead on her crossed hands, the relief of tears after such long restraint as welcome as a warm bath.

Brenna had always wept silently, a trait she shared with Jess. Even as a child, during the years she and Samantha shared a narrow cot in the County Youth Home, her grief had been voiceless. The comfort Brenna longed for then never came, but now it was here. She heard the cabin door open behind her,

then felt Shann's hand, gentle and strong on her shoulder.

Brenna knew Shann understood that grief tended to close women's throats, and she wouldn't expect Brenna to talk. Shann stood beside her, her arm around her waist, letting her regal presence lend the kind of loving support mere words couldn't hope to convey.

After a while, Brenna was able to raise her head from her hands and draw a few hitching breaths. "She's still sleeping?"

"Yes, the valerian tea worked well." Shann stroked Brenna's hair. "Your Sammy should rest comfortably until morning. Vicar and Wai Li will watch over her during our night's council. With care and time, Blades, she'll recover physically."

Shann reached into an inner pocket of her robe and pulled out a small, plastic-wrapped package. "I found this in your blood sister's shirt, adanin. Samantha protected it well."

Brenna opened the plastic and stared at the tattered notebook inside. "Shann. It's my first journal."

Shann nodded. "You must have found an excellent hiding place for it."

"You told me to leave it behind last spring, wrapped in a tree, safe from the flood. With directions to our first camp." Brenna brushed the back of her hand across her eyes. "And you ordered maps placed at each of our camps as we traveled, lady. Sammy never would have found us otherwise. How can I thank you for that?"

Shann opened her arms, and Brenna went into them willingly, her head fitting neatly beneath Shann's chin. She rested against her elder sister for a moment.

"Sammy named her baby for me." Brenna found herself empty of tears, which was good, or repeating that memory would have closed her throat for another hour. She filled her lungs with cold mountain air, then breathed it out and tried to focus on Shann's voice.

"Brenna, I must ask you to call upon all your courage now. You must face your grief head-on. We have grave work to do, and it begins tonight. I'm going to need your help."

"With what?"

"Listen first. Samantha is alive." Shann's smile was radiant. "Brenna, your little sister lives! You haven't even had time to digest that one lovely grace before you were hit with sorrows."

"You're right, lady," Brenna whispered. She lifted her shoulders a little as she registered her surroundings again. The sun was setting over the forested western slopes, but it wasn't terribly cold yet. An early, full moon ghosted her way up the sky.

"Lady...Brenna?"

Jess was walking toward the cabin's deck, a sight so healing to Brenna's sore heart her knees almost buckled. Jess's eyes were shadowed with concern as she lifted Brenna's cold hands and warmed them in her own.

"How do you feel, adonai?" Jess's low brogue was tender.

Brenna considered. "I'm tired. I'm hungry. Sore. I still have water in my left ear." She sank into Jess's arms and hugged her fiercely. "And *Sammy's alive,* Jesstin."

"She is, lass. We have new family to celebrate tonight." She met Shann's fond gaze over Brenna's shoulder. "Your council gathers, lady."

"Hm." Shann's eyebrow lifted. "And has Aria arrived yet?"

"She has, Shann." Jess grinned. "Aria and her sixty skillets of dinner await us in the square."

"Well, we'll not keep them waiting." Shann took Jess's arm and Brenna's, and they started down the tree-lined path leading into the village.

Tristaine was unusually quiet in the gathering dusk.

Brenna saw other Amazons filtering through the trees in pairs and small groups, finishing the day's work or heading home to their lodges. A few called greetings, which Jess returned with a lifted hand.

Brenna drew in a breath of fresh air, savoring its scent. Faint tendrils of woody smoke reached her from cooking fires, blending with the spicy pine and rich loam of the surrounding forest. Those aromas evoked a feeling of home and safety for Brenna more potent than any sight could. But there was something strange about the camp's stillness.

She heard no laughter among the women they passed. Their voices were hushed and their greetings subdued. And there was no music. Tristaine was a clan that had always cherished song, and many Amazons carried small instruments with them. The air was usually full of soft, separate melodies. Not this night.

"Do you hear it, Blades?" Shann asked.

"I don't hear much, lady. That worries me."

"Exactly." Shann sighed, her gray eyes moving over the lodges that housed her Amazons. "This numb silence has lasted for days now. Brenna told me about the concerns the two of you share, Jesstin, while we sat with Samantha. Of all the signs we're seeing, I think it's the loss of our laughter that chills me most."

Brenna heard a faint grinding sound. Looking over at Jess, she saw the muscles in her jaw stand out. Shann nudged her lead warrior.

"What troubles you, Jess?"

Jess shook her hair out of her eyes, scanning the trees around them. "Nothing new, lady. Or nothing specific. I just don't like enemies I can't see."

"Ah." Shann patted Brenna's hand. "It's especially hard on our warriors, Brenna, these vague portents. Ephemeral threats can't be fought with steel. Strange hostilities between

Amazons who are bound as adanin...a creeping malaise that weighs down our spirits."

"Warriors who get spit sideways off their horses," Brenna added.

"Yes, poor Vicar. It started there."

"And those stallions, and the voice you heard today, Bren." Jess's hand went to the dagger in her belt, an unconscious protective gesture. "It said something was coming. The ghostie didn't offer anything more helpful?"

"You know everything I do." Brenna paused as Jess maneuvered her and Shann carefully around a root embedded in their path. "This voice was different from those I've heard before. Very pushy, might I add. But it helped us save Sam..."

Brenna's voice drifted off and she stopped, peering at Shann in the ebbing light that revealed the shadows beneath her eyes and the sallow dryness of her skin. "Shann—hey. You're not feeling any better, are you?"

"Not a bit," Shann admitted.

"You're sick, lady?" Jess's brow creased, and she touched her dagger again. "How bad is it?"

"Jess, I told you she was looking tired weeks ago." Brenna's impatience was all for herself. Studying Shann now, she was appalled she hadn't addressed her health sooner.

"Relax, girls." The corner of Shann's mouth lifted. "I'm touched, but fatigue is about the worst of it. I'll catch up on my rest once we get a grip on what's plaguing our clan. Come on. I smell a roasted boar out there with my crest on it."

"I want to examine you after the council, Shann." Brenna kept her hand on Shann's arm. "No excuses. You really don't look good to me."

"I'll thank you for it, Blades." Shann smiled. "This is a bad time for Tristaine to suffer a weakened queen." Jess met Brenna's worried gaze and kept a supportive hand on the small of Shann's back as they entered the village square.

The council that advised Tristaine's queen had changed in the last year. The Amazons still mourned the deaths of Jocelyn and Dorothea, two of their elder members, taken by fever within days of each other. Shann's selection of Dana to her inner circle was not greeted with universal joy. She had met privately with several women angered by the City soldier's inclusion.

In addition to Dana, Kyla had been named to the council to represent the clan's youth, a position Camryn had held before a crossbow bolt took her life. Brenna saw her standing near a bank of tables laden with fragrant platters of food.

Kyla seemed to feel her gaze, and her eyes lit when she spotted Brenna. She trotted over to the three women, nodding respectfully to Shann before taking Brenna's hands.

"How is she, sweetie? Your sister?"

"She'll mend, Ky, thanks." Brenna smiled. "I can't wait for you two to know each other. You've always reminded me a bit of Sammy. You're both cheeky as hell."

"Hey, I already know she's from excellent stock." Kyla gave Brenna a quick kiss on the cheek, then stepped back and regarded her and Jess sternly. "Lady? Would you please command these two idiots here to wear life jackets wherever they go now? You should have seen them pitch head over fanny into that river! I almost bit my tongue in half."

"I'm just as glad Gaia spared me that sight." Shann brushed Kyla's hair off her brow. "And grateful you spared your tongue, adanin. We'll need your voice tonight."

"...and I will cheerfully tweak your colon with a fork, barbarian, if you *dare* refer to this sumptuous feast again as *grub*!"

They turned to watch the third new councilor, a voluptuous blond woman named Aria, as she wrapped steely fingers around Dana's neck and escorted her on a forcible survey of the food laid out before them.

"What you slandered as *pork chops* is, in actuality, a savory and tender wild boar, slow-roasted with garlic and fresh herbs. Served with a reduction of wild berries, green onions, and the finest elderberry wine in Tristaine."

"It looks great," Dana stammered, obviously trying not to grin as Aria led her to the next platter. "Everything smells fantastic. Really. I meant to compliment—"

"*And* these are not *spuds,* churl. These are indigenous *rrrr*oot vegetables caramelized slowly, *slowly* and to perfection, and seasoned with pork fat." Aria hit that last "t" with great precision.

"Your problem child's in trouble again," Jess told Shann, amused. "Young Dana's developed a fine talent for rubbing her sisters raw."

Shann nodded. "Stand by. This might call for someone brawnier than me. *Aria,*" the queen trilled, "what a delightful feast you've conjured for the delectation of our council!"

"*Shanendra*!" Aria released Dana's neck and sashayed to Shann in a swirl of silk robes, pecking her affectionately on both cheeks. "Finally, a royal palate *deserving* of my unrivaled culinary talents. Hello, dear Brenna, and *hello*, you muscle-bound stud muffin!"

Aria raised high on her toes, wound her arms around Jess's neck, and gave her a prolonged, sucking kiss full on the lips.

Brenna smiled politely. For the entire time. She refused to look at Shann or Kyla, who undoubtedly enjoyed watching her expression whenever Jess encountered Aria.

She was actually getting used to this behavior, for the most part. Brenna thought Aria was a complete treasure, and she accepted the fact that the woman was simply incapable, at a cellular level, of chastity in any form. She was Shann's age, and when she was eighty, Aria would still be sexually irresistible to any butch with half a pulse on the planet.

Finally Aria's lips detached from Jess's with a wet pop that echoed through the trees like a faint thunderclap. Jess grinned down at her curvaceous elder and gave her an appreciative wink.

"Yech. Brazen strumpets." Sarah was the oldest Amazon on the council. The moonlight gleamed off her bald scalp. Her voice was harsh and cracked—not so much from age, as from the pipe always clenched between her teeth. Her dark eyes were shrouded in a fine web of wrinkles, but they glittered with a sharp intelligence that had guided Shann well. Brenna loved and honored Sarah and tried devoutly to avoid her notorious temper.

"The seven Amazons of Tristaine's council are gathered." Shann drew the attention of the group as naturally as she drew breath. The traditional invocation fell pleasantly on Brenna's ears.

"We serve our clan as the living legacy of the Seven Sisters who gave it birth," Shann continued. "We call on their ancient wisdom, and the benevolent guidance of our Goddess, to preserve Tristaine through this long winter. But first, we invite them to join us for this lavish feast!"

The queen rubbed her hands together in gleeful greed, and Brenna's shoulders relaxed at the soft laughter that followed.

"Just let the uncouth among us," Aria said, eyeing Dana, "remember that only good little warriors get dessert." She swept to the altar in the center of the square and indicated the seven wooden bowls grouped on its surface. "In this case, a fiendishly creamy egg custard with fresh blackberries—"

Brenna was moving before any conscious thought registered, her eyes pinned on the altar. She brushed Aria roughly aside, snatched two of the bowls, and set them quickly on the rocky ground.

"Bren?"

She heard Jess, but for the second time that day, she ignored her. Brenna lowered another two bowls to the ground, then urgency stung her, and she swept the last three from the altar with her arm. Bowls bounced, and custard splattered over the rocky earth.

"Brenna." Jess was beside her, a hand on her shoulder.

"This is not a dessert tray." Brenna couldn't take her eyes from the ancient symbols carved in the altar's surface.

"Little sister?" Shann's touch was cool on her flushed face.

"This is a dark chancel," Brenna whispered. Her fingers trembled as they hovered over the glyphs. "We stand on blighted ground."

"Brenna!" Jess had heard enough. She took Brenna's shoulders in a firm grip and turned her from the altar, forcing her to meet her gaze. "Look at me, lass."

Brenna blinked. The fierceness in Jess's eyes broke through the fog clouding her mind, and she looked up at her in confusion. "What's a chancel?"

"Lady." Aria watched Brenna with dismay. "Please know I meant no disrespect to this place."

"Of course you didn't, adanin." Shann pressed Aria's hand, her eyes keen on Brenna's face. "Blades, are you all right?"

Brenna tore her gaze from Jess and crossed her arms as a shiver swept through her. She saw the six women circling the altar regarding her with a mix of worry and fascination. "Shann, I have no idea where that came from."

Shann's tone was low and calm. "Tell us what you remember, dear one."

"Did you hear that voice again?" Kyla's eyes were huge.

Dana stepped closer to her. "You look really strange, Brenna."

"No." Brenna shook her head. "No voice. Just a feeling when I saw those bowls...such outrage and fury..."

"I knew I should have made fruit pies," Aria whispered.

Brenna wiped her palms on her denim pants, and her mouth filled with saliva. "Hoo. This was a new one, folks. It wasn't...very pleasant. Excuse me."

She touched Jess's arm, then walked swiftly toward the trees lining the square. She was halfway there when the belly cramps struck, and she bent double and emptied her stomach violently.

Jess's arm was fast around her waist, and her callused hand brushed Brenna's hair back as she retched again. Brenna made the requisite indelicate spitting sounds until she could stand erect.

"Just breathe, adanin." Shann rubbed a small circular caress on her back.

"Yech," Brenna gasped. "Have I told you lately how—erk—much I hate throwing up, Jesstin?"

Jess looked too worried for a cavalier reply. "What ails her, lady?"

"Yet I keep doing it," Brenna finished, and spat again.

"It's to be expected, Jesstin." Shann wound her arm through Brenna's and walked her carefully back to the circle of Amazons around the altar. "Whatever strange force propelled Brenna to this altar had to be powerful indeed. Our young seer had no time to prepare herself, and her system took a bad shock. The body simply rebels at such invasion."

"But didn't she get invaded even worse earlier today?" Dana caught herself and looked around, but the faces turned to her were open and attentive. She swallowed. "That bully voice yelled at her to jump in the river, and she didn't get any advance warning then, either." Dana looked to Kyla for affirmation. "Right?"

"Yeah, Bren, and you weren't shook up like this

afterwards." Kyla folded her arms, a characteristic sign of her worry. "You were cold and drenched, but you didn't have this—haunted look."

Brenna's internal percolations had subsided enough that she could speak normally again. "That voice was nothing like this, Ky. This was pure rage, and there was nothing human in it. Or even animal. It was an energy I've never felt before. That's all I could catch, Shann."

"It's a beginning, Blades. Well done." Shann's finely veined hand moved over the rock surface of the altar. The Amazons fell silent as their queen's fingers brushed each glyph. "Many of these sigils are known to us," she murmured. "Others are alien to our clan."

She touched a familiar image, the crude two-headed ax that was an all but universal symbol of Amazon spirit. Near it were the simplistic circles within a circle of a bull's-eye target. Farther down the craggy stone were the intertwined ovals representing sexual love between women.

The altar held symbols for each of the seven guilds of Tristaine and more. The arrows in flight that Jess wore on her shoulder, marking her as a warrior. Other glyphs for healing, weaving, tilling the soil, spirituality. The intricate swirl of the artists' guild that Kyla wore on her flat stomach. The images weren't all identical to Tristaine's designs, but they were recognizable.

"What's this odd little corkscrew, lady?" Aria's perfectly manicured nail tapped one small carving in the stone. "Or this shooting flame thing?"

"We can only guess, adanin. I'll need our wisest historians to decipher them."

"Shift your bones, overgrown weed. She means me." Sarah tapped Jess's arm impatiently. "I'm the wisest historian Tristaine's got, madlady Artemis help us."

Jess moved respectfully aside to allow Sarah closer

access to the altar. She bent stiffly and peered at the symbols in baleful silence.

"All these are star glyphs," she said at last, her gnarled finger thumping the stone. "They stand for individual clans." Sarah squinted up at Dana. "Like our Seven Sisters, sprout. That star cluster up there that houses the souls of Tristaine's mothers."

Dana nodded, searching the dark sky for that well-loved array of twinkling lights. Kyla nudged her and pointed toward the opposite horizon, where she found them easily.

"Do you recognize any of these tribes, grandmother?" Shann asked.

"Not a one, lady." Sarah drew on her pipe and winced smoke out of one eye. "There's sigils here for magic, both light and dark. For queens and bloodletting."

Brenna's gaze fixed on those carvings, and she gave in to the persistent urge to step back from the altar. She noted the rest of the Queen's Council kept a prudent distance as well. To her pitched nerves, the black stone seemed to shimmer like a dark and malignant battery, vibrant with power.

Another hour of discussion brought them no closer to understanding their enemy, but at least it found them well fed. Weary of conjecture and sated with Aria's rich food, Shann's advisors sprawled in various stages of repose around a crackling fire.

Kyla drew a small cedar comb slowly through her curls, her eyes troubled and distant as she watched the flames. Shann and Sarah sat in private council, the smoke from Sarah's pipe wreathing their inclined heads.

Brenna lay with her head pillowed in Jess's lap, delicately licking the last spices off her fingers. "Ah, wee piggy," she burred, in a fair imitation of Jess's brogue, "ye did not die in vain."

Jess interrupted her constant scrutiny of the quiet square

to reach down and ruffle Brenna's hair. "You're a marvel, Bren. From spewing your guts to wolfing down half a roast boar in less time than it takes our fire to burn low."

It was true. Brenna's stomach was pleasantly full, with no lingering trace of its earlier rebellion. It seemed she had purged whatever toxin afflicted her, messily but efficiently.

"Well." Brenna fingered the collar of Jess's thick jacket. "I've heard Amazons are fast healers by necessity."

The gentle fingers in her hair lulled her, and Brenna's eyes drifted closed. Then she remembered this was only a break in the night's council, and she forced them open again. "Beautiful moon," she murmured.

Jess lifted her gaze to the night sky. "Aye, Selene's in her glory tonight."

"With the rising of the harvest moon, sisters, our Lady readies Herself for the celebration of Thesmophoria." Reclined on a warm fur near them, Aria followed their gaze. "Our festival menu will *not* include egg custard, in any form."

"Damn." Dana leaned closer to Kyla. "Is that Thesmie-whatsits some other Amazon big shot I'm supposed to know?"

"It's an old rite of our Nation, Dana." Jess's hand slipped beneath Brenna's hair and massaged the muscles of her neck. "We used to harvest our winter wheat at the rising of the Thesmophorian moon. It honors the goddess Demeter and her search for her kidnapped daughter, Persephone."

"She's the gal who ate the apple?" Dana's brow furrowed. "And got captured by the god of hell?"

"It was a pomegranate, Dana." Kyla snickered. "Persephone ate its seeds."

"And her imprisonment royally vexed her peace-loving mother." Aria smiled seductively at Dana, because that was how Aria smiled. "It's an immensely powerful time for Amazons, young one. A three-night festival of debauched revelry."

"A celebration might bring us together, Jess." Brenna lifted her head from the warrior's lap and sat up with a blissful stretch. "You think? A little dancing, a little wine..."

"Only a little wine, querida." Jess had gone back to scanning the square's perimeter with restless eyes. "Our warriors don't need much excuse these days to bash in each other's skulls."

Brenna nodded rueful agreement. She glanced at Aria's flagon of elderberry wine nearby, then looked away. She had not imbibed, in spite of a powerful temptation. Alcohol had played far too important a part in Brenna's life in the City, and she avoided it carefully now.

Gazing across the fire, she saw Dana staring down at the bench she shared with Kyla, her fingers curled around the small wooden comb Kyla had used earlier. Dana glanced surreptitiously at Kyla, then slipped the comb in her pocket and rested her hand over it. Brenna smiled.

She turned her head against the tree and studied the sculpted planes of Jess's profile, then caressed the powerful swell of her shoulder. In her mind's eye, Brenna could picture the glyph cresting that smooth muscle perfectly. She remembered the first time she had seen it, the night she met Jess.

The haggard Amazon prisoner, chained in a freezing cell in the City Clinic. Brenna's first medical intake in the Military Research unit. The brutal clinical trials Jess endured that left her bloody and battered, but unshakeable in her loyalty to Tristaine. Brenna's own hand, pressing the muzzle of a powerful stunner against the intricate tattoo on Jess's shoulder and firing an agonizing burst of electricity into the muscle.

Brenna shuddered and buried her face against the soft sheepskin of Jess's jacket.

"Hey. What's this?" Jess wrapped one arm around Brenna's shoulders. "You cold, lass?"

"Yeah," Brenna whispered and burrowed closer to the solid warmth that surrounded and shielded her through the bitterest of nights.

"Ah, young lust." Aria beamed at them with sentimental approval. "Jesstin, the sight of your macha self brings to mind, and to vulva, whole cadres of studly warriors who have heated my blankets—"

"Lady! *Shann!*"

Adrenaline sluiced through Brenna in a sick rush as they bolted to their feet. There was no mistaking the horror in that shouted alarm. She didn't recognize Vicar's voice until she staggered into the square, carrying a blood-soaked figure in her arms.

"Sweet Gaia, Vicar!" Shann ran to them, but Jess was faster. She lunged and caught the falling weight of the Amazon her cousin carried, and together they eased her onto the altar.

"Dana, bring torches!" Jess snapped. "Lady, it's Sirius."

Brenna actually needed this information. The gore covering the warrior rendered her all but unidentifiable. She moved quickly to stand at the altar across from Shann, to lend what assistance she could. She helped her unlace Sirius's vest and stared aghast at the bloody gashes and punctures that gaped like obscene eyes on her ebony torso.

Jess grasped Vicar's arm. "You hurt, Vic?"

She shook her head, then bent and rested her stained hands on her knees, her sides heaving for air. "Sirius guarded our south border tonight, Jesstin," she gasped. "I found her crawling toward the healers' lodge."

"Did she speak?"

"No, nothing, she just...stared at me."

"Lady, should I bring your satchel?" Kyla's voice was strained.

The queen's hands moved swiftly over her fallen warrior,

measuring her pulse at the neck, lifting an unresisting eyelid with great gentleness. Shann bent and smelled Sirius's faint breath, then straightened and met Brenna's stricken gaze.

Brenna had realized within seconds that even heroic efforts couldn't save this woman, and Shann had doubtless known it at first sight. A sick desolation filled her eyes. Kyla made a choked sound, and Dana's arm rose instinctively to encircle her shoulders.

"Assemble the guild, Vicar, battle ready." Jess's tone was low and firm. "I want a squad to guard our lady. And a full recon of the mesa, *now.*"

"Aye, Jesstin."

Brenna's heart gave a nasty lurch, and she whirled. "Jess? Sammy..."

"My adonai watches over the girl, Brenna, and she's well armed." Vic met Jess's sharp look and nodded. "We'll set a squad at the healing lodge as well." Vic spun and ran out of the square.

"Black-hearted, bile-swilling scrotes who did this..." Sarah's voice cracked.

Aria was pale as chalk. "There's nothing we can do, Shanendra?"

Shann didn't answer. The anguish faded from her eyes, and she looked down at the still face with quiet compassion. Raising one hand, she rested it at the base of Sirius's throat. Shann whispered an invocation, which Brenna recognized as the opening of one of the most sacred of Amazon traditions, the granting of the Queen's Blessing to a dying warrior.

Sirius had been mercifully unconscious until now, but at Shann's touch, her eyes opened slowly. Brenna tensed, but saw no indication of pain in Sirius's slack expression.

"Is she hurting, Bren?" Kyla whispered. She seemed oblivious to Dana's comforting arm.

"No, little sister." Brenna covered Kyla's hand with her

own. "She's leaving us, honey, and almost gone. She's not suffering."

"Jesstin." Dana swallowed visibly. "Should I join the recon—?"

"Quiet, adanin." Jess's tone was oddly gentle. "Stay. You should see this."

Shann looked into Sirius's eyes, and her lips lifted slightly in a smile. "Sirius, daughter of Shenoka, warrior of Tristaine," she said softly. "You close your eyes in the embrace of a clan that will cherish your memory. Tales of your courage will be told around our storyfires for generations. You gave your life protecting your sisters, and an Amazon can win no higher honor. You have the heartfelt gratitude of your queen, dear one."

Shann's slender fingers brushed the blood-soaked hair off Sirius's ashy brow, then carefully adjusted her head. Her dying eyes were clouding, but they focused briefly on a sight high above them.

Without looking, Brenna knew Shann had shifted Sirius's gaze so that the last view she had of the world would be the starfield of Tristaine's Seven Sisters. Brenna's vision trebled as her eyes brimmed with tears.

Sirius released one more shallow breath and was gone.

A soundless sigh passed through the women around the altar. Shann bowed her head and whispered a private prayer of farewell.

Brenna felt a warm stickiness on the side of her hand, and she blinked to clear her vision. The brutalized warrior had shed most of her blood in the forest, but the surface of the altar was still streaked with it. She saw, with a detached numbness, that several of the glyphs carved into the stone had filled with the sluggish red fluid.

J'heika, rise.

Brenna froze. Her gaze fastened on the simple target

glyph, the circles within a circle just visible beside the dead woman's knee.

The blood filling it was starting to boil.

"Shann," Brenna whispered.

Small red bubbles popped viciously in the roiling circles, and a thin, wisping tendril of steam curled from the center of the target. An acrid odor assaulted Brenna's nostrils, impossibly sharp given the fragile thread of vapor that carried it.

"This was a blood sacrifice," Brenna murmured.

Jess's voice reached her only faintly. "What do you mean, Bren?"

"Drawing first blood gives her ingress. It opens the portal between our worlds."

"Brenna!" Jess's tone was sharp now. "Look at me."

Brenna's mouth filled abruptly with a sour sulfur taste, and she stepped back in pure reaction.

Back and off the edge of the planet. Brenna slid bonelessly to the ground, Shann's cry reaching her dimly before all light vanished.

❖

She materialized seconds later in a nightmare of static.

Brenna opened her eyes on the pitched plane of another world glimpsed rarely, and only imperfectly, in her dreams. She was on her knees, grasping for purchase on a surface that wasn't grass or rock or anything else identifiable.

She sucked in a desperate breath, relieved but astonished to find oxygen was available on this harrowing plane. "Jesstin!" Brenna screamed. Her cry evaporated before reaching her own ears, lost in the erratic, pervasive buzzing filling the air.

All Brenna could see was a murky gray light, pulsing and surging all around her. This world seemed formless, with only vague black spikes far in the distance providing any solid

contrast. But as her panic-filled eyes began to adjust and she forced herself to breathe slowly, Brenna saw a figure forming several feet in front of her.

It was a large human shape, its gender impossible to determine, as it was surrounded by a bristling nimbus of light that concealed its features. It took a step toward her, and Brenna skittered backward like a crab, on her hands and heels. She was picturing the hideous wounds inflicted on Sirius's body. But the looming figure stopped and lowered itself slowly to one knee before her. There was no menace or threat in its careful movements.

Brenna realized the ugly static buzzing in the air was fading a little. She made herself hold still as the glowing form extended an arm toward her. A rough hand materialized, still shrouded in light, but Brenna could see some details: long, strong fingers, a crude silver ring.

The hand clutched a small, leafy plant with gold berries that was instantly familiar. Brenna had last seen its kind in the abandoned cemetery beyond the mesa, adorning the graves of long-dead Amazon warriors. The connection was not a reassuring one.

Her eyes widened as a gold liquid welled from the spiked leaves of the plant, then overflowed it and spilled in a gentle stream to the ground. Abruptly, Brenna's throat seemed coated with dust, so deep was her thirst.

❖

Just as abruptly, her teeth clacked together as her butt hit the ground with jarring force.

Brenna's senses were assaulted at once with the chill night air of the village square and the alarmed shouts of the Amazons swarming around her. Regardless of her own perceptions, her sojourn to that strange spectral world had apparently lasted only long enough for her falling body to hit

the sparse grass.

"Brenna!" Kyla's hands gripped her shoulders, and she blinked hard to focus on the frightened girl's face.

"I'm here, Ky," she gasped.

Instantly she felt a supporting warmth leave her back as Jess rose from behind Brenna and bolted toward the altar.

The night was shrill with the howling of the clan's dogs and the bugling of horses from the stables. The tumult disoriented Brenna, and it took her a moment to register the Amazons clustered at one end of the hulking black stone.

"Bren, you have to come." Kyla was obviously struggling for calm. She took Brenna's hands and hauled her bodily to her feet. "Hurry, adanin."

Brenna saw the woman splayed on the ground at the center of the group, and her heart trip-hammered in her breast as she raced toward her.

Shann lay motionless on her back, her eyes half-open, gazing sightlessly up at the Seven Sisters who rode high and unreachable over the heads of her embattled clan.

Chapter Five

Vitality surged at last through its withered limbs, and its tainted blood ignited with a stirring of ancient power. It had been sapping the energies of Tristaine's queen since she first entered the shadow cast by this mesa. Every spark of strength it drained from their pitiful ruler added to its own growing reserves.

Their queen had fallen so easily. This last tribe would prove little challenge to the divine destiny of an immortal sovereign. With the three-night reign of the Thesmophorian moon, the blood of these Amazons would soak this ground, and it would live again.

She who ruled the mesa centuries ago took form within the depths of the ebony altar. Not human form—that couldn't happen until the third Amazon tribe fell to its bloody will.

But the essence of Woman filled it again and restored its betrayed gender. The Feminine force, pure and strong and good in Tristaine's queen, became a potent malevolence in an immortal sorceress held captive by death for hundreds of years.

She had leeched enough of the queen's vitality for now. She wanted the old woman alive at the rising of the harvest moon. Her bloody death would be delectable, a death to savor through the thousand years of her reign.

Her imprisonment had ended. She was Botesh, and she would rule again.

❖

No evident blood loss. Pulse thready. Febrile. Respiration shallow but even.

With burning eyes, Brenna scanned her initial entry, made hours ago, after her first thorough examination of the unconscious queen. Her gaze drifted over the rough-hewn log wall of the healing lodge to its window, and she saw no hint yet of approaching dawn. Scrubbing her tousled hair off her forehead, she bent over her journal again.

Shann's still unresponsive. And I can find no medical reason in the world for this unbroken sleep.

Jess has posted sentries around the perimeter of the village. Our warriors saw no sign of intrusion, no tracks left by enemies. Sirius wasn't mauled by any animal we've seen in these hills, but we still don't know what killed her. Brenna closed her eyes for a moment. *I'm terrified.*

She closed her journal and rose from the wooden stool, feeling the endless day in her aching knees and stiff neck. She glanced down at the pallet where Shann lay, her elegant hands still on the warm blankets covering her. Her lips were parted with her quick breath, and dark circles bracketed her closed eyes.

Brenna drew aside the clicking strings of beads that curtained the window. The torches posted outside the lodge cast a reddish light on the many Amazons standing vigil around it, awaiting news of their queen.

She felt the comfort of Jess's presence behind her first, then the relief of her strong hands targeting perfectly the tight muscles in her neck. Brenna let her head drop forward, allowing those talented thumbs to probe deeply, releasing her tension in warm waves.

"You have to rest, Bren."

"Soon," Brenna murmured, soaking in the familiar texture of those callused hands on her skin.

"You've done all anyone can for our lady." Jess's strong fingers explored the curves of her shoulders and upper back. "You'll do Shann no good by wearing yourself out, lass."

Brenna leaned back against her, folding Jess's arms over her breasts. "I wish she could tell me what to do, Jesstin."

"You're a fine healer, adonai. Shann knows that." Jess rested her chin on top of Brenna's head, both of them gazing out the beaded window into the night. "But more than illness afflicts our lady. We'll need your gifts as a seer as much as your skills in healing to save her."

"No pressure, of course." Brenna meant to speak lightly, but she felt weak tears filling her eyes again. For the third time that day. Incredible. She should start keeping track in her journal of the number of times she either cried or threw up in service to her clan. She wanted the final tallies inscribed on her gravestone.

"Brenna." The voice was muted and slightly hoarse.

Jess released her, and Brenna moved quietly across the large room to the pallet where Samantha lay. She sat on its edge and looked carefully at her sister's pale face. "Hey, Sammy. It's awful late. Why are you awake?"

Samantha's eyes were on the still figure on the other bed, and a line appeared between her brows. "Is she dying? Your friend."

"No." Brenna shivered. "I don't really know. I'm not sure what's wrong with her."

"You'll figure it out." Sammy turned her remote gaze on Brenna. "You were the best medic in the Clinic. Maybe in the whole City."

This simple declaration of faith almost brought on the tears again. Brenna laid her fingers on Sammy's throat to

measure her pulse. The candlelight illuminated a thin scar that etched the delicate skin of her neck, and Brenna caught her breath. "What did this, Sam?"

"I was kept on a leash in Prison." She delivered this information with the same dispassionate voice that asked about Shann. Brenna stared at her in shock, and Sammy turned her face from her sister's touch—not angrily or abruptly, but a subtle distancing. "And that's Jesstin? The one who pulled us out of the river?"

Jess stepped out of the shadows, her hands crossed on her belt. "Aye, Samantha, I'm Jess."

Brenna wrapped a cup of cool water in Samantha's hand to ease her throat, and she sipped it as she regarded Jess. "They still talk about you in the City. How you and Brenna broke out of the Clinic together."

Jess nodded.

"You two are married now, Brenna said."

"Your blood sister and I are adonai, lass." Jess's tone was kind, but she studied Sammy as carefully as Sammy watched her. "It's our word for lifemate."

"Adonai." Samantha nodded and gazed at Brenna silently for a moment. "Do the Amazons have a word for widow?"

Brenna swallowed and met Jess's gaze.

"Dolore," Jess said quietly.

Samantha's lips moved silently as she repeated the word, and her eyes closed.

"You should get some sleep." Brenna took the cup and rose from the side of the pallet, her movements gentle, not wanting to startle her. "I'll be right over there if you need anything."

"Bree?" Sammy's cold fingers on Brenna's wrist stopped her. "Your friend was kind to me earlier. I hope she'll be okay."

"Me too." Brenna hesitated, then bent and rested her

lips briefly on her sister's forehead, a lifetime of loving her overriding any fear of rejection. Brenna patted Jess's arm absently on her way back to Shann, then began checking her vital signs again. Respiration, pulse, still slightly feverish...

Jess waited patiently until Brenna opened her journal to re-record the same readings. Then she unlatched the door of the lodge and walked out onto the wooden porch. The Amazons standing outside in the predawn chill stirred and turned toward Jess, and she lifted a hand in reassurance. "Our queen rests comfortably, adanin. There's no change." Jess's voice was rough with fatigue. Her eyes searched the crowd. "Aria?"

Aria emerged into the torchlight in a whirl of colorful silk. "Jesstin?"

"Join us, please." Jess motioned Aria into the lodge before her, then secured the door again. She took Aria's elbow and escorted her to Shann's pallet, and Brenna blinked up at them, puzzled.

"You've passed a harrowing night as well, Aria." Jess studied her friend's face. "Do you have the energy for a few hours' watch?"

Aria's sculpted eyebrows arched, and she rested a hand on a curvaceous hip. "I'm sure my rickety old crone bones can withstand such strenuous labor, lamb chop, yes."

"Good." Jess held her hand out to Brenna. "This one's sleeping now."

"Jess," Brenna protested. "I just want to see if—"

"Aria will guard our lady's sleep, Brenna, and your sister's." Jess lifted Brenna to her feet. "I'll watch over yours."

"But—"

"Call us if they stir, adanin." Jess drew Brenna to the empty pallet Shann often slept on when an injured Amazon needed her care.

Brenna had more objections half-formed in her mind as

Jess eased her down onto the cool bed, but the words faded before they passed her lips. Jess climbed carefully on the pallet behind her and wrapped her long arms around Brenna's waist. Spooning was all they had room for, and everything they needed most.

Brenna yawned hugely. "Ah int ucker ace is ime."

Jess smiled into her hair. "Once again?"

"Aria didn't suck your face this time." Brenna nestled back into the warmth of the powerful body enfolding hers. "Did you two have a fight?"

"She ravished me on the porch." Jess's breath tickled her ear. "I'll be bearin' her bairn come spring."

Brenna snickered, but then remembered their most urgent need. "Jess. We need to find the plant that glowing giant showed me—"

"We'll not find it without sunlight, querida." Jess kissed the top of Brenna's head. "Tomorrow will be trial enough, but it's hours away. Rest with me a while."

Brenna felt her body relax into a boneless mass, and her eyes drifted closed.

Their queen on the brink of coma. Tristaine under siege by some demon force. Her adored little sister destroyed by grief. And in these arms, against all sane expectation, Brenna found safety and peace.

"Jesstin."

"Hm."

"I cherish you," Brenna whispered.

Jess went still behind her. Then she cradled the side of Brenna's face The light of Selene's ghostly moon began to fade as they drifted to sleep beneath the protective watch of their sisters.

❖

Bracken at a quick trot was smoother and easier on Brenna's spine than most horses at a leisurely lope. She knew Jess had taken some ribbing three years ago when she picked the scruffy little foal out of Tristaine's herd as her personal mount. Only Hakan, the clan's stablemaster, had grinned at Jess in approval. She knew mountain mustangs had unquenchable heart and, more often than not, could run brawnier stallions into the ground.

Jess slowed Bracken to a walk as they wound through the thinning trees at the base of the mesa, and Brenna tried to curb her impatience. She tightened her arms around Jess's waist and scanned the ground carefully, searching for the gold berries and silver leaves of the plant from her vision.

Shann had been no better or worse after the sun rose that morning. But the longer her strange sleep lasted, the greater the chance she would never wake. Brenna held fast to the hope that the odd shrub she'd been shown could save their queen.

"You know, butch of mine," Brenna knocked politely on Jess's back, "we could cover a lot more territory if you'd let me ride my own horse. Hakan could pick me out a nice, gentle—"

"Chipmunk," Jess finished. "You'll ride nothing larger until the clan's safe again, Bren."

Brenna squeaked in outrage. "Hey, you saw me ride yesterday! Bracken and I booked, and I stuck to his back like a—"

"Aye, I saw you ride, and that's why you'll be astride chipmunks." Jess checked the position of the sun and turned slightly east. "Until I know you won't bolt off on a wild hair again, with a great flailin' of elbows and buttocks—"

"Yahhh." Brenna curved her hands into claws and dragged them down Jess's chest in mock fury. "You better be nicer to me if you want any buttocks at all in your immediate future. And Jess..." She leaned out slightly, to see her lover's

face. “You don’t get to decide when I’m ready for a new challenge. I’m the only one who can know that. Right?”

Jess’s expression softened. “Aye, Bren. You’re right. I thank you for letting me butch you on this, just for now.”

Brenna nodded, content, and went back to scanning the greenery around them. Still no sign of their mystery plant.

“As for covering ground, we have our two sisters to broaden our search.” Jess shaded her eyes to see the distant figures of Kyla and Dana, their horses moving in tandem toward the deeper forest. “Ears.”

Grateful for the warning, Brenna quickly covered her ears before Jess unleashed a piercing whistle through two fingers. The far-off figures stopped, and Dana lifted one arm to indicate their direction. Kyla reached out and adjusted her arm slightly, and Jess grinned and signaled agreement.

“They seem to be spending a lot of time together, those two,” Brenna observed as Jess nudged Bracken into a lope to join their friends.

“Mostly Dana’s doing, I think. Seeing Sirius die was hard on Ky. Her heart’s not ready to risk much right now.”

“And she’ll choose her time to face new challenges.” Brenna rested her cheek against Jess’s warm back. “Some macha butch taught me that.”

The terrain they covered couldn’t have changed much since the previous day, but as they neared the secluded graveyard, Brenna found the forest around them increasingly ominous. The sun-dappled trees seemed to watch their passage, as if to ensure these intruders entered hallowed ground with a proper respect.

In the distance, Brenna glimpsed the low rock wall that encircled the cemetery and was surprised by a faint superstitious dread. She was a healer. She had intimate knowledge of the messy workings of the human body and had never held illusions about death. But since she had found Tristaine, a

series of quite vivid visions had been forced on Brenna, and the last of her City-trained skepticism was crumbling. She would never see death and the realms that lay beyond it in simplistic terms again.

When they reached the wall, Jess extended her left arm, and Brenna grasped it and slid to the ground. Jess lifted one long leg over her horse's neck and landed lightly beside her. She took Brenna's hand as they stepped over the stone enclosure, and neither felt inclined to let go.

Brenna let out a long breath, seeing the gold-berried plant everywhere now, dotting grave after grave in the barren yard. "These things had to be transplanted here, Jess. They can't be native to these hills, or we'd see them everywhere."

"The Amazons who settled the mesa may have cultivated this strain in their gardens." Jess knelt and fingered the silver-veined leaves of one small sprig. "For this one purpose, to guard the sleep of their warriors. They seem to flourish without tending." She stood and brushed the sandy soil from her hands.

They walked slowly among the canted gravestones. "The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out," Brenna murmured.

"Sorry?" Jess bent closer.

"Oh, one of the charming chants that went around the County Home where Sam and I grew up." Brenna rubbed Jess's muscled forearm with her free hand. "No one really knew what it meant. Bodies aren't allowed to decay in the City. There aren't any cemeteries there anymore."

"No? How do they honor their dead in the City?"

"They dispose of them efficiently. Same way they handle their living."

Jess waited.

"She blames me, Jess."

"Ah, lass." She wound an arm around Brenna's shoulders. "Your Sammy's too full of pain to see things clearly right now."

"I'm not so sure about that." Brenna folded her arms, hugging herself. "She was making it, Jesstin. Even in that sterile hell down there, Sammy carved out some happiness. She had a loving husband, a job. She was starting a family. I wrecked all that. Caster never would have targeted her if she hadn't hated me so—"

"Brenna." Jess stopped her and took her shoulders gently. "*Caster* destroyed your sister's happiness. Just as her kind has brutalized and laid waste to thousands of innocent lives for generations in the City. Caster deserves all your rage, adonai, and all the blame. Sammy will know that someday."

Brenna studied Jess's face, wanting to believe her. Jess tipped her chin with one finger, then lowered her head to kiss her with a light, searching warmth. The city of the dead around them faded for a moment. As the love between them deepened, their physical intimacy had developed its own diverse language. This feathered brushing of lips offered comfort and solace, and Brenna drank it gratefully.

Then she almost bit Jess's tongue as a piercing whistle split the air.

Jess whipped around and targeted its source, then grasped Brenna's hand and took off on a run. Sorry, sorry, sorry, Brenna apologized silently, every time they leaped over a headstone, her heart hammering in her chest. They reached the far end of the stone wall and jumped it, then crashed through a haze of tangled brush.

"Dana!" Jess barked.

"We're here, Jesstin."

Brenna heard no great alarm in Dana's voice, and a moment later Jess batted some hanging branches aside and they saw her. She looked whole enough, as did Kyla, and Brenna's relief was immediately tinged with annoyance. Just like the time Sammy had scared her when they were kids by running too close to a busy street, she wanted to hug her sisters, then

slap them silly for frightening her like that.

Jess apparently felt some of the same mixed maternal urge. She set her hands on her hips and glared at Dana, panting. "A fine, clear signal, adanin, but that particular whistle warns of *attack*. If there's no danger—"

"I figured you'd want to see this pretty quick." Dana hadn't turned to look at them, and neither had Kyla. Brenna followed their gaze and went still.

Several yards away, the brush had been scraped clean in a rough oval. In the center of the hard-packed earth stood a sculpture, cut in one piece from a large block of black granite. It was a life-sized depiction of two women—one kneeling, the other draped full-length across her lap.

"Sweet Lady," Jess whispered, and Brenna reached for her hand again.

Whoever sculpted this piece had been no master. There was little detail hewn into the rock, and its planes were rough and unfinished. But somehow that starkness made the impact of the image all the more powerful.

There was enough nuance to see that the kneeling figure was a very old woman, her face lined with both age and sorrow. The folds of her robes draped over the naked body cradled in her lap, a younger woman of obvious strength, and obviously lifeless. Her hand lay loose around the hilt of a crude sword.

It was a classic image, emblematic of the pietas created by any number of civilizations. The archetype of the female mourning her fallen.

The almost featureless face of the old woman somehow conveyed the depths of her grief as she gazed down at the slain warrior. Her gnarled hand rested at the base of the dead woman's throat. The one clear detail on the back of the elder's hand was the simple glyph that also graced Shann's shoulder—the mark of an Amazon queen.

An image rose in Brenna's mind—the sketch she'd made

in her journal of Shann cradling a dying child.

Jess lowered herself to one knee as she stared at the roughcast figures, and her eyes glittered with tears.

Dana looked from her commander to Brenna uneasily, as if she wanted to offer comfort.

Kyla walked quietly to Jess, knelt beside her, and rested her head against her shoulder.

Brenna's throat ached, and she had to look away from this primitive but eloquent rendering of the Queen's Blessing. Only then did she register what should have been immediately evident—the ground around the sculpture was thickly carpeted with the gold-berried plants.

"Why did they put this...shrine outside of the cemetery?" Dana's tone was subdued. "We never would have seen it if we hadn't come up this way."

Brenna cupped her elbows in her hands, her eyes drawn irresistibly to the stone figure of the warrior. Such a powerful body, slack and empty in death. Its proportions were so similar to Jess's tall frame that a chill chased up her back.

"We'd best get what we came for, Bren." Jess's head rested in Kyla's auburn curls.

Brenna stepped forward carefully, laying a hand on Jess's shoulder as she passed. She kept her gaze on the largest of the plants, growing lush at the center of the base of the granite sculpture. Its gold berries were glossy in the midst of the silver-veined leaves.

Not looking at the stone faces in front of her, Brenna knelt to grasp the stem. It was wiry and full in her fingers, and its roots went deep. She pulled gently, smoothly, and at last felt the thready tearing of the soil surrendering its hold.

"J'heika..."

Brenna started, and her eyes flew to the ancient rock face of the Amazon queen. She rose on unsteady legs, the plant clenched in one hand. "No," she whispered.

The title had been spoken softly, with great tenderness. And with heartrending regret. The voice was unmistakable.

"J'heika, rise," Shann whispered from the ancient stone lips. *"Forgive me, Brenna."*

Brenna felt the blood drain from her face. She breathed deeply until the dizziness passed and she could turn and face her sisters.

"We need to go home," she said quietly.

Chapter Six

Brenna saw Vicar's tall roan loping toward them as they turned onto the path leading up to the mesa. Vic raised a hand and called something she couldn't hear, but relief was already flooding through Brenna. Vic was grinning like a bandit.

"Our lady's awake, Jesstin!" Vicar spun her horse neatly as she reached them, skittering gravel and dust. "Weak as a pup, but all her senses intact. She's asking for our seer, here."

"Good news, cousin." Jess tapped a knee to Bracken's side, and he lunged up the rocky trail, followed closely by the rest of their party.

They cantered minutes later into the village square, which was milling with women talking in excited groups. Several ran to greet them, and Brenna saw her relief mirrored in their upturned faces.

The news of Shann's collapse had shaken the clan badly. Tristaine had never been an idle tribe, and this sunny day should have found the Amazons busy with the work of their seven guilds. The warriors were on duty guarding the mesa, but no cloth was being spun, no food preserved, or horses trained. The routine of daily life had come to a halt until the fate of their queen was known.

When they reached the healing lodge, Jess slithered from Bracken's back and lifted Brenna down. Several women were clustered around the door to the cabin, but they cleared a respectful path, hands reaching out to touch them.

"She's back with us, Jesstin!"

"Aye, Keyen."

"Our lives for her, Jess."

"Always." Jess opened the door and ushered Brenna, Kyla, and Dana into the lodge. "Give us a moment with our lady, adanin."

Brenna waited for her eyes to adjust to the lamplit dimness of the cabin. Kyla had no such patience. She was on her way to the raised pallet where Shann lay before Jess had the door latched.

Kyla sat carefully on the edge of the bed and rested her head on Shann's breast with a tired sigh. The queen opened her eyes and focused on the women watching her, and the corner of her mouth lifted. She patted Kyla's shoulder with maternal affection.

Aria rose from her chair in the corner and shocked Dana to speechlessness with a smacking kiss of greeting. "I believe you'll find Shanendra much improved, my sweet sistren. Brenna, dearest, I'll go check on young Samantha, who lunches with Vicar's adonai. Lovely woman, Wai Li, though her gravies just miss proper texture."

"Our thanks, Aria." Jess gave Aria's buttock a friendly pat before she swept out of the cabin, then she grinned at Brenna. Shann's revival had lifted the burden on her broad shoulders enough to allow such teasing.

"I'm sorry I worried you, little Ky." Shann's voice was raspy, and Dana all but trotted to pour her water from the jug by her pallet.

"Worried me," Kyla murmured. "You about stopped my damn heart, lady. I swear I'm going to have you impeached or impounded or dethroned or something, if you ever do this to us again."

"Tell me how you feel, Shann." Brenna shrugged off the canvas satchel she carried and sat at her other side. She took

Shann's wrist to measure her pulse. Shann's color was better than this morning, and she seemed fully alert. Brenna was still faintly nauseous with relief. She wondered if throwing up on Tristaine's queen could be counted on her final sacrifice-for-the-clan tally.

"I feel like that accursed altar dropped on my head." Shann frowned. "Just how much of Aria's elderberry wine did I swill at last night's council?"

Jess studied her with folded arms. "What do you remember, lady?"

"I remember blessing Sirius." Shann accepted the mug of water from Dana and drank deeply. "I remember seeing Brenna's eyes roll back in her head. Then nothing."

"Do you have pain anywhere?" Brenna moved a lantern closer to illuminate her features.

"Nothing worth mentioning, Blades, just a bit stiff." Shann lifted a hand to forestall the next question. "Can we move past my humiliating royal infirmity for the moment, please, and address the welfare of our clan? Jesstin, your report."

"There've been no other incidents, Shann. We scouted the mesa thoroughly and found nothing. I've doubled the watch at all sectors, and our guild remains on full alert."

Shann nodded. "Kyla, your take on our adanin?"

Kyla sat up slowly, and Brenna could see the lines of strain around her eyes. "We're all mourning Sirius, lady. Rumors are everywhere. Some worry Caster survived the flood, and she's after us again. Or there's some random tribe of cutthroats out to get us. Others think Tristaine is still under that stupid bloody curse I've never believed in. Our enemy is invisible, and our sisters are scared."

"Rational enough." Shann gently tapped Brenna's hand off her forehead. "I'm not feverish, adanin. Sweet Artemis, Jesstin, what must she be like when you're ill?"

"She hovers like a buzzard, lady."

Brenna glared at Jess, who winked at her.

"Dana?" With an effort, Shann sat up straighter against the folded furs cushioning her back. "Your thoughts on our council, please."

Dana had retreated respectfully to one corner, and now her eyebrows shot up. She looked at Jess and stepped closer to Shann's bed. "Well, I don't know anything about Amazon curses. But it seems to me this place is haunted. I mean, we've got blood-steam rising out of that spooky-as-shit altar out there. And Brenna getting possessed by all these voices. I don't think we should waste any time hunting down a human enemy. Whatever conked you guys out last night sure wasn't that. Human." Dana swallowed and glanced at Jess again.

"A fair analysis, adanin. Thank you." Shann smiled at Dana and cleared her throat. "All right. Our first priority is to bring our women together. I want a full clan assembly early this evening. Our sisters have the right to know what little we've learned so far."

"Shann. Are you sure you're up to a big gathering?" Brenna was prepared to brave any further reference to hovering buzzards. "Come on. You were all but comatose for a good twelve hours."

"I know, Bren." Shann sighed. "And I still feel bloody wiped, I admit it. But, yes, I do have the strength for this because it needs doing. Now, adanin, we have hours before dusk, which I will spend obediently resting. Jesstin will want to run a circuit of the mesa and check in with her warriors."

"Aye, Shann."

"Dana, spread the word of tonight's meeting, please. And Kyla, love, please disperse that mob of hovering buzzards from the front porch. Tell our sisters their queen expects to see them busy and productive until sunset, or heads will most surely fly."

"They'll quail in terror, Shann." Kyla smiled at her lovingly and kissed her cheek. "But they'll step right smart, too. Your word compels us."

"Yes, in this and all things." Shann eased back against the furs and pressed Brenna's hand. "Will you stay a moment, Blades? For private council."

"I'd be honored." Brenna felt Jess's finger brush her face, and she smiled up at her. "See you soon, hotshot."

"Lady." Jess nodded at Shann and herded Dana and Kyla out of the healing lodge.

Brenna sighed, content to regard the queen in silence as long as she allowed it. The grieving message that had drifted from the stone sculpture in Shann's voice still haunted her. Brenna told herself, with every league that passed beneath Bracken's hooves on their way back to the mesa, that it hadn't been a farewell. Now she drank in Shann's face—the laugh lines etched around her kind eyes, the slight smile on her lips—with simple pleasure.

"It's my turn to hover, little sister." Shann's gaze turned appraising. "My slumber was deep and dreamless, but I wasn't the only one knocked senseless by that scary-as-shit altar out there." Shann managed a fair imitation of Dana's voice, but then her smile faded. "What happened to you, Brenna?"

"I guess I have to call it a vision." Brenna closed her eyes, remembering. "Some strange, chaotic world, hardly more than a gray blur. There was an ugly buzzing sound, but I couldn't see what caused it."

She gave as clear an account as possible of her time in that odd world and the light-drenched giant she encountered there. She was careful to keep her report linear and factual, but when she was finished, Shann studied her thoughtfully.

"And what was your heart telling you, Blades? That information may be just as vital as the testimony of your eyes."

"Well." Brenna swallowed. "I was scared out of my head. First of how strange everything was, that awful static, and I couldn't see anything. Then of the giant. But when she—or he—reached toward me, I stopped being scared. And not because she was holding that plant instead of a weapon. I just knew she wouldn't hurt me. There was some kind of… benevolence, there."

"Good." Shann traced Brenna's wrist with her thumb, apparently lost in thought.

"Hey—the plant, we found it." Brenna started out of her memories and reached for the canvas bag she'd dropped at the foot of Shann's pallet. She lifted it into her lap and carefully withdrew the lush plant, its roots wrapped in soft parchment soaked in water from her canteen. "I was hoping that giant spirit showed it to me because it might help you, that it was medicinal. We've only seen it growing in that cemetery."

"You see this shrub everyday, Brenna, here in Tristaine." Shann fingered the gold berries with something like reverence. "Every time you pass my lodge, where all the glyphs of our clan are etched above my door. But you see only a stylized rendering. This plant is part of the design of the glyph worn by our clan's seers."

Brenna blinked. "Our seers?"

"You being our only one, at the moment." Shann turned the cutting carefully in her hands to examine its leaves. "Tristaine passed long generations without birthing anyone gifted with your second sight. I've never laid eyes on this plant in nature, Brenna. Finding it is a true blessing."

"Then it's not used for healing?"

"It's a narcotic. And an hallucinogen. Our seers used it much as other cultures used peyote or certain mushrooms. It induces trance and opens doors to other planes."

"Oh." Brenna's voice squeaked a bit. "Then it's for me?"

Shann pursed her lips. “Tell me again how you felt in your vision when you first touched this plant?”

Brenna sighed. “Thirsty.”

“It’s for you.”

Brenna stared at the spiked leaves in Shann’s fingers. “Okay,” she said finally. “I’ll do it. Another trance, a little nap. I can handle that.”

“We need to move quickly, Blades. Tonight, after the assembly.”

“Okay.”

“Set this in water for now.” Shann rested her head back against the furs as Brenna arranged the plant in a pitcher and placed it on a table that caught sunlight from the beaded window. “A giant spirit,” she murmured.

“I’m sorry?” Brenna sat on the pallet again.

“You described her well, Bren. That she was.”

“Who?” Brenna was puzzled. “Are you talking about the giant I saw in the vision?”

“You saw her there.” Shann lifted Brenna’s hand again and smoothed her fingers on the soft blanket. “You heard her when your blood sister cast herself into the river. And she came to you seasons ago, just before the flood covered Tristaine.”

Troubled, Brenna focused on Shann’s hands and the simple silver ring she wore on her middle finger. She’d seen its twin before on a large, spectral hand outlined in light.

“Dyan,” she whispered.

“Dyan.” The name was a prayer on Shann’s lips.

They sat quietly for a while. Around them, Tristaine was coming to life again. Horses trumpeted from the stables, hammers mended railings, voices called to each other.

“Lady?”

“Yes, Bren.”

“We found a sculpture outside the cemetery. It depicted the Queen’s Blessing. And the Amazon queen...she spoke to me. In your voice.”

"Mine?" Shann's brows rose. "What did she say?"

"J'heika, rise." Brenna paused. "And you asked me to forgive you."

Shann's gaze drifted toward the window. "I can't fathom this message, adanin. But I'll rest on it. It's one more piece of a puzzle we must solve quickly if we're to preserve our clan."

Brenna nodded, then got up and smoothed the blankets over Shann's shoulders. "I'll call someone to bring you a light supper, Shann, and sit with you while you rest. I don't want to hear of you twitching before sundown."

"Yes, ma'am." Shann smiled. "No twitching."

Brenna checked the plant in its patch of sunlight, then went to the door. Glancing back, she saw a tear forming a silver trail down Shann's cheek.

"Lady?" she called softly. "Are you in pain?"

Shann shook her head, eyes closed. "No, loved one. It's probably a...a perimenopausal hormone surge. It's just...ah, Bren."

Brenna waited.

"I so wish she could have come to me," Shann whispered. Her head settled deeper into the furs as she drifted into sleep.

Brenna lowered her eyes and stepped quietly out of the lodge. She blinked at the clouded sunlight of midday, her mind churning with lost love and evil altars and the trial that awaited her when the moon rose.

A prospect made all the more daunting by the sick certainty in Brenna's gut. She knew, as surely as she knew she loved Jess, that Shann had understood the stone queen's message. And she'd lied about it.

❖

She didn't like being separated from Jess.

Brenna had never been the clingy type. And accusations

of hovering aside, she was usually able to suppress her more florid imaginings of disaster, even where her lifemate was concerned. But as Brenna moved through the village, she still searched constantly for Jess, who was riding a check of the mesa and wouldn't be back any time soon. That knowledge didn't ease Brenna's craving to see her. An image of Sirius's brutalized body flashed through her mind, and she shuddered.

She was stopped frequently by Amazons wanting to hear the latest on Shann or ask questions about that night's clan council. When did this happen, Brenna wondered. When did I become a trusted source to these fierce, amazing women?

She remembered her first days in Tristaine. Reeling with culture shock and the trauma of the Clinic, Brenna had doubted she would ever find acceptance in Jess's clan. Shann's faith in her had helped, as had the friendship of Kyla and Camryn, and the strong, steady beat of Jess's heart beneath her cheek as they slept peaceful nights beneath Tristaine's Seven Sisters.

Brenna stopped short as a gaggle of children passed in front of her, herded with loving sternness by women from the guild of mothers. She grinned at one toddler who seemed fixated on inserting her finger into as many ears as possible, and returned the waves of the older kids. The clan's young all idolized Jess, and Brenna enjoyed basking in the warmth of her reflected glory.

She folded her arms, watching the small crew scramble its way to the dining hall, and a kind of wistfulness filled her. She thought of Vicar's infant son and the sweetness of his downy head cradled in the palm of her hand. Brenna and her sisters would watch this boy grow into puberty, then tell him good-bye. These partings were often wrenching for all involved, but they were a necessary part of Amazon culture.

Brenna had never considered bearing a child. Childbirth was regulated by the City as strictly as all other human endeavors. Genetic screenings had to be passed and permits

secured. Brenna had assumed that her single-minded focus on her career would eclipse any hope for family life. And in her heart, she would have feared for any child in her care. During her last year in the City, she had spent too much time in an alcohol-induced haze to be trusted with an infant.

Brenna's gaze drifted from the children to a young mother whose arms would always ache with the memory of a lost baby. Samantha sat cross-legged on the low stone wall that separated the village square from the cabins beyond it, seeming oblivious to the activity around her, or the chill breeze that swept the square. She was curled around something she held in her hand, and Brenna saw a small flash of flame from a match.

"Since when do you *smoke*?"

So ingrained was her reaction to her older sister's voice, Sammy actually whipped the hand-rolled cigarette out of her mouth and hid it behind her back. Jess would have found the resemblance between them striking as she glared back at Brenna.

"Since when do you creep up on a person like a damn *ghost*?" Sammy snapped. She drew the cigarette out again and looked at it dismally. It was a flaking mess.

Brenna uncrossed her arms and sat on the wall beside her sister, leaving a careful distance between them. "Sheesh, you used to be so healthy, Sam. You always nagged *me* about nutrition and exercise."

"Yeah, well, someone had to nag you." Samantha scowled, trying to roll the shredded tobacco and paper back into some semblance of a tube. "You take terrible care of yourself."

Not necessarily true anymore, Brenna thought. "Where did you get that, anyway?"

"An older bald lady who smokes a pipe." Sammy squinted at her work. "I asked her for it. She called me a weed."

Brenna muttered imprecations against Sarah in her head, but managed to smother further criticism as her sister succeeded in lighting up. She took the time to study her. Samantha's eyes had lost some of that frightening blankness, but her face was pale and drawn even in the chill breeze of afternoon. "How do you feel, Sammy?"

"I'm all right." Samantha scraped tobacco off the tip of her tongue with one fingernail. "I'm sorry I made you guys jump into that river after me. You don't swim very well."

"You don't swim at all." Brenna risked touching her hand. "You were trying to kill yourself, Sam."

"Not really." Sammy blew out a plume of smoke and coughed, her eyes distant. "Or not on purpose. I just wanted to rest. I've been so tired."

"Tired?" Brenna moved closer to her, anxiety sharpening her voice. "You wanted to die because you were *tired*?"

"Don't be stupid, Brenna." Samantha's tone was suddenly entirely adult. "I don't have to explain myself to you anymore. Karen and Lee Ann were gone, my baby and Matt were gone, and finding you just didn't seem so—"

"Wait a minute. Slow down." Brenna gripped her shoulder. "Who's Karen? Who's Lee Ann?"

Sammy blinked, then stared at the glowing cigarette in her fingers. "Karen was my legal defender in the City. Lee Ann was her partner. They were both Amazon-crazy. They ate up all the rumors about Tristaine." Grief filled Samantha's eyes. "They got me out of the Prison. And gave up everything they had to do it, too. The City would have killed them if they were caught. They came with me to find you and the Amazons."

"What happened to them, Sammy?"

Samantha didn't answer at once. The silence spun out between them, and in spite of the tension in her gut, Brenna let it linger. She was beginning to see the first hints of the expressive sister she knew in the myriad of emotions passing over Sammy's face.

"They were like a couple of kids." The corner of Samantha's mouth lifted. "Both of them were older than me, but I felt like their mother sometimes. They were so excited about Tristaine. And they were so sappy in love. That was hard. I missed Matt so much."

Samantha's eyes filled, and Brenna took her hand.

"It was pretty hard travel. Karen and Lee Ann knew more about the mountains than I did, but we all grew up in the City. We weren't real prepared. We kept running out of food. Karen got these awful blisters." Samantha shivered and tucked her free hand beneath her arm to warm it. "But we found the maps the Amazons left in each of their camps. They kept us going. Half the time we could see a trail to follow from all of you passing through. It was such a...different world for me, all that sky. Sometimes I'd go whole hours without remembering."

Brenna murmured something. No real words, just a soft sound of encouragement.

"Lee Ann fell from a high ridge about two-thirds of the way up the south face. Karen died trying to save her."

"Ah, Sam." Brenna let out a long breath. She had seen that ridge awash in Amazon blood in one of her dreams, when the women of Tristaine had climbed the mountain pass last summer. Shann had heeded her warning to avoid it. Taking that route had shortened Samantha's journey to the mesa, but at a hideous cost. "I'm so sorry about your friends. They were Amazons from the day they were born, and we'll add their names to Tristaine's roster of our honored fallen."

Samantha stared at her. "You're different here, Bree, aren't you?"

Brenna thought about it. "Yeah. I am different. I've changed a lot since we last saw each other."

"You look stronger."

"I am."

"Physically and otherwise."

"And otherwise." Brenna nodded.

"No booze?"

"No." She dropped her eyes, regretting the dozen times her younger sister had seen her drunk. She'd never been raucous or belligerent, even at her worst, but her indifferent neglect had been just as damaging. "No booze, not for a long time."

"Hey. Brenna." Samantha's hand touched hers, then held it firmly, and her eyes lit with a familiar warmth. "That's good. I'm really glad. I was scared for you. You were drinking so much. I'm really glad you were able to stop."

"Thanks. Me too." Brenna stared down at their entwined fingers, and Sammy slipped hers free.

They sat together quietly for a while, watching the small groups of women milling around them. The square was emptying now, as the Amazons prepared for their evening council.

"The queen's awake, I hear." Samantha cradled her elbows in her palms.

"Yes." Brenna rubbed her eyes. "Shann's awake. We have no earthly idea what woke her up. Or what knocked her flat in the first place."

"You care a lot about her."

"I do."

Another silence fell between them.

"I'm sorry, Sam." Brenna kept her gaze on the tall trees ringing the village. "I hope you'll forgive me someday for bringing Caster down on you and Matt. And I'm so sorry about your daughter."

Brenna lowered her head. The words were out, and she'd needed to say them, but she expected no immediate reply. She didn't receive one. Samantha sat quietly beside her, shivering in the biting air. Brenna took off her denim jacket and wrapped it around her sister's shoulders.

"So, is it okay if I stay?" Samantha asked at last.

"Oh, honey. Of course it's okay." Brenna found a smile. "Tristaine's full of women who are refugees from the City. You can make a home here. I'll help you. Lots of us will help."

"All right. Thanks." A smile ghosted across Samantha's face.

Brenna turned as she heard the distinctive, clopping gait of a particular mountain mustang.

Jess cantered into the square, scanning the women around her, then finding Brenna. She slid from Bracken's back in one smooth motion and walked toward them. Brenna drank in the sight of Jess's wild, dark hair blowing around the planes of her face, the breadth of her shoulders, that easy, graceful step, and fell in love all over again.

She jumped from the low rock wall, met Jess midstride, and wrapped her arms around her neck with a grateful sigh.

"Where's yer coat?" Jess growled into her hair.

"I'm warm enough," Brenna mumbled. "Just don't let go."

"Never will."

Brenna finally released her and gazed up into Jess's eyes, which sparkled with warmth. "Damn. My girlfriend is such a hunk."

Jess's eyebrow arched. "A hunk, am I now?" She looked past Brenna and saw Samantha lift herself off the wall. "How's the young one, Bren?"

"Better," Brenna murmured. "We have to talk, but it can wait until after the assembly."

Jess nodded and turned to include Samantha as she joined them. "Hello, lass. Good to see you up and about."

"Hi." Samantha smiled at Jess shyly. "I guess there's big doings tonight?"

"Aye, a gathering of our clan. A good chance to see Tristaine in full force, if you're up to it."

"I am. Should I just wait here, or—?"

"Nope, nope." Brenna took her sister in one arm and Jess in the other. "We're going home. You haven't seen our cabin yet, Sammy, and Jess hasn't eaten since dawn. I'll rustle us up some dinner before the council."

"You're going to *cook*?" Samantha asked.

Brenna saw her and Jess exchange dismayed looks.

"I'm going to heat up that stew Aria made for us," Brenna corrected, leading them into the trees toward their lodge. "And if there are any more comments on my cooking prowess, I will put both of you *in* a stew to prove myself."

Chapter Seven

Vicar and Hakan carried their queen, seated on their crossed wrists, from the healing lodge to the village square. Shann was displeased, but managed to maintain her regal posture. No easy task, while being bodily handled by two Amazon warriors, however carefully. "It's never too late to introduce state executions, Jesstin."

"An idle threat, lady." Jess clasped Brenna's hand as they walked down the torchlit path. "You need me to housebreak those two barbarians carting you around."

"I do not require *carting*."

"You're still pale, Shann." Brenna threw a sympathetic look over her shoulder. "When you stop looking like cottage cheese in a crown, I'll let you cart yourself."

"Time was," Hakan drawled to Vicar, "many a wench in Tristaine would give their hallowed hymens to perch where our lady now rides. How low we studly have fallen, adanin."

"Speak for yourself, horse breath," Vicar muttered. "They still line up for me."

"I intended no offense to my brawny escorts." Shann draped her arms around their necks, regal even seated on a human throne. "Samantha?"

Sammy walked at the edge of their group, her eyes downcast. She looked surprised Shann remembered her name. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Little sister, you might have many questions after this

evening's council. Sleep on them, then seek me out tomorrow, and we'll have a nice talk."

Brenna smiled and felt Jess squeeze her hand. They were both remembering a similar invitation extended long ago by Tristaine's queen to another scared exile from the City. The "nice talks" Brenna shared with Shann had been lengthy and far-ranging, and had founded her knowledge of her new clan.

"Thanks, your…majesty." Sammy paused when Vicar snickered, and Shann rapped her smartly on the head. "I already have lots of questions."

I hope we'll have answers, Brenna thought as they entered the center of the village.

They walked into the breathing essence of Tristaine, rows upon rows of Amazons crowded into the circular clearing, awaiting their queen. The odd stillness in the midst of a gathering of nearly six hundred women struck Brenna immediately. In spite of the circumstances, Brenna felt a pleasant déjà vu as she watched Sammy absorb her first real look at her new family. Her sister's slack-jawed wonder resonated with her own memories of meeting these women, of all colors and ages, living for one purpose—to preserve the freedom and rich cultural heritage granted them by a benevolent goddess.

The square was softly illuminated by dozens of torches, and they paused in the shadows outside the reach of their golden light.

"Put me down."

It was not a request, and Vicar and Hakan obeyed at once, lowering Shann with care and supporting her as she stood erect between them.

"Brenna, you and Samantha stand within my sight, please." Shann smoothed her robe with her hands, breathing deeply. "Jesstin, be ready with our clan's sacred weapon."

Without further comment, the queen walked toward the light of the square. Jess nudged Brenna, who caught Sammy's

hand and guided her quickly into the rows of seated Amazons. She saw Kyla's wave, and they joined her and Dana near the front of the assembly.

Shann emerged into the light, and the troubled silence that held the square lifted as a stir moved through the clan. Several voices called to her, and Brenna felt Sammy jerk in surprise as a musical ululation rose in waves around them, a spontaneous chorus of relief and greeting.

The queen returned their homage with a fond smile as she reached the center of the gathering and stood waiting for silence, her hands clasped behind her. It was a rather long wait, and Brenna watched Shann with something like wonder. It seemed impossible this woman had been all but comatose twenty hours ago. Her posture was relaxed, her shoulders squared, with no hint of either tension or weakness. She studied her women with alert warmth, as if she were memorizing each face.

Brenna folded her arms against the cold, uneasily aware of the stone altar behind Shann and to her left. She noted Jess had posted Hakan and Vicar between the queen and that sinister block, and she was grateful for her lover's protective instinct.

"Tristaine summons all her power tonight, adanin." Shann finally had to speak to silence the last of the ovation. "See our strength in the faces of the women beside you, and feel it in the warmth of our numbers. No force on this planet can sever the bond that unites our clan."

Shann spoke the words as simple and essential truth, and Brenna felt them deep in her gut. The square was silent now, intent on the slender figure at its center.

"Amazons have long shed dear blood to preserve the lands they called home. Our refuge in these high mountains has already cost Tristaine a strong and valiant heart. Sirius stands tonight with Kimba in the immortal guild of our clan's lost warriors."

An almost soundless sigh passed over the gathering, its sibilance whispering Sirius's name.

Samantha tugged Brenna's sleeve. "Who's Kimba?" she asked softly.

Dana answered, still riveted on Shann. "One of the Seven Sisters, the founders of Tristaine. She started our guild. She's like our alpha warrior."

Brenna and Kyla exchanged startled glances behind Dana's back, and Kyla gave her shoulder an approving pat.

"All we know of our enemy now is this," Shann continued. "Its power lies beyond the scope of our mortal plane. In order to fight it we look for passages between worlds—"

"Lady." A thin figure rose from the ranks of the seated Amazons, and an uneasy murmur went through them. A few hisses of disapproval were heard. Speaking during a full clan council was welcome, but never during the queen's address, and interrupting Shann outright was all but unheard of. Brenna craned her neck to see Wedan, one of the guild of weavers, a spare and fierce woman known for her strong will.

"I've seen Sirius, what's left of her." Wedan's tone was respectful, but her eyes on Shann were flinty. "No mere specter did that much damage. Why are we off chasing ghosts when Artemis knows Tristaine has enough enemies of flesh and blood? Why aren't our warriors scouting beyond this mesa, hunting down our prey instead of huddling here, waiting for them to come to us?"

"Wedan, your fat mouth runs away with your manners." Sarah rose from her stool stiffly, glowering at the other woman. "Close your yap and let our lady speak."

"Thank you, grandmother, for your most courtly defense." Shann smiled, and Brenna felt the tension in the women around her ease a notch. "Our sister Wedan has voiced doubts that might be shared by others among us. I offer any such concern this assurance."

Her eyes sought out Jess, who stood in the shadows. She walked into the light of the square, carrying an object draped in black silk balanced in her hands.

"We take our stand on this mesa, sisters, because the force that threatens us is here." Shann's voice rang through the square. "Before the sun rises, we'll know more about the corporeal nature of our adversary. But the blood sacrifice of Sirius has already taught us our enemy can take lethal form. Our warriors are stationed exactly where we need them, should this come to a worldly battle."

"Why don't we all just leave this place?" Samantha whispered to Brenna. "If the mesa's so dangerous—"

"Winter's coming, Sammy." Brenna looked up into the star-studded sky. Heavy cloud cover would block out their light before many weeks passed. "Imagine trying to find shelter for all these women and kids in a blizzard."

"We drowned our last village, Samantha, to keep it out of an enemy's hands." Kyla hesitated, and Brenna knew she was remembering the deep mountain lake that cloistered Camryn's bones. "We won't lose this one without a fight."

Jess reached Shann and extended the silk-shrouded form toward her. The muscles in her forearms stood out clearly, telling Brenna how heavy this object was. Shann lifted the silk covering in one graceful motion and draped it over Jess's arm. Another sigh moved through the Amazons as they saw the ebony labrys balanced in Jess's hands.

"Dyan," Kyla whispered. "That was hers. A gift from the guild of warriors when she took their command." Brenna saw Dana take Kyla's hand, and Kyla allowed her to keep it.

Jess's lips moved, but Brenna couldn't hear what she said to Shann, who replied briefly, then wrapped her hands around the two-headed axe and lifted it with apparent ease. Shann turned and stepped closer to the women watching her, the torchlight striking off the wickedly honed curved blades.

Her knuckles were white around the short-handled hilt, but Brenna could read no other sign of strain in her carriage.

"Amazons are not known for coddling bullies." Shann's smile had changed. It held steel now. It was almost predatory, and Brenna remembered this was a queen of warrior women and a seasoned fighter herself. "In the end, that's all our enemy is. It hides behind cheap spells and sneak attacks. And if it dreams to find Tristaine an easy conquest, we will offer it a grim awakening."

Shann turned and carried the labrys toward the altar. Vicar threw Jess a questioning glance, but stepped aside to let her move behind the sinister stone. Both Dana and Kyla half-rose in alarm, but Brenna gripped Dana's arm and pulled her down.

You and Samantha stand within my sight. Brenna heard Shann's words whisper through her mind again, and she grasped Sammy's hand and rose, taking her sister with her. Sammy squeaked in surprise, and Brenna shook her head slightly, her eyes on Shann.

Shann held the ebony labrys inches above the altar's surface and searched the sea of Amazons until she found Brenna. Their gaze held for a long moment, and then Shann lowered the rugged axe to the stone. The curved blades rang against the rock, a startlingly loud sound given the gentleness of their contact.

A shiver went through Brenna, but the altar offered no other outwardly dramatic effects. Shann laid her hands on the leather-wrapped hilt and waited until she and Sammy were seated.

"Adanin, we have learned this pedestal serves as a portal between worlds of the spirit." Shann brushed one hand over the glyph-marked surface of the altar. "And we have the means to open the passage connecting these worlds. Our clan's seer was gifted with a vision of a sacred plant. This night, the tea

made from those blessed leaves will send our sister on a quest into the eternal."

Brenna felt the color rise in her face as the gaze of hundreds of women turned her way.

Sammy stared at her with frank wonder. "You're going *where?*" Samantha whispered.

"On a quest into the eternal," Brenna sighed. "Pay attention, Sam."

"We believe a benevolent spirit waits beyond this life to guide Tristaine's prophet." Shann looked down at the labrys, and the corner of her lips lifted in a private smile. "When the sun rises, sisters, I assure you, we'll be wiser in the ways of our enemy."

The tiers of women sat in silence, absorbing the words of their queen.

"We stand at full vigilance, adanin." Shann left the altar, and as she moved closer, Brenna noted the fine trembling in her arms. "Our warriors are well armed and primed for any physical battle. Tomorrow's rising of the Thesmophorian moon tells us events may begin to unfold more rapidly now. And we couldn't have chosen a more powerful and portentous hour to defend our clan."

Brenna started as Jess settled cross-legged beside her, her arrival as welcome as it had been silent. Her long fingers folded around Brenna's cold ones.

"This moon shines for three nights every year in celebration of the harvest," Shann continued, "and in honor of the sacred trust bonding mothers and daughters. These nights have long quickened Amazon blood and heightened the spiritual energies of our clan. Tristaine usually celebrates this festival with races, dances, and feasts."

"And serial ravishings," Aria called helpfully. This time the interruption was met with hoots of approval and lecherous nudges.

The feeling in the square was changing. Brenna sensed a new spirit growing among them. Shann's relaxed but commanding presence, and the revelation of Dyan's labrys, were empowering their clan.

"Yes, serial ravishings for the more wanton among us." Shann laughed. "But this year our revelry, carnal and otherwise, must wait. The rising of this autumn's moon finds the daughters of Artemis bracing for battle. The festivities will wait for the certain celebration of Tristaine's victory."

Shann paused as Jess let out a sharp war cry, echoed immediately by Vicar and Hakan and several others in the crowd. Brenna cocked an eyebrow at Sammy and grinned like a bandit. This was beginning to feel like a gathering of the fierce Amazons she knew and loved.

"However," Shann threw Jess a look of amused reproof, "before we close tonight's council, we'll still honor Mother Demeter's grief for her kidnapped daughter. I call upon Kyla, daughter of Viviane, to sing our Challenge."

Brenna drew in a quick breath. She and Jess both turned to Kyla, who was paling rapidly. Revered for one of the most beautiful singing voices ever to grace Tristaine, Kyla hadn't sung a note since Camryn's death. She obviously hadn't expected to be asked to do so tonight.

Shann returned her stunned look with serene patience.

Kyla's lips parted, but no words of protest emerged. The youngest daughter of Viviane was many things, Brenna thought, and a widow was only one of them. Above all she was an Amazon of Tristaine, and she did not refuse her queen. Kyla started to stand up, but her knees gave out, and she sat back down with a thump.

"I really want to hear this, Ky." Dana still held Kyla's hand, and Brenna heard a mature tenderness in her voice. "Shann's told me how much Dyan loved to hear you sing. Come on. We'll be right here." Dana pressed her fingers.

Kyla looked up at her, then turned to Brenna and Jess. Apparently finding what she needed in their faces, she rose to her feet, and a glad murmur rippled through the crowd as she met Shann at the center of the circle.

Shann took Kyla's hand in both of her own, spoke to her quietly, then smiled with loving pride and rested her lips against her pale forehead. Shann retreated to one side of the square and sat on a low stool with a shaking sigh.

Kyla faced them, her eyes downcast, and cleared her throat twice. The square was hushed, but with a different silence than the one Brenna had noted at the opening of this council. This stillness held no tension. It was filled with encouragement and warmth.

Kyla's shoulders lifted with a deep breath, and a first tentative, thready note left her lips. It drifted and faded in the chill air and was followed by another. Stronger this time, richer in melody, and then a third. Brenna felt Sammy straighten beside her and remembered how her sister relished music in all its forms.

Kyla sang, and Brenna closed her eyes as the poignant message of the Challenge spilled like gems from her lips. She remembered the last time she had heard Dyan's blood sister sing this chant, one of Brenna's first nights in Tristaine. She heard Jess's low voice again in her mind, interpreting the language of the old Amazons as she sat curled in her arms.

"Wow," Sammy whispered. She seemed spellbound by the rising beauty of Kyla's voice, soaring now to fill the square with resonant sound. Brenna watched Sam's face grow younger as she listened, grief fading from her features like the passing of a fitful dream. She leaned closer to her.

"The Mothers of Tristaine charge their daughters to protect and cherish each other." Brenna recalled Jess's translation of the lyrical, difficult tongue. "Our clan travels toward the dark night of winter. Only our shared passion can

sustain us until spring's warmth returns."

Kyla's eyes closed, and her voice spiraled through a series of melancholy notes. Her tone was deeper and richer than her delicate size seemed capable of producing, and her audience listened with rapt pleasure.

A small wooden box appeared in Brenna's lap. She picked it up and studied it curiously, then nudged Jess. "What's this?" she whispered.

"A wee offerin'." Jess was watching Kyla with pride.

Brenna took off the ornate lid and set it aside, and her breasts lifted with her indrawn breath. Inside the box, nestled on a square of folded satin, lay a slender bracelet of hammered silver. Burnished to a fine sheen, it was inlaid with colorful streaks of onyx, turquoise, malachite, and red jasper.

"Jesstin," Brenna murmured. "It's beautiful." She lifted the silver band free and fit it around her wrist. The bracelet warmed at the touch of her skin, and its delicate design shimmered in the torchlight.

"You've been with us a full year, adonai." Jess slid an arm around Brenna's waist. "You walked into Tristaine for the first time under the light of Demeter's harvest moon."

"It matches this." Brenna fingered the turquoise pendant that lay in the hollow of Jess's throat. "Ah, honey. Thank you so much. I love you remembering the night I came to the village."

"I'm honoring all the nights since. You've changed my life, Brenna." Jess touched her face. "You've given me such happiness. Thank you, adonai." She lowered her head, and their lips met in a long, brushing caress.

The complete silence that greeted the last chiming notes of Kyla's Challenge brought them out of their haze. They sat up as cheers burst around them, and Brenna huffed her damp bangs off her forehead. They joined in Kyla's warm ovation, rising with their sisters to celebrate this healing.

Chapter Eight

The village square seemed hauntingly empty to Brenna now, hours after the last of their sisters had drifted to their home lodges. The assembly had ended on a warm and vibrant note with Kyla's song, and this midnight stillness felt barren by comparison. The square itself seemed larger, its far reaches cloaked in deep shadows, and the star-swept sky above them was an implacable immensity.

In her brief tenure in the clan, Dana had mastered the art of fire building, and she had a bonfire crackling in the rock pit near the altar. Kyla sat on a low bench nearby, warming her hands by the flames. Her head was inclined toward Sarah, who sat beside her, drawing on her pipe. The old woman caught Brenna's eye and winked before resuming her story.

"Lady," Jess called. "I need a word."

"Jess," Brenna sighed.

"No, Bren." Jess covered the hand Brenna laid on her arm with her own. "This needs to be said."

Shann was deep in conference with Aria, who tended a boiling kettle. Aria wafted the fragrant steam swirling from the pot's interior to her face with a twirl of her wrist, the image of a voluptuous elder witch. Shann lifted a hand to acknowledge Jess, but her fingers spun a request for patience. She whispered a last word to Aria, then joined Brenna and Jess.

"What is it, Jesstin?" Shann looked harried. She brushed a tumbling lock of hair off her forehead, her cheeks flushed by the heat of the fire. "We're nearly ready. Brenna, we can only

estimate the intensity of this brew by fragrance and color. But I promise you, it's the mildest dose discernible."

"My lady queen." Jess reached for Shann's hand and held it until she looked up into her eyes. "You know I trust you with my whole heart. Hear me now."

The impatience faded from Shann's features. "I'm listening, Jess."

"You and Brenna believe Dyan waits for her on the far side of the veil." Jess's tone was respectful. "But the blood of Sirius is still fresh on our hands, Shann. We don't know who or what else Brenna might find there."

"True enough, Jesstin." Shann looked at Brenna with shadowed eyes. "I understand all too well the risks we're asking your adonai to face."

"We can mitigate them. Send me with her, lady."

"Dear one." Shann laid her hand on Jess's cheek. "We can't know what effect this tea would have on an Amazon with no natural psychic shields. Brenna is virtually the only woman among us with some assurance of safe travel. Believe me, I would go in our sister's place myself if I could."

"Like Brenna, I accept the risks of this journey." Jess took Shann's hands in her own. "And I'll look to her for protection, when it comes to phantoms. All I ask is your leave to safeguard my wife against more visceral enemies."

"Brenna is more than your wife to Tristaine, Jesstin," Shann said gently.

"Of course she is." Jess glanced at Brenna, and even through her urgency there was warm pride in her eyes. "As much as I love Brenna, lady, it's not her protection alone that drives me. I seek this honor for the sake of our clan as well. If Tristaine loses her only prophet, we lose our connection to divine help."

"I can't allow it, Jess." Shann squeezed Jess's hands. "This sacred plant might even prove poisonous to one outside

the guild of seers, and the life of the leader of our warriors is also precious to Tristaine. We must let Brenna make this journey alone."

"Excuse me." Brenna tapped her way politely in between Jess and Shann. "As the endangered party, may I add to this discussion?"

She noted Jess had the grace to flush. "Of course, lass."

"Jesstin." Brenna stepped closer to her. "I know you trust me with your life. You have yet to learn to trust me with the welfare of our clan."

"Ah, Bren." Jess sounded dismayed. "Of course I trust you. I never meant—"

"Hush, then." Brenna laid her fingers against Jess's lips. "Just listen a minute." She extended her arm and showed her the silver bracelet adorning her wrist. "I earned my year in Tristaine, Jess, every day of it. I've fought in our battles, and tended our wounded, and buried our dead. I climbed over a mountain range with every other woman in the tribe to reach this mesa. True?"

"True, Brenna."

"Every Amazon in Tristaine is willing to defend her sisters with her life." Brenna poked Jess's chest to emphasize her point, but then softened her hand against her breast. "That's what you told me, one night in the Clinic when you were so homesick for these women I was afraid your heart might stop."

Brenna measured the steady pulse beneath her palm, willing Jess to absorb understanding through the pores of her skin. A hundred faces flickered through her mind, sisters she had met and grown to love, only because of this one obstinate Amazon. "This is my clan now too, adonai. Tristaine took me in, and I've found family here. I've earned the right to protect my sisters." She cradled Jess's face in her hands. "I'm sorry, love, but where I'm going tonight, you can't follow. You have

to let me walk by my own light."

The square was quiet, save for the snapping of the fire, until Sarah rose from her bench with a dry cackle. "Madlady's moon, Shann. To the very word, you gave that speech to Dyan, the night before your first battle."

"I remember, grandmother." Shann cupped the back of Brenna's neck and smiled at Jess. "It's the hardest work our Mothers ask of us, Jesstin, risking the women we love in order to preserve the clan we all cherish. I'm afraid it never gets easier, adanin."

Jess released a sigh as bleak as a wind-swept glacier. "I hear you, lady."

Brenna stood on her toes and brushed a swift kiss on Jess's cheek.

"Ladies?" Aria wrapped a cloth around the kettle's handle and lifted it off the fire. "I'm afraid it's teatime in Tristaine."

One by one the women rose and drifted toward the stone altar. Brenna shivered and turned back to Jess, who lowered her head until their foreheads met. They leaned lightly against each other, the swells of Brenna's breasts cushioning Jess's firm ones. It was one of their favorite ways of touching, and they relaxed in the unique and sensual comfort of this quiet blending of their bodies.

"Okay," Brenna whispered, closing her eyes, "so after the I-am-much-woman speech, I can still tell you I'm scared witless, right?"

Jess's arms were strong and warm around her. "You'd be daft not to be, Bren."

"You'll stay close."

"Hell's fury can't move me."

Brenna opened her eyes and filled her lungs with cold air. Then she let go of Jess and walked to the altar.

Dana and Kyla stepped apart to admit her to the circle of women around the black stone, and Kyla gripped Brenna's

hand with chilly fingers as she passed. Dana gave her shoulder an awkward pat. Brenna offered them what she hoped was a reassuring smile, but her teeth were chattering, and the effect was probably a bit macabre.

"Shanendra wouldn't let me add anything, Brenna." Aria tisked as she poured the steaming amber liquid from the kettle into a silver cup resting on the altar's surface. "Not one drop of honey, not one sprig of mint—"

"Peace, Aria, you've done well." Shann helped her lower the kettle to a nearby rock. She turned to Brenna and took her hands. "Are you ready, adanin?"

"I need a drink." Brenna tried to smile. "Something with a little kick. I guess this brew will have to do." She felt a tremor in Shann's hands and pressed them gently. "I'm ready, lady."

"Safe journey, little sister." Shann kissed her forehead. "Come home to us soon."

Brenna felt the altar lurking behind her like a living presence. The craggy stone block still pulsed with a banked power. It carried as much sinister menace as the granite sculpture near the cemetery had evoked poignant grief. Brenna didn't let herself see the sigils carved into its surface. Instead, she focused on the leather-hilted labrys still resting in its center.

She lifted the gleaming silver cup and cradled it in her palms, the heat emanating through the metal shocking her cold fingers. She held it beneath her nose, her eyes crinkling at the sharp fragrance rising with the steam. The pungent tea carried a faint licorice scent, which seemed a hopeful sign.

The faces around Brenna were a study in watchful tension. The firelight reached them only faintly this close to the altar, and their features were washed in soft reddish light. Sarah stood motionless, her shawl wrapped around her bony shoulders, betraying her worry only through her rapid draws on her pipe. Aria's beautiful features held no trace of humor,

and Kyla and Dana were both visibly pale. Brenna met Shann's shadowed gaze, then reached for Jess's hand.

To her own surprise, Brenna murmured a brief prayer before she drank. She wasn't specific about who she was praying to. Just those phantom women every Amazon called on in times of need, with a child's pure faith that her Mothers will hear her.

The thin liquid flooded Brenna's mouth with heat and a taste more bitter than she'd expected, and her throat almost closed. She swallowed hard, then drained the cup in three determined gulps.

Kyla gasped somewhere behind her. "Is she supposed to bolt it like that, lady?"

"We don't know how quickly this tea might act, Ky." Shann took the cup from Brenna's hand and studied her face closely. "How are you, Blades?"

"Fine, thanks. How are you?" Brenna realized she was squeezing Jess's hand with painful force and made herself relax her grip. She opened her eyes, and the sculpted lines of Jess's face swam into focus. Or almost. She was starting to sparkle a bit around the edges. A mild wave of dizziness went through Brenna. "Maybe I should lie down."

There was a flurry of movement around her, and careful hands helped her sit on the black altar. Jess lifted her legs, and Shann took Brenna's shoulders and eased her down until she was lying flat.

"*Jeeze,* this thing is cold," she hissed. A certain chill might be expected from a stone block, but the cold seeping into Brenna from its dense depths seemed almost arctic. She shifted and quickly gave up finding any semblance of comfort on the craggy rock.

"This part just kills me." Dana's voice reached her faintly. "She looks like some virgin sacrifice laid out on this thing. Plus, as far as we know, this altar might eat people. Wouldn't a

warm cabin have been just as good for this ritual?"

"This altar is our doorway, Dana." Shann's hand was warm on Brenna's hair. "Everything is centered here."

"Bren."

She opened her eyes. Jess stood close beside the altar, holding the labrys. The rising moon loomed behind her, outlining her muscular form in silver light. Brenna opened her hands and accepted the revered weapon, resting its curved blades over her breasts and holding the short hilt near her waist. Its solid weight was comforting, an anchor holding down the frenzied fireflies in her belly.

"Just breathe slowly, Brenna." Shann's fingers moved through her hair.

She was starting to feel decidedly odd. A prickly lightness filled her stomach and spread up into her chest.

"I'm here, Bren." Jess's large hand covered her own.

She felt her body grow weightless, as if she were evaporating into an insubstantial mist, and something cell-deep in Brenna rebelled at this alien state. She tightened hard, her back arching against the stone, then felt a horrific sensation of melting down into the altar itself, vanishing into that malign black bulk.

"Relax, dear one." Shann's breath brushed her forehead. "It's all right, Brenna. You know what to do. Trust your sight."

Brenna focused on the midnight heavens above her, each pinpoint of light a crisp pinwheel against the velvet sky. Seven particular stars formed a firmament that flickered brightest and drew her toward them like a celestial tide calling its lost children home.

Abruptly the Seven Sisters sparked and telescoped into rushing streaks of light, and Brenna felt herself soaring upward, twisting in gentle spirals of warm wind.

❖

Lush grass tickled her ankles—thick, cool, and a dazzling deep green.

Brenna blinked and raised her head.

The sun-drenched light that flooded the clearing struck her first, startling after the soft mist of the mesa. Startling, too, that in the village square it was cresting midnight, and here—wherever "here" was—it seemed to be high noon.

She stood in an open, grassy space at the edge of a thick forest, beneath a cloudless sky saturated with rich blue. It took Brenna a moment to realize the heavy weight in her hands was the ebony labrys, and she gripped its hilt gratefully.

Brenna breathed in a chestful of the sweetest air ever to grace a human lung and let Jess's training take over. She turned in a tight circle, surveying the terrain, the two-headed axe held ready for a quick defense. She was alone, that much was obvious, and no immediate threat set off her internal alarms. Her pounding heart began to ease to a more comfortable rhythm.

She knew this place. Perhaps only in dreams, but its beauty resonated in Brenna's memory. She'd stood on this goddess-graced ground before.

Brenna completed her circle and let out an abrupt yelp of dismay. She was perched at the edge of a virtual cliff. The earth dropped off abruptly only inches from her boots. Brenna leaned forward to trace the wall's sheer descent to a rocky floor a good two thousand feet below, then straightened quickly.

"Great, heights will still scare the crap out of me in heaven," Brenna muttered, her hand to her breast.

"Amazons need courage in all their lives."

A ragged gasp burst from Brenna, and she whirled, the double-bladed axe swinging in a clumsy circle before her. Unaccustomed to its weight, she nearly lost her footing, but managed to regain it with an unlovely lurch.

The giant of her vision towered over her. She wasn't glowing anymore, but she was still a giant, and now her handsome features were crystal clear. The dark woman easily topped nine feet, not counting her boots. The muscles of her crossed arms stood out in stark relief, and her entire being emanated a sinewy strength. Eyes black as obsidian regarded Brenna quizzically.

"You're Dy..." Brenna's words died in her throat. "You couldn't be."

She remembered and treasured Jess's vivid description of Shann's adonai. Though they shared a common mother, Dyan had rough features that carried none of Kyla's delicate beauty. Ravishing in the strength of her spirit, in life Dyan had been short, broad as a barn, freckled, and plain as dirt. The black-haired colossus before her was stunning.

She unfolded her arms and crooked two fingers at Brenna. "Ye hold what's mine." The malted brogue clearly echoed the voice that had called to her at the river.

Brenna felt the labrys vibrate in her hands. It lifted abruptly out of her grasp and sailed through the air in a pure arc to its true owner. The woman caught the weapon with one lazy snap of a wrist, and the labrys was transformed by her touch. The double-bladed head shimmered, then transformed from pitted steel to some flawless black metal that sparked sunlight off its glossy surface. The hilt grew longer and became a dark, gleaming rosewood, balanced effortlessly in the warrior's powerful grip.

A very human fondness flickered across her beautiful features as her fingers flexed around the axe's hilt. She sent the curved blades in a tight, whistling circle around her head so fast Brenna could hardly follow the motion, the wicked edges slicing a note of music out of the clear air. The labrys snapped neatly into the leather sheath strapped across her broad back.

Brenna saw the sun spark off the simple silver ring on the giant's third finger. It was identical to the band Shann wore. Unlike the labrys, this symbol of their bond was unchanged from its earthly form, and Brenna understood that this crude ring was already perfection.

"Dyan," she whispered.

Dyan grinned, and now Brenna could see her little sister in her. There was a gamin quality in that smile that was all Kyla.

"Short, was I now?"

"N-not anymore," Brenna admitted. "Can I ask where we are?"

"You've not traveled far in one sense, lass." Dyan's voice rang like a deep bell. She set her hands on her hips and nodded toward the dense forest. "We stand at the edge of the mesa this generation of Tristaine calls home."

"We do?" Brenna asked politely. She glanced over her shoulder and shuddered at the sheer drop behind her. The mesa she knew didn't involve towering cliffs.

"We haven't much time, Brenna, so listen well." Dyan lowered herself slowly to one knee next to her, and Brenna had a vivid memory of her doing so, with equal care, in her vision. Now she only had to crane her neck slightly to look into her dark eyes.

"The demon who plagues Tristaine was an Amazon queen. And a powerful sorceress. She ruled this mesa three hundred years ago. And she destroyed her own clan. Made them blood sacrifices to the dark gods to win immortality for her poxed soul."

Brenna felt that appalling betrayal deep in her gut and heard it echoed in the revulsion in Dyan's rich voice.

"Her undead spirit slaughtered a second Amazon tribe who inhabited this mesa a century later. And she means to make the adanin of Tristaine her next victims."

"Wait a minute." A frisson of fear coursed down Brenna's back. She heard Kyla's voice in her mind, at the storyfire three nights ago, telling the chilling ghost story that held the clan rapt. "Are we talking about that legend? That demon queen who sucks the souls out of Amazons? Botesh?"

"Botesh," Dyan confirmed "The name means 'shame' in a dozen languages. She's more than legend, girl. If she enslaves the spirits of a third Amazon clan, she'll fill her unholy pact with her dark masters. She'll regain human form, with all the powers of her sorcery intact. And that twisted canker will be as immortal as the gods themselves."

"That's not going to happen." Rage shook Brenna, drowning her fear, and her palms itched for a weapon. The warrior in her was rising fast. "Tell us what to do, Dyan."

Dyan's eyes glinted. "Give this message to m'lady, Brenna. Tristaine's greatest warriors can't stop Botesh. Only an Amazon queen, an equally powerful light matched to her darkness, can vanquish this evil. But Shann must not face her alone."

Her huge hand rested gently on Brenna's shoulder. "Tell her she must call on the Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone. Their blended powers are Tristaine's only hope. Shanendra will ken my meaning."

"I sure hope so," Brenna whispered. "You couldn't possibly be any more specific, though? In case she has any questions?"

"Ha. Think I'm vague?" Dyan snorted and got to her feet, towering over Brenna again. "Our Mothers don't speak much more clearly on this plane, lass. Try getting a straight answer out of those seven stubborn..."

Dyan looked to the trees as a faint, trilling whistle reached them.

Brenna's mouth was open to ask the next of six dozen essential questions, but it snapped shut again as she recognized

that particular pattern of whistled notes.

The sound came from the dense trees bordering the small meadow. Brenna's heart beat faster, and she looked at Dyan. The immense warrior's chiseled face softened, and she nodded.

Brenna stepped through the lush grass toward the forest's edge, stooping to peer through the thick branches. The swirling whistle came again, and she stopped. She saw her now. A tall, slim young warrior with chestnut hair, standing on a far-distant ridge, strong and vibrant with life.

Camryn was too far away to allow speech, and Brenna didn't attempt it. They regarded each other across the distance, both grinning like fools. A joyful laugh rose from Brenna's throat, and she gave in to the irresistible, childlike urge to wave her arm in huge arcs in greeting. Cam lifted her hand in return, laughing too.

"She can't come closer, lass." Dyan's low voice sounded in her mind. "She's still learning the lay of the land."

Brenna nodded, drinking in every detail of the distant figure. Camryn's hand moved over her chest, and her long fingers twirled in an intricate design. Brenna shouldn't have been able to see the motion clearly at this distance, but she followed it easily, and it imprinted on her heart.

Brenna raised her hand in acknowledgement and caught the flash of Camryn's grin. The young warrior stood a moment longer, relaxed and easy in a body that had been gangly and restless on earth. Then she turned and walked back into the surrounding trees.

Brenna stared at the empty ridge, her fingers brushing the base of her throat.

Dyan waited for her at the edge of the cliff. They stood side by side, looking out over a vista of mountains and valleys more crisp and beautiful than any view offered on Brenna's mesa.

"You need to go back, adanin."

Brenna murmured agreement. "Is there anything else I should tell them?"

"Aye. Botesh's power peaks with tomorrow's dawn of Demeter's moon. Expect her attack at nightfall. And don't drop your guard. If the she-ghoul survives the first night, she'll return the second."

"I understand." Brenna thought that might be overstating it, but at least she understood what to tell Shann and Jess. "Is that all?"

Dyan's hand rose to her breast, and her fingers moved in the same twirling motion Camryn's had, with a slight variation at the end. "Tell m' lady I hear her. Each and every night."

Brenna swallowed hard. "I will, Dyan."

Dyan straightened and looked down at Brenna from her dizzying height. "Do you trust me, Brenna?"

"Yes, I do." She didn't have to think about it.

"Then trust your sight." Dyan put a large hand in the small of Brenna's back and pushed her off the cliff.

❖

At first she just plummeted, her arms pinwheeling helplessly, her ragged scream sucked back into her throat by the wind. Brenna's lifelong nightmares crystallized in those few seconds of stark terror. And then she was lifted.

Her spirit changed and soared, a painless transformation that sent her reeling high into the cloudless, sunlit heavens. She turned and stretched in the warm winds, the terrain spinning with her, her fear giving way to exhilaration. Jesstin, *she yelled in her mind,* see me now!

Only now, high above the earth, could Brenna realize the truth of Dyan's words. This was *Tristaine's mesa, albeit larger and more spectacularly beautiful than the one Shann's*

Amazons inhabited. She could see the ring of towering trees outlining its perimeter and stopped in her headlong flight, hovering over the mesa's center.

Small details registered: the tiny blocks of lodges and cabins that dotted the Amazon village, the lush conifers growing thickly among them. But Brenna was struck by an amazing symmetry evident only at this height.

The outer ring of trees wasn't just regular; it was perfect, forming a wide and solid circle around the mesa's surface. And several hundred yards in, another concise circle of trees grew, forming an inner ring. There was an obvious gap—an empty space, forested only by shrubs and smaller trees, where a third circle should be. And there, in the exact geometric center of these natural rings, Brenna saw the sinister black shape of the altar.

The target glyph, the image of the bull's-eye, its grooves sizzling with Sirius's blood. The sigil carved onto the altar was replicated almost perfectly on the mesa's surface. It lacked only the third, innermost ring.

And then Brenna was falling again, no, diving. There was no sense of helplessness now, just a desperate urgency to get home to her clan. She streaked down toward the altar, fixing her furious gaze on its malignant form, seeing it grow larger as if rising to meet her attack.

❖

"She'll be with us soon, Jesstin."

Shann's voice, immensely weary but rich with relief. Brenna could feel her fingers stroking her hair again and Jess's firm grip on her hand.

"Hoo," Brenna whispered.

"Brenna." Jess's breath warmed her brow. Brenna could feel the faint trembling in her fingers.

She opened her eyes, and the first thing she saw was

the blurred montage, high overhead, of the Seven Sisters. Then Jess's tense features swam into focus, filling her sky, and Brenna realized that cherished gaze was all she would ever need of heaven.

"Get me off this thing," she mumbled, and Jess's arms slid under her shoulders and knees at once and lifted her gently from the altar.

"Here, Jesstin, near the fire." Shann motioned to Dana, who snapped out a warm fur and spread it close to the crackling flames.

Rather than lay Brenna on the blanket, Jess settled cross-legged onto it herself and cradled her in her lap. Brenna was starting to shiver from the night's cold now and welcomed the warmth of the fire, but the strong arms supporting her offered more exquisite comfort.

She heard the stirring of cloaks and robes as Shann and the others gathered around them. The relief of the breathing presence of her sisters was so great Brenna felt faint with it. Shann knelt in front of her and lifted her hand.

"How are you, little sister?"

"Lady," Brenna began, "please, please, please tell me you know three women called the Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone."

A quicksilver array of emotions passed over Shann's expressive features. She masked her fear almost at once, but Brenna saw it clearly.

Chapter Nine

Brenna sat near the edge of the highest bluff their mesa afforded—a tame drop-off, compared to its counterpoint in the spirit world. The tree she leaned against was one of those towering conifers that formed the outer ring encircling their village.

She rested her head against the soft moss cushioning the trunk of the tree and allotted herself exactly thirty seconds of closed eyes and relaxed vigilance. If Botesh and her minions chose to attack in those thirty seconds, she was prepared to accept full blame.

The sun was an hour from setting. They had until nightfall, Dyan had said. Shann seemed to accept this assurance, and the rest of her lost adonai's instruction, as literal truth. She had told them she understood who this mysterious Crone, Mother, and Maiden were, and how they could help Tristaine. Beyond that, Shann declined to elaborate.

Snugging the collar of her jacket closer around her throat, Brenna shivered in the breeze of early evening. It had been a day of frenetic activity. She had spent much of it in Tristaine's healing lodge, rolling bandages and stocking Shann's supplies to prepare for the coming battle.

Which would take what form? Brenna folded her arms, curled her legs beneath her on the rocky ground, and looked out over the twilight pasture below. Jess's warriors were braced for armed conflict. Their children and elderly were housed in fortified cabins that would be well guarded until the

clan was safe. Food was stored in their harvesting bins to see them through any siege that might confine them to the mesa. They were as ready as they could be for physical battle, but it seemed there was little more they could do to raise shields against the spectral forces their enemy might command.

Shann had shepherded her women ably through all these preparations. She claimed a good night's sleep had restored her energies and brushed aside any attempt at solicitude. But throughout the day, Shann seemed to avoid being alone with Brenna and rarely met her eye. A small thing with so many urgent demands on a queen's attention, but the loss of that direct, warm gaze troubled Brenna.

Eyes still closed, she heard the outraged rustling coming up on her left.

"Great! She's asleep. We could have crossbowed your butt three times already, Brenna." It was Dana's voice.

Brenna crooked one eye open and smiled a greeting at Kyla and Samantha as they joined Dana around her moss-sheathed tree.

"And what part of Jess's order about no one traveling alone beyond the village didn't register with you?" Dana continued to crab. "You really want to bring the wrath of that big snarly adonai of yours down on your—yipe!" She broke off as an acorn bounced smartly off the top of her head.

Brenna craned her neck and watched Jess descend from her watch atop a nearby oak. She sluiced down through the branches, sinuous as a panther, moving almost soundlessly. Jumping the last ten feet, she landed lightly, with the smallest flex of her knees. Brenna made a clicking noise and smiled in wicked appreciation, and Jess winked at her.

"Make that big sneaky adonai," Dana muttered, rubbing her head.

"I take it by your presence that all's quiet in the village." Jess lifted Kyla's hand and kissed it.

"As a tomb." Kyla tousled Jess's hair. "A quiet, tense, ticking, pressurized tomb."

"The night watch is coming on, Jess." Dana shrugged the strap of a canvas bag off her shoulder and knelt to rummage through it. "I heard Siirah and Reilly ride past a minute ago. This sector is set. Aria sent up this tasty ch—this dinner for us."

"Hey, you." Brenna smiled at Samantha and patted the ground beside her. "Pull up a root."

Sammy complied, folding her coltish legs beneath her and settling between Brenna and Dana. The climb to this low ridge had done her sister good, Brenna noted. Or maybe it was the quiet ministration Sammy had received from their clan the last few days. That persistent pallor had faded a little, and her expression seemed more alert and focused.

Towering waves of terror and dread were impossible to sustain, Brenna philosophized as Dana passed thick mutton sandwiches around their circle. She often wrote her journal in her mind long before ink touched paper. She saw the tension ease from the bodies of her friends as they began to relish their collective warmth. They had all been swept up in the adrenaline-charged preparations since they were last together, and it was past time for this brief reprieve.

"So Shann really understands this whole crone-virgin thing?" Dana obviously didn't comprehend the nature of a reprieve, which in Brenna's mind meant ignoring the looming threat altogether.

Kyla sputtered, then lowered the canteen, giggling. "That's *Maiden,* you heretic. The Crone, the Mother, and the Maiden. That's covered in, what, Introduction to Amazons? The *virgin*."

"Okay, the Crone, the Mama, and the Maid." Dana grinned. "Same difference. Did Shann say any more about who they're supposed to be?"

"Our lady keeps her own counsel." Jess chewed methodically, studying the sparse grass of the pasture below them. "She hasn't shared her thoughts with me."

That in itself was unusual, and troubling, Brenna thought. Jess served as Shann's second and had always been one of her most trusted advisors.

"Were they Amazons, these three women?" Sammy was wolfing down her dinner with obvious pleasure.

"They're three aspects of our Goddess, Samantha." Jess brushed her hands together and leaned back on one elbow. "But many other cultures share the archetype. The wise elder, the fruitful mother, the innocent girl. They are the new, full, and waning moons. Sedna, Demeter, and Persephone. The most potent ages of Woman, embodied in those three."

"Wow." Samantha swallowed the last of her sandwich. She watched Brenna closely, as if trying to read her response to all this. "I'm sorry, but I don't know anything about your religion. So I'm not sure how these three…um, aspects of your goddess figure in here. Everybody's getting ready for this big physical battle. But aren't you talking about some…spiritual war? I just don't see how swords can protect us against ghosts."

"Our battlefield was cast the night Sirius died, Samantha." Jess met Brenna's gaze, and Brenna picked up her thought effortlessly.

"I'm glad you weren't there to see her body, Sam." A sad shiver moved through Brenna. "Sirius was killed with terrible violence. It's all the proof we need that Botesh can attack us on the physical plane. That's why Jess's warriors are on full watch."

"Brenna said Sirius's slaughter was a blood sacrifice." Grief and anger melded in Kyla's voice. "It opened a door between worlds and let Botesh in."

"Doors swing both ways, Ky." Jess nudged Kyla's knee

gently with her foot. "Tristaine has her own allies in Botesh's realm. If that banshee can reach us, so can they. If Shann calls on our Goddess, her Crone, Mother, and Maiden will answer."

"But how will she call them? Please tell me it won't involve anyone stretching out on that creep-show altar again." Dana scratched her shoulder. "And how will we use them once they get here?"

"Shann will need their blended powers to face Botesh." Brenna closed her eyes, remembering. "That's what Dyan said. I asked her to be more specific about the whole blending thing, but she just said Shann would understand."

"She said she'd *ken,*" Kyla murmured.

"She did." Brenna nodded.

"I can't believe you spoke to her." Kyla lifted Brenna's hand onto her knee. "You stood right in front of her, Bren."

"And she was something to see." Brenna smiled.

"Dyan was your real sister, right, Kyla?" Samantha asked. "I mean, your biological sister?"

Kyla nodded. "I only had her for a few years. We grew up in different villages, raised by separate branches of Tristaine. But I always knew Dyan existed. I heard stories about her my whole life. And I dreamed about her, even before we met. The bond between blood sisters can be so intense and so sweet. You know about that, Sammy."

Brenna felt Samantha go still beside her. She held her breath, glad she couldn't see her sister's face. Kyla pressed her hand, sending her faith.

"Yes, I do," Samantha said softly.

Brenna smiled at the ground and pressed Kyla's hand back, sending her thanks.

"So that explains why Dyan had this huge accent and you don't." Dana tossed a small pebble lightly in Kyla's direction. "You grew up in different villages."

"Aye, lassie," Kyla replied in a deep brogue. "Dyan's trrrribe was a bunch o' crrrude barbarians, who slaughtered all their 'rrr's."

"She would mean me," Jess drawled. "Dyan brought Vicar and me with her when she joined this clan, Dana."

"Jeeze." Dana scowled. "Y'all's history is complicated enough without breaking into clan offshoots. You were born in this part of Tristaine, right, Ky?"

"Yep, Camryn and Lauren and I were all homegrown." Kyla smiled at Samantha. "Lauren was Cam's blood sister. Maybe you should be taking notes."

"Good idea," Sammy sighed.

Brenna sat quietly through the relaxed banter that followed. The warmth between Dana and Kyla was palpable tonight, almost flirtatious. Their fragile bond had grown strong since Tristaine had found this mesa.

Brenna had a message for Kyla, one that might rekindle old grief, and she was reluctant to dim the new light in her sister's eyes. But they hovered on the brink of battle, and there was no promise of future council. Brenna looked at Jess to gather her courage and cleared her throat.

"I saw Camryn, Ky."

Kyla said nothing for a moment. She laid down a wedge of cheese and brushed her hands together carefully. A tremor shook her, but her eyes on Brenna were calm. "Tell me, adanin."

"She was as strong as a young horse." Warmth surged through Brenna as she remembered the spirit warrior's vibrant energy. "And grinning like a demon. She's home, Kyla. Safe in Dyan's care and thriving on her own path."

Kyla drew in a deep breath and looked at her hands folded in her lap. Her sisters waited with her. Dana sat with one elbow on a raised knee, watching Kyla with unreadable eyes.

"Did she speak?" Kyla asked finally.

Brenna nodded. "She was too far away for voices, but she sends you this."

She lifted her hand to her waist and performed the intricate twirling motion of wrist and fingers Camryn had formed on the ridge. Kyla's lips parted, and her eyes filled with tears. Then she smiled, and Brenna remembered Shann's belief that the very act of smiling through tears held the essence of healing.

Brenna felt Samantha touch her back.

"Is it okay to ask?"

Brenna waited until Kyla nodded. "Sure, Sam." She shifted so her sister could see her hands. "Amazons can communicate amazing things through hand signals." She dipped her fingers in a subtle curve. "This is the universal signal for a deep and abiding love, the bond between adonai."

"It's how we greeted each other." Kyla brushed her hand across her cheek.

"Dyan sent Shann the same message." Brenna touched Kyla's knee. "And Cam sent you this wish, Ky." She painted a gentle pattern with her fingers.

Kyla's brow furrowed. "Peace?"

"Peace." Brenna smoothed Kyla's hair off her forehead. She knew that word held realms of meaning for her, beyond the immediate fate of their clan. It was what Shann had sought since Dyan's death, and what Samantha desperately needed now. Inner peace was Camryn's unselfish wish for an end to her adonai's mourning.

"Listen." Jess was suddenly alert as a feral cat, then Brenna heard it, an urgent trumpeting of hooves over the hard-packed earth.

Siirah appeared above them, reining in her plunging roan. "Jesstin! You'd best get to the village."

Jess rose to her feet. "What's happening, Siirah?"

"No enemy has been sighted, Jess. But there's…you'd best see for yourself, adanin."

Jess whistled acknowledgement, and Siirah wheeled her horse and cantered back down the rise. "Kyla, take Samantha to the elders' cabin, then join us in the square. Dana, Brenna, with me."

"Hey, wait." Samantha touched Jess's arm. "I don't want to hide in some cabin. If Bree—if everybody's going to be out there, I want to be too. I won't get in the way."

Jess glanced at Brenna, then nodded. "Just don't make me tell you anything twice, lass."

They gathered their things quickly and moved in one close unit toward the trail leading down to the village. Brenna paused before following the others into the thick of the trees and looked over her shoulder. She had felt its weak light on her back even before turning. It was still a mild sickle, rising over the far mountain crest. The first dawn of the Thesmophorian moon.

Brenna invoked any goddesses still listening and ran swiftly after her sisters.

❖

She nearly smacked into Jess's broad back when they slid to a stop.

They stood at the head of the narrow trail, looking down a low rise to the Amazon village below. It was a cold night, and twilight had surrendered to full darkness now. The stars glittered with uncommon brilliance, and the rising moon had started to bleed its own murky light, casting Tristaine in a dull silver glow.

"What in Hera's left tit is that?" Dana stared down at the gathering of lodges.

"Fog," Jess answered rhetorically, and Brenna wrapped

her fingers around her forearm for reassurance.

Only an Amazon, who referred to mountains as hills and canyons as ditches, would consider this brackish mess *fog*. Brenna knew mountain fog now and welcomed the soft mists that graced many of their mornings. And her sense memory still carried the distinctly unpleasant chemical stench of the City's air. If this stuff was fog, it was the kind only a City could generate.

Rivers of it drifted like curdled streams of liquid cheese through the cabins and trees below. It emitted a scent almost discernable from this distance, but it was no odor Brenna recognized, more a malign memory of mildew.

"This is Botesh's herald, adanin." Kyla drew in a long breath. "Remember the legend. The coming of the demon is signaled by a thick, strange mist."

"Thick, strange, check." Dana turned to Jess for instructions, but closed her mouth at the grim light in her eyes. Jess slipped the leather notch from her belt to free her sword, and Brenna felt a thrill of pride. She hadn't seen Jesstin of Tristaine in full battle mode for three seasons, and the sight of her brought Dyan's spectral grandeur to mind.

"Our wait's over." Jess's upper lip curled. "We've a bully to spank." She spun and jumped a dozen feet down the hill, and they exploded after her.

Dana's war cry, a damn fine one for a debut, rattled the trees. Brenna reached back and touched Sammy's chest as they ran, making sure she stayed close.

There was a definite stirring in the village, the ignition of a strategy set carefully in place. They passed running women, efficient bands of three and four, bound for sentry posts and defense positions. Voices shouted to each other, not in panic, but in a crisp cadence acknowledging orders. Shann had prepared her women well.

Brenna wanted to keep running. She had the wind to circle

the mesa a dozen times. The adrenaline coursing through her might be enough to boost her to another flight above it. Some of the hot joy that ignited Jess's expressive features heated Brenna's blood as well, an alien but welcome energy. A healer to her core, she had never felt less conflicted going into a fight. Their enemy was anathema to generations of Amazons, and her reign would end here.

"Vicar!" Jess reached up and snatched the bridle of her cousin's horse as she reined in beside them. "Where's our lady?"

"Shann awaits you in the square, Jesstin. We're ready. I join Hakan on the west flank."

Jess clapped her horse's rump in reply, and Vicar cantered off into the trees.

Brenna sensed Jess's urgency to reach Shann, and she more than shared it. The five women moved as quickly as they could toward the square. The odious fog curling about their knees made for uneasy footing.

They found Shann easily. Closely guarded by a small phalanx of warriors, she waited near the roaring bonfire that cast red shadows across the stone altar. She pushed back the hood of her elegant winter robe and smiled when she sighted them.

"Thank you, adanin," Shann touched the back of one of the warriors guarding her. "My family is here now. Please go see to the safety of yours."

Jess issued quiet orders to two of the Amazons as they passed, then nodded respectfully to Shann. "Lady, our lines are well set."

"Of course they are, Jesstin. Nicely done." Shann rose on her toes to kiss Jess's cheek. She looked exhausted to Brenna, but she still managed to exude an unmistakable aura of regality. "Sisters, join me, please."

They moved with Shann to the altar and grouped loosely

around it. Tristaine's labrys rested on the black stone's surface, and Brenna brushed her fingers across one rough blade, a comforting genuflection.

"As our warriors take up arms on their field of battle, we make our stand here." Shann's voice was low, but it reached Brenna clearly. "Call on your Mothers, dear ones, and prepare yourselves for whatever comes."

The square was quieting around them as the last Amazons reached their assigned stations. The slick fog swirled wetly around their knees, and Brenna had to resist the persistent urge to scrub her feet against her calves.

Sammy stepped closer to Brenna. "Who said that?" she whispered.

Brenna looked at her, puzzled.

"Lady? Shann?" Dana's voice was hushed. "Sorry, but shouldn't we be calling in our allies? The Crone and the Mother and the Maiden?"

"They're here, Dana." Shann looked grim. "But they can't materialize until Botesh herself enters this plane."

Brenna touched her sister's wrist. "Who said what, Sammy?"

J'heika, rise.

Brenna froze.

"Who said *that*?" Sammy frowned. "And who's J'heika?"

Brenna couldn't move. Jess threw her a quick look, her expression darkening. She drew her sword.

And the dead came to life around them.

❖

A sinister growl filled the air, like the rending of snarled roots from blasted earth.

"Shann?" Brenna's throat was dry as ash. "She's coming."

Strident whistles broke out almost simultaneously from three different directions. Brenna's blood chilled as she recognized the identical signals of imminent attack. The ripping, groaning sounds resounded through the village, and, close by, Brenna heard a metallic clatter. She stepped back from the altar and pulled Samantha with her. The heavy labrys was vibrating violently, its twin blades beating a rapid-fire tattoo against the ancient rock.

"Sweet Gaia, lady." Kyla's voice was breathless. "The trees!"

Brenna spun, and the breath punched out of her lungs.

The inner ring of uniform trees that encircled the village was encased in a gray light that began to pulse and shimmer. Human figures were emerging through the gnarled bark of each tree. All women—heavily armed Amazon warriors, their bodies convulsing in apparent agony. The tortured moans rose from their fight to wrench themselves free of their dense wood prisons, leaving the trees unscathed. Seeming fully human, the warriors' faces were contorted in pain, their teeth bared in rage, and their eyes utterly insane.

"Jesstin, go." Shann's command came fast and clear. "The rest of you, hold here with me."

"Lady." Jess snapped her sword to point straight at Dana. "Dana, Brenna, you guard our queen's life." She paused on the brink of flight and faced Brenna, and her fingers moved in the subtle twirl that signaled an adonai's love. Then Jess whirled and was gone, the rising fog swallowing her with unsettling abruptness.

The spectral invaders were moving out of the trees now and closing in around the village. That they were Amazon was evident at first sight. The glyphs marking their faces were foreign to Brenna, but she recognized their distinctive weapons, and the cut of their armor was an old guild design.

A harrowing wail rose from the ghost warriors, an ancient battle cry corrupted by their unholy resurrection.

Their bloody screams were met at once by the rising tide of Tristaine's vocal fury, as the cries of Shann's Amazons rang their answering challenge. Brenna alone heard another sound—the monotonous, grieving undertone of an elderly woman's weeping.

Battle broke fast, and it was intense and vicious. The illumination provided by the fire and the eerily luminous fog allowed Brenna to discern shapes, and she followed Jess's streaking form with fierce concentration. Clashes broke out in rapid succession just outside the square, punishing hand-to-hand combat, and the undead Amazons matched Tristaine's warriors in both ferocity and skill.

Jess was everywhere, and for whole minutes at a time Brenna's fear for her surrendered to awe at the brutal grace of her dance. She fought with murderous precision, spinning from one opponent to the next, her sword cutting sizzling arcs. Brenna shuddered as Jess's blade plunged deep into the chest of one phantom enemy, and Samantha clenched her arm.

They watched the ghost-warrior spasm on Jess's sword, her arms splayed, and her eyes rolling whitely toward the night sky. Then the woman's body crumbled to dust, solid bulk melting to powder in less than a second. Jess staggered, thrown by the sudden lack of resistance at the end of her blade. She stepped back from the pile of sand at her boots, stunned, then turned and raced toward her next prey.

"Did you see—?" Samantha stammered.

"Shann!" Brenna peeled Sammy's fingers off her forearm.

"Yes, Brenna, these slaves of Botesh are mortal enough." Shann had both hands on the altar, as if to contain its power. Her calm voice helped steady Brenna through the rising chaos around them. "It seems our ghoul is content to hide behind her slaves. She'll not show her wretched face tonight."

"Lady!" Kyla's screamed warning came almost too late. The ghost-warrior roaring down on their right might have

reached Shann, had Kyla not bolted past her and met the attack herself head-on.

The undead Amazon's dozen braids whipped around her head, and her dark skin gleamed with sweat in spite of the night's chill. She brandished two long daggers, and Brenna's heart almost stopped as Kyla flew at the warrior and tackled her around the waist. Her momentum slammed them both to the ground, but the alien woman recovered quickly, twisting free of Kyla and kneeling for a strike to her unprotected back.

There was a rush of motion at Brenna's side as Dana launched into the air, kicking off the altar for purchase and crashing bodily into the crouching Amazon. The two rolled free of Kyla, who scrambled to her feet, and Shann snatched her back out of harm's way.

Dana's features were fixed in a rictus as she twisted the leather thong of her sling around her enemy's neck. The maniacal light faded slowly from the struggling warrior's face, and in the dying moment before she shriveled to dust beneath Dana's hands, Brenna saw her eyes fill with a pathetic gratitude.

Kyla shook off Shann's concern and ran to kneel beside Dana. "Did she cut you?"

"No." Dana sat back on her heels, staring at her empty hands. Kyla touched her face.

The fighting was well contained outside the perimeter of the square. No other attacker came close to breaching that boundary. War cries blended with clashing steel and the screams of the wounded in the trees beyond them. A distant, spiraling whistle sounded.

"The first wounded are being brought in." Shann had to shout to be heard. "We'll be needed in the healing lodge. It looks like clear passage, sisters, but move with care."

"Shann, I want to join our healers in the field." Brenna's blood thrummed with an urgency to reach Jess. "I'll see you

and Sam safely there."

"No, Brenna, you're with me. Our most gravely injured will be brought to the lodge."

"But, lady—"

"I said you're with me. Dana, hold." Shann caught Dana's arm as she started to lift the double-headed labrys from the altar. "That stays here, adanin. Dyan's blades will seal the lid of this vile creature's tomb." She swept off her white outer robe and wrapped it around a shivering Samantha. "We move, now!"

❖

Her nearly human ears heard the guardian's puling commands. Botesh fought to contain her ravenous fury.

It had been centuries. She could wait for one more dawn and the second rising of Thesmophoria's moon.

She would savor the juices of this woman's liver by its crimson light.

❖

The fog lifted in the fading hours of the night, as did the smoke from a dozen small fires set by thrown torches. The air was clean and clear again, and the sky was lush with stars only beginning to fade in the predawn light.

Brenna sat beside Samantha on a log bench several yards from the healing lodge. The fighting was largely over now. They still heard whistles signaling brief skirmishes at the far reaches of the mesa, but they were few and scattered. The night's battle was decided, and the sun would rise over a victorious Tristaine.

But at a horrendous price. Brenna rested her aching head in her hands and released a shaking sigh. There would

be thirteen funeral pyres to build when this was over, if any in their clan lived to light them. And the final tally wasn't in. Dozens more were terribly wounded. She had never seen such carnage.

Jess had not returned yet.

Beside her, Sammy made a distressed gulping sound, and Brenna sat up and laid a sympathetic hand on her sister's leg. "You need to go again?"

"I might." Sammy swallowed convulsively.

"It's okay. Let fly. Just not on my boots, please."

"No. No." Samantha lifted a hand, her eyes closed. "I'm okay."

Brenna rubbed small circles on Samantha's back. "You sure?"

"Yeah. Just don't burp me."

"Can I get you anything?"

"A cigarette. God, Brenna. I'm sorry I made such a scene."

"Sammy, no. You were amazing. You saw stuff in there that would choke a buzzard, and you hung in there with us all night. You really helped."

"And I threw up," Samantha sighed. "And fainted. Then I woke up and threw up again."

"Sorry, the vomiting's genetic." Brenna checked Sammy's color. She was glad Shann had signaled to take her outside during this lull in casualties. Her own fear and fatigue were receding enough to allow real concern for her sister. Sammy had seen more than the gruesome butchery of combat tonight. The sterile and secular worldview of the City they had grown up in didn't allow for things like Amazon zombies. Brenna could only hope her own ability to absorb the bizarre without losing her sanity ran in the family too.

"Bree?" As if reading her mind, Samantha turned to her with a plaintive look. "Is it always so…*intense* around here?"

A bubble of laughter rose in Brenna's throat and died there.

Jess was walking toward them, weaving slowly through a stand of poplars across from the lodge.

Brenna shot to her feet. Even by fading moonlight, Jess was covered in an appalling amount of gore. But she was upright and mobile and gazing at Brenna with weary relief.

"Jesstin!" Vicar's shout was distant and ragged. "Bloody hell, Jess, stop!"

Jess lifted one blood-streaked arm toward Brenna and dropped to her knees.

Brenna's heart staggered in her chest. She ran hard, but she wasn't fast enough to catch Jess before she crumpled to the ground.

Chapter Ten

Bloody half-wit." Vicar paced the small cabin, her long step marred by a pronounced limp. "She wouldn't stop, lady. I saw the damned cretin take a dozen strikes. She was gushing like a geyser."

"Peace, Vicar."

Brenna appreciated Shann's stern tone. She already had too many faint-inducing images of Jess going down in her mind. She didn't need to add geysers to her nightmares. She helped Shann shake out a thick fur and spread it over their patient, who was still trembling like an aspen.

At least she had Jess home. Tristaine's healing lodge was crowded with wounded warriors, and the less critical cases were being taken to surrounding cabins. Brenna knew Jess would rest more easily here, in the oak bed fashioned by her own hands. And thanks to all the goddesses guiding Tristaine, her injuries didn't require their healers' constant care.

Jess was coming around again now, and Brenna sat on the bed and rested her hand against her bruised face. "Hey."

"Hey," Jess croaked. She started to sit up, and her eyes closed abruptly.

"Whoa, slow down, hotshot." Brenna eased Jess back down and smoothed the warm pelt across her chest. "You're home, Jess."

Jess squinted up at her, and her face softened. "Aye, that I am." She cleared her throat. "How long was I out?"

"It's just after dawn, Jesstin." Shann sat on the bed's

other side. “Can you stay with us a while? I know you’re in pain. We can give you some tea to help you sleep soon. But I need a brief council before we let you rest.”

“I’m able, lady.” Jess drew as deep a breath as her aching sides would allow and pushed herself carefully higher against the cushions behind her. Brenna shifted and slid one arm behind Jess’s neck to support her head. The solid warmth of Jess’s body against her side was a blessed reassurance.

“Bleeding Hera, Jesstin.” Vicar folded her arms and glared at her cousin. “Care to tell me what made you think you had to take out the entire demon horde single-handed?”

“Hush, Vicar, keep your voice down.” Kyla was crouching beside Samantha, tucking her cloak around her sleeping form. Sammy was curled on the floor in front of the wide fieldstone fireplace, and Brenna doubted a shrieking banshee would wake her.

The small cabin Brenna shared with Jess was crowded with women they loved. Dana sat against one wall, watching Kyla with an open longing only exhaustion allowed her to reveal. Shann’s elegant features had aged visibly during the endless night. She rose from the bed and went to Vicar.

“I promise, adanin, to castigate this rash warrior most harshly. But you’ve seen Jesstin safely home, Vicar. I want you to go get that ankle stitched.”

“Wai Li can patch me later, Shann.”

Shann shook her head. “I trust your adonai’s skill with a needle, but go have her patch you now, please. I don’t like your color.”

“We don’t like yer color, Vic,” Jess echoed. She turned her head stiffly on Brenna’s arm. “Go on, Stumpy. You’re bleeding on my clean floor.”

“I hear, lady.” Vic scowled and jerked her chin toward Jess. “But if I see this shrimpy dolt out of her blankets before dusk, I’ll flatten her again myself.”

"I'm there," Dana offered.

"Vicar." Jess's voice gentled. "My thanks. You risked your neck to save mine a dozen times last night."

Vicar shrugged. "Always will." She nodded to Shann and stepped out of the cabin, letting in a brief flood of sunlight. Heavy curtains cast the small room in shadow, illuminated now only by the fire crackling in the hearth.

"Here, Shann. Lady." Dana unwound from her seat on the floor and carried a heavy chair to the side of the bed. "You look a bit wiped. Ma'am."

"Thank you, adanin." Shann accepted Dana's hand and, in spite of her weariness, lowered herself to the polished oak seat as gracefully as if it were a throne. She regarded Jess with clinical concern. "You're still shaking, Jesstin."

"I'm warming fast, lady." Jess's finger shifted beneath the fur and brushed over Brenna's breast, and Brenna smiled into her thick hair.

"But you've taken some punishing strikes." Shann slid the furs down carefully to reveal Jess's battered form, wrapped in several layers of bandages. Brenna closed her eyes, but then made herself match Shann's calm appraisal of her injuries. "Nothing mortal or even disabling, all thanks to our Mothers. But there are some vicious cuts here, and this one—" Her hand hovered over Jess's shoulder. "You've lost a great deal of blood, Jess. And this bruising runs deep." She laid gentle fingers on her lower left side.

"So I'll not rival Kimba's prowess tonight." Jess flexed her right arm. "I can still lift a sword."

"Not for long, dear one." Shann pulled the furs over Jess again. Brenna tried to catch her eye, but Shann avoided her gaze and addressed them all. "Our warriors fought like furies in this opening battle, adanin, and their valor carried us safe to morning. But our numbers are sadly depleted, and the Thesmophorian moon rises again tonight."

"Our enemies were Amazons." Kyla shook her head in bewildered sadness. "Not Tristaine, but part of the Nation. Our sisters, lady."

"They were the spirits of the warriors who lie in the graveyard west of the mesa. The tribe of the stone queen." Brenna shivered, remembering that dry, monotonous sobbing. "I heard her weeping as her clan attacked."

"Dear Goddess." Shann lowered her head. "I can't imagine enduring such grief."

A silence fell, broken only by the crackling of the fire. Kyla went to the hearth and lifted a pot of steaming water off the grate. Their cups held a variety of teas, and a light, pleasant blend of scents reached Brenna as Kyla filled them. Jess had stopped shivering and lay quietly beneath her stroking hand.

"The look on that warrior's face when she died," Dana said finally. She was staring at her hands in the firelight. "Like I was saving her life, not ending it. I think she welcomed death."

Shann nodded, warming her fingers around her mug. "As would any true Amazon compelled to murder her sisters, Dana. The warriors who fought Tristaine last night weren't *hers* any longer, our ancient stone queen. They still are not hers. Their souls belong to Botesh."

"It's why we beat them, Shann." Jess stirred beneath the furs. "The ghost-warriors were nearly our equal in skill, more than equal in numbers. But they fought with ferocity, not passion. They were forced into battle by a loathed demon. Tristaine willingly defended a queen we all cherish."

Shann's eyes shimmered, and she reached down and brushed a lock of Jess's hair off her forehead.

Kyla checked Samantha's sleep, then settled on the floor beside Dana. She lifted her hand into her lap and twined their fingers together.

"Shann." Brenna waited until she finally met her gaze.

"The souls of those warriors were imprisoned in the inner ring of trees that encircle the village. There's still the outer ring. It's much larger."

"Ah, lordy, she's right." Dana rested her head against the wall. "If that outer ring spits out Amazons tonight, there's going to be lots more of them."

"Enough to overwhelm our weakened forces." Shann said this calmly, as if she were not predicting the death of her clan. "That's why we must face Botesh herself at moonrise."

"Lady." Jess slid her scratched hand across the fur and covered Shann's. "It's time you told us your strategy."

Brenna saw Shann's gaze move to Samantha's sleeping face.

"Time and past time, Jesstin, yes. What there is of it." Shann sighed as though a weight were lifting from her shoulders. "You've all been patient with my silence, and I thank you for that. I can tell you this much."

Dana and Kyla both sat slightly straighter against the wall.

"I have heard and heeded the words of my adonai, sisters. I believe they reflect the will of our Goddess. I'm confident Her triad stands ready for Tristaine's defense. Their blended strength will rise tomorrow night when Botesh takes physical form on our mortal plane."

"But how will they fight Botesh, lady?" Jess asked. "What shape will this battle take?"

"Brenna." Shann smiled. "Tell me, why do I keep after you to record the life of our clan in your journal?"

"Because…" Brenna struggled for the right wording. "Because our history can provide a map for our granddaughters. The way Tristaine lives today can guide her descendants."

"Exactly." Shann nodded. "Amazon lives become legend, Jesstin. Our grandmothers have faced similar enemies in our history. Just as the tale of our talented singer warned us

of Botesh, Amazon myth carries clues to her downfall. Kyla… how did Queen Lenea fight the demon-king who threatened her tribe?"

"She conjured a naiad, who skewered the king with an enchanted trident." Kyla blinked, then smiled grimly. "I'd love to see Botesh skewered, lady, on any blade we can wield."

"No more than I, little sister." Shann's eyes glinted briefly with a predatory light. "As for a concise strategy for our next moonlight battle, adanin, I freely admit to having none. I'll trust in our Mothers to guide us when the time comes."

"That's all the assurance we need, Shann." Brenna was relieved to realize she still meant every word. This queen had seen her clan whole through harrowing calamity before, and Tristaine had risen from the dust at the end of the day.

"Thank you, Blades." Shann's tone warmed. "And now, I order a period of much-needed rest, sisters. I'll find my bed too, after I check Hakan's wound."

"Hakan?" Jess lifted herself on her elbows, ignoring Brenna's restraining hand. "Is she badly hurt, lady?"

"She is, Jesstin." Shann's voice softened. "But our sister has the strength of Artemis. She's one of many in my prayers."

Shann stepped quietly to the hearth and looked down at Samantha's sleeping face. Then she lifted her cloak from a peg on the wall and wrapped it around her shoulders. She stopped at the door and turned to Brenna.

"I wanted very much to shield you and Samantha from this danger, Blades. But I'll not be able to keep either of you out of it tonight. We'll need all your courage."

"You'll have it," Brenna promised. "But Shann, what will we—"

"Peace, little sister. You'll know in time." Shann's fingers formed a gentle, twirling shape in the air, a benediction, and then she was gone.

Brenna rested her cheek in Jess's hair and stared at the fire. Samantha was snoring softly, a mild, soporific buzzing Brenna had teased her about throughout their childhood.

Dana nudged Kyla and patted her thigh, and Kyla stretched out and rested her head in her lap. Dana saw Brenna watching them and smiled at her with wistful sweetness, her fingers trailing through Kyla's hair.

Jess let out a sharp breath and tightened suddenly, her eyes closing.

"Here, honey." Brenna braced Jess's head and held a cup to her lips. "Drink the rest of this. It'll help you sleep."

Jess swallowed the tea without protest, which told Brenna much about the pain of her injuries. She set the empty cup aside and stroked her hair, willing her to relax.

"Do we nurture a new seer, Bren?"

"Hm?" Brenna followed Jess's gaze to Samantha, sound asleep near the hearth. She remembered the confusion in her sister's eyes when she asked about *j'heika.* "Oh, lord. I'd forgotten, Jess."

"Did your Sammy show any gift for prophecy growing up, lass?"

"Well, we weren't exactly tested for such things, but no. Neither did I, for that matter."

"Your first visions came when you joined Tristaine?"

"My first visions came when I met you." Brenna kissed the top of Jess's head. "I wonder if this seer thing tends to run in families."

"A talent for queasiness seems to." Jess grinned, and her eyes drifted closed.

"You have to rest, love."

"Tell me the names first, Bren."

"Ah, Jesstin. It can wait. Please, you really need to—"

"I need to hear the names."

So Brenna drew Jess closer, held her with great care, and

began the terrible litany.

"We lost Ayla," she whispered. "And Remy, and Elodia. Raven fell. Perry is gone, and Trenare, and Danai, and Cyrene..."

Jess's tears fell silently and blended with Brenna's. Only when the last fallen warrior was named did they surrender to sleep.

Chapter Eleven

Pounding on the cabin door woke Brenna seemingly seconds later. Jess jerked out of sleep, then gasped and clutched the furs in a white-knuckled grip. Brenna cursed softly and steadied her, trying to clear the cobwebs from her mind.

Dana trotted to the door, scrubbing one hand over her face. She snatched it open, and Brenna was alarmed when no flood of sunlight filled the cabin. Surely it couldn't be much past noon. Kyla and Samantha were both sitting up, looking as groggy and disoriented as she felt.

"Back up, weed." Sarah tapped her walking stick irritably at Dana's legs as she entered, then peered into the cabin's dark interior with a scowl. "Jesstin? You in here?"

"I'm here, grandmother." Jess sat up slowly, waving off Brenna's hand. "Is there—"

"Fog's falling. Moon's rising. Shanendra calls you all to the square." Sarah turned and waved her stick at Dana again to get her out of the way.

"Wait, hold up—ow." Dana hopped back. "Sarah, why's it so dang dark out?"

"Do I look like an oracle?" Sarah growled. "All I know is the sun took it in its mind to set half a day early. I've got three more messages to deliver. Fog's falling, moon's rising, and Shanendra calls you all to the square. Any more impertinent questions?"

"None." Dana looked out the cabin door, shaking her head before closing it after Sarah.

"Easy, Jess." Brenna darted around the bed and took Jess's arm as she pulled herself upright. Jess wavered for a moment, grimacing, then seemed to find her center. She straightened, holding her left side.

"My gear, Bren?"

"Jesstin, listen to sense." Brenna gripped her wrist. "You can hardly stand, much less fight. You can't possibly—"

"My place is at our queen's side, lass." Jess brushed one finger down the side of Brenna's face. "Help me dress, and I'll thank you for it. But I fight tonight, with or without your help."

Brenna held Jess's rough palm to her cheek and tried to quell the burning in her stomach. "If you fight, I'll have your back, Jess. My place is with you."

Jess smiled, then bent her head and kissed her, a languid, sweet exploration of lips and tongue, a fleeting moment of peace before chaos fell.

❖

At first it seemed to Brenna a nightmare replay of the previous evening, running beside Jess through the curdled fog, Amazons streaming in all directions, urgent whistles calling summons to battle. But this night's race held a macabre new element that cast a gruesome glow over Tristaine's mesa. The Thesmophorian moon cresting the horizon was a deep bloodred.

Jess inserted two fingers in her mouth and sent out an ear-piercing trilogy of notes, and Brenna heard it answered from three different sectors seconds later. If Botesh hoped to catch Shann's women flat-footed by somehow hastening the night, her plan was failing. Even depleted, Tristaine's warriors

were highly trained and formidable fighters, and there was no panic in their preparations.

Every woman and child in Tristaine might become a warrior before the night was through, Brenna thought. She and Kyla carried escrima sticks, thin rods made of hard rock maple, nearly two feet long. Wielding them required skill, and Brenna had become adept in their use over the past summer. Even Samantha was armed with a short, stout club for self-defense should the fighting close in. She ran with them silently, almost as pale as Jess.

Jess was moving well, her long stride relaxed and even. She still held her left side, but her breathing came easily, and Brenna marveled again at the healing capacity of Amazon stock.

The silence was getting to her. Except for the light pattering of their feet and the occasional whistled signal, the premature night was quiet as a graveyard. Brenna saw the altar in the distance, long before they entered the square. It seemed to glow with its own malevolence, in resonant harmony with the crimson moon.

If the bloody moonlight embraced the altar as kin, it outlined Tristaine's queen in a more benevolent silhouette. The fog swirled in restless coils around Shann's robes, but she ignored its clammy touch, every line of her body resolute.

As Shann had commanded, the six women were alone in the village square. Jess unleashed another series of whistles as they gathered in its center, and a volley of distant replies came quickly.

"We're in place, Shann." Jess straightened and dropped her hand from her side. "The first wave monitors the outer ring. The second waits a hundred yards farther in."

"And we're the third wave, if need be." Shann's smile was grim. "Pity Botesh if she does regain her humanity tonight. Flesh gives more easily than spirit to Tristaine steel."

Shann's clear voice echoed in the fog-shrouded square, and Brenna felt a thrill of dark anticipation. She had seen this side of Shann before, on the brink of an earlier battle, when Tristaine was threatened by Caster. She was healer, teacher, and much more, but tonight, Shann was once again a blood-tested queen of warrior women, and any victory Botesh might eke out would be dearly won.

"Hear me, adanin." Shann walked before them, meeting the eyes of each woman as she passed. "Our sisters cry out from their graves for justice. Tonight we end the reign of a traitorous queen whose hands are drenched in centuries of Amazon blood."

A low tapping sound reached Brenna, and she was afraid her trip-hammering heart was audible in the silence of the square. But then she recognized the source of the metallic clatter. Dyan's labrys still lay on the altar's surface, and its blades were vibrating again against the black rock. The heavy weapon quivered with power, as if holding back a furious force determined to break free.

Shann reacted at once, her robes swirling as she went to the altar. A cry formed and died in Brenna's throat as Shann gripped the labrys in both hands and lifted it, stilling its tremors.

"Lady, listen!" Jess drew her sword from its scabbard, and Dana mirrored her action. Kyla stepped protectively closer to Samantha, the escrima wands braced and ready in her hands. Sammy looked around wildly, her club hovering over her shoulder like a baseball bat.

Brenna heard it then, and her heartbeat ratcheted higher. That terrible low moaning, repellant at a visceral level. The outer ring of trees that encircled Tristaine was too far distant to see from the square, but Brenna didn't need her eyes. The far-off, guttural groaning meant the bark of each tree had begun to shimmer with that ghastly gray light. It was the first sign of

the emergence of the ghost-warriors.

Jess was poised and ready for flight. "Shann, send me on."

"Not tonight, Jesstin. We'll need your protection here." Shann carried the labrys around the altar and walked back to them. "Keep them off us, Jess, as long as you possibly can."

"Lady—"

"And have more faith in your warrior-sisters, Jesstin. Remember, our enemies are forced into battle by a loathed demon." Shann stopped in front of Brenna and held the labrys out to her. "Tristaine's warriors fight willingly to defend a queen we all cherish."

Brenna looked at her, then at the labrys, then at Shann again. "Oh, no. No, you don't. You're not giving me that. Don't you pull this queen stuff on me now, Shanendra. I'm entirely serious."

"Tristaine's sacred blades are too heavy for me to carry alone tonight, little sister." Shann's eyes were compassionate. "And they are your birthright. You're simply going to have to suck it up."

Shann dropped the labrys, and Brenna's hands shot out to catch it before it touched the ground. She tried to mumble further protest, but Shann turned abruptly to the altar.

"Botesh!" Shann's voice was sharp as a whiplash, cutting through the distant moaning. "Blight on the Nation, I invoke you!"

"She's *invoking* her?" Dana was turning to keep the square in view, her sword held ready. "What the hell do we do if she *answers*?"

"She'll answer. She has to." Brenna hefted the labrys in her hands, glaring holes in Shann's back. "Undead or not, Botesh is Amazon. She can't ignore the direct command of another Amazon queen. A *real* queen!" she yelled to Shann.

The wretched groaning was growing louder. Brenna's

inner eye focused on the largest ring of trees again and the twisted shapes beginning to emerge from the gnarled trunks.

"I compel you, demon, rise!" Shann cried.

The top of the altar cracked with a thunderous concussion so jarring Samantha dropped her club and clapped her hands to her ears. A jagged line streaked down the center of the altar's stone surface, and from its depths Botesh rose.

At first the ghost-queen was more sound than anything visible. Botesh manifested as an innocuous tendril of smoke weaving above the altar, ephemeral, saturated with red moonlight. But the sounds that rose with the fiend's spirit revealed her nature more vividly than a hideous appearance could. Brenna heard the terrified screams of hundreds of women issuing from the cracked altar, and she nearly dropped the labrys in shock. These heartrending cries were a sound Botesh carried with her as a gangrenous wound carried a stench.

Brenna heard whistles from the outer reaches of the mesa, signaling imminent attack.

"Who should I thank for allowing me to witness your bloody deaths?"

Brenna saw Jess raise her sword as the sibilant voice whispered from the stream of smoke, and she was grateful that at least they all heard it. The opening remarks of their unwelcome guest didn't lend much hope for diplomacy, but that had never really been an option. Tristaine didn't bargain with murderers forever banished from Gaia's light.

"Don't count your scalps too soon, putrescent queen." Shann stood almost casually, with her hands clasped behind her. Her words were etched in acid, but a small smile played over her lips. "You have no idea who you're dealing with."

"Oh, I'll savor your screams, old woman." Something horribly like laughter shuddered through the smoke. "Your death throes will be like a thousand tongues on my sex."

War cries, both mortal and inhuman, broke out all over the mesa, and Brenna's blood chilled. The fighting was on in earnest.

"The slaughter begins." The red smoke wavered for an instant into a recognizably female form, then dissolved again. "You'll be butchered by the finest Amazon army that ever marched, doomed hag. I have collected my warriors from all over the world, and they are unstoppable."

"Those same warriors beg for a death they prefer to serving you, corruption."

The harrowing screams that flowed from Botesh's presence flared, as if to answer Shann's claim. The fear in those cries shook Brenna badly and made it difficult to think.

"I'll bathe in the blood of you and your Kores by dawn, Shanendra. And I'll take a small sample now."

"Shann!"

Brenna heard Jess's warning cry, but Botesh struck before any of them could act. A dart of smoke shot from the undulating stream and struck Shann full in the chest. She flew off her feet and landed hard, breaking Brenna's paralysis. Brenna ran to the fallen queen, just as Jess bolted past them.

Jess's sword carved through the column of smoke with savage power but had no effect on the nebulous spirit. Jess backed up a step and assumed a defensive stance between Shann and the demon who hovered above the altar.

"Is it bad, Bree?" Samantha dropped to her knees at Shann's other side and helped Brenna raise her to a sitting position. Her eyes were half-open but unfocused.

"Shann, you've had the breath knocked out of you." Brenna's hands were gentle as she opened the top of Shann's robe. She spoke as if the still woman could hear her. "It's a surface wound, lady. There's no vital damage."

The adrenaline pumping through Brenna's veins subsided enough to allow a moment of relief. Botesh's weapon

had scored three deep scratches across the top of Shann's left breast, an inch from her heart. They bled sluggishly, but hadn't penetrated deeply enough to threaten her life. She was regaining her senses now, and Brenna saw her breathing ease into a pattern designed to both calm and strengthen the heart.

"Your blood christens the dawn of my new reign, Shanendra." The column of smoke flexed, and drops of red fell from it to spatter on the cracked surface of the altar below. Steam rose where the blood splashed on stone. "Your warriors have begun to die again. I welcome them to the ranks of my screaming disciples. They will make my army truly invincible."

"Jesstin!" Dana paused as a strident whistle split the night, rising above the bloodcurdling war cries in the forest. "Our first line is falling back!"

The fighting was getting closer, the ghost-warriors closing in on the square. Brenna could hear the clash of steel on steel now, and the terrible screams of horses.

"Brenna." Shann closed her eyes for a long moment, and when they opened they were clear and shining. She studied Brenna's face and Samantha's. "I wanted to spare you both this trial, dear ones. But it's time for you to remember."

Brenna felt a chill course through her. "Okay. Remember what?"

"Joanna." Shann slid one hand beneath Samantha's hair to cup her neck. "Rebecca." Her other hand warmed Brenna's neck. "It's time for you to remember me."

Sammy looked as mystified as Brenna felt.

"This butcher called you my Kores." Shann shot a contemptuous glance toward the altar. "Who is Kore, Brenna?"

"Kore is another name for Persephone." Brenna answered automatically. "Demeter's daughter…"

She felt the light warmth of Shann's hand cradling her

neck, and her throat constricted. Some deep part of her, long since scarred over, remembered this touch in a new way. Her cellular memory summoned the feel of this woman's hand holding her much smaller one and the image of Shann's younger face, smiling above her. She had filled her sky once.

Brenna looked at Sammy and saw the same blend of confusion and recognition dawning on her face.

Shann's hand slid from Brenna's neck to cup her face. "You were both taken from me soon after Joanna's birth. It's that loss that drove me to Tristaine, Brenna."

Dana let out a piercing whistle. "Jess, right flank!"

One of Botesh's undead warriors had broken through the trees and was racing for the square. She was an enormous Amazon, dressed in an alien tangle of furs and leather, and outlined in a sick green light. Spittle flew from her clenched teeth as she raised her battle axe, and Brenna could see she was targeting directly on Shann.

"Back off, bruja!" Jess clasped the hilt of her sword in both hands and was at full speed within three strides. She charged directly into the screaming warrior's path and engaged her in a sparking strike of steel.

"Brenna. Look at me." Shann gripped her chin in strong fingers, forcing Brenna's attention away from Jess. "There's no time. Pick up the labrys."

"Brenna!" Samantha sounded scared. She pointed to the other end of the square, where two more ghost-warriors emerged from the trees. Dana and Kyla were off like a shot to head them off.

"The labrys, Brenna!" Shann commanded.

Brenna looked around, dazed, and saw Dyan's ancient weapon on the ground a few feet away. She had dropped it there in her haste to get to Shann. She stretched out and grabbed it and pulled it into her lap.

"Samantha. Your hand, please." Shann positioned

Sammy's fingers on the head of the two-bladed axe. "Brenna, keep your grip on the hilt of our deliverer."

Brenna was shaking hard. Her heart and soul were with Jess, twenty yards away, alone and battling a growing weakness. The undead warrior she fought was still striving with ghoulish determination to reach Shann. But the compelling urgency in Shann's voice kept Brenna focused on the leather-wrapped hilt, her fingers curling around it with desperate strength.

Shann's hand hovered over the midsection of the labrys, then settled around it and held on. Brenna felt an instant pulse of power that was nearly painful, an electric current shooting through her blood. Kneeling across from her, Samantha flinched, too, but kept her hand on the cold blade.

Music. As naturally as screams accompanied Botesh, a strange, thrumming harmony flowed from the labrys, once galvanized by the joining of the Crone, the Mother, and the Maiden. A gold light seeped from it, bathing them in a soft glow.

"Only an Amazon queen, an equally powerful light matched to her darkness, can vanquish this evil." Brenna heard Dyan's voice.

The ethereal light filling the labrys brightened, glowing red through the three hands that touched it. Brenna looked at Shann's face and into the eyes of the Crone. Superimposed over Shann's features was the weathered visage of an old woman, patience and wisdom shining in her gaze.

Brenna turned to Samantha and saw her pale and worried expression strengthened by the mature, protective countenance of the Mother. Brenna touched her own face and knew the fresh innocence of the Maiden looked out at the world through her eyes.

The music of the labrys grew rich and full, empowered by the joining of these three aspects of the Goddess.

Brenna heard another woman speak, her tone deep and

resonant. "*When Tristaine is in deepest tribulation, She will be led by three generations of blood-bonded queens."*

And yet another Woman spoke in Brenna's mind, and hers alone. Not Dyan or Shann or Jess or any other earthly advisor, but the Voice that always offered this challenge.

J'heika, rise.

Brenna decided to take Her literally. She rose in one smooth movement, carrying the glowing labrys with her. In this world, it had always been a rugged axe made of wood and steel. Now it was much more, a deadly weapon charged with the blended energies of three faces of the Goddess, three Amazons of royal blood.

Brenna stalked toward the altar, growing more furious with every heartbeat. The square was filling with battling warriors now, both Botesh's damned and Tristaine's fighters, and the noise was hideous. But Brenna's ear was tuned to the strange aria of the labrys, and she faced Botesh without flinching.

The broad flat stone that served as the altar's surface had canted to one side when the vile essence of the malignant spirit burst from its depths. The glyphs etched into the rock glittered in the red moonlight, and one in particular gleamed brightest.

The drops of Shann's blood had carved a new sigil on the craggy plate. Seven drops, in a configuration at once so beloved and familiar to Brenna, and so shocking in this profane context, it almost brought her to her knees. It was the Seven Sisters, Tristaine's star clan—and Botesh's diabolical claim of ownership.

"Greetings, young queen," the sibilant voice purred above her. "Your nubile loveliness is wasted among these barbarians. I will make you my personal bed slave when I regain form. You will watch my own hand squeeze the life from this hag's frail neck."

"You will shut up," Brenna said calmly. "And you will

keep your putrid claws off my *mother*, *bitch!*"

The labrys swung up, its music flaring. Then Brenna brought it down with immense power on the altar's cracked surface.

The stone block imploded with a titanic shock. Shards of black rock ricocheted crazily, and the scarlet cloud that was Botesh spasmed higher into the air.

In the next second, in the void created when the altar crumbled, an Amazon Warrior stood.

She was easily ten feet tall, entirely solid and definitely real. Gleaming ebony skin, powerfully muscled, shielded by armor, a broadsword sheathed on her back. The woman regarded Brenna silently.

Brenna took a step back, still clenching the labrys in her frozen hands. If this behemoth belonged to Botesh…and then Shann appeared beside her and spoke to the warrior.

"Well met, Kimba. Welcome home."

Brenna's jaw dropped, and all she could do for a moment was mouth the name and stare.

Kimba's glittering eyes moved to Samantha, who stepped numbly up between Shann and Brenna.

Tristaine's first and greatest warrior took a step forward and dropped to one knee before the Crone, the Mother, and the Maiden. Her dark head, curtained with tight black braids bound with chips of ivory and bone, dipped in respect.

Then Kimba rose, unsheathed her sword, and let loose a war cry that blew Brenna's hair back like a fierce wind. Obsidian eyes flashed with blood lust, and powerful legs propelled the huge warrior fast into the square and the thick of the fighting.

"Shann!"

Brenna spun as a frantic voice called from the edge of the square. The roiling fog obscured detail, but she could see a distant figure waving her arms.

"Lady, we have injured!"

"I'll come, adanin!" Shann turned to Brenna and clasped her shoulders.

"I'll see to our most seriously wounded, Brenna, and return as soon as I can. Look after your sister." Brenna nodded dumbly, dazed all over again by the realization that this woman's blood coursed through her veins.

"Soon we'll have a nice talk." Shann smiled, gave Brenna a swift kiss on the forehead, and moved quickly toward the edge of the square.

"Uh, Bree? Brenna?" Samantha plucked her sleeve. She was staring at the burned patch of ground that marked the altar's outline. There was a great roiling in the darkness of that hole; then, even as Brenna watched, another spectral Amazon fighter emerged from its depths. A third followed close behind, leading what became a steady stream of Tristaine's lost warriors.

"It's all right, Sammy." Brenna lifted an arm around Samantha's trembling shoulders. "They're ours."

She knew there would be time to teach Sammy all their names later, when the survivors of this battle recounted its marvels before storyfires. Brenna recognized most of these warriors by the vivid descriptions that were part of Amazon folklore. These were fighters out of Tristaine history and legend.

Ikarias, trained by Kimba herself, who liberated her tribe from its patriarchal oppressors. Trenare, who appeared with her adanin Barkida and Klymene, a trio of deadly archers who rescued a queen held captive in the City. Cerdryn, who perfected the clan's unique brand of hand-to-hand fighting.

More warriors came surging out of the earth, their armor and gear evolving from primitive to more recent cuts. Brenna counted fifty at least, hypnotized by the brutally armed parade.

She became aware of a pervasive buzzing sound and realized it was coming from the fluttering cloud that was Botesh, still hovering above the destroyed altar. The insectile hiss had replaced any power of speech she commanded.

And the quality of the spirit-women's screams that rose with Botesh was changing. Their fear was becoming fury. Despairing cries of terror were growing stronger, turning into a full-throated roar for justice.

"What's happening, Bree?" Samantha was trying for composure, but there was a definite quaver in her voice.

"We've called in our third wave." Brenna craned to see Jess through the fog and dust kicked up by the several skirmishes that had broken out in the square. She couldn't find her, and her heart pounded against her ribs in slow, leaden thuds.

"Is that her?"

"Who, Sam?"

"*Her!"*

Dyan was striding toward them, towering and magnificent. She stood with her massive fists on her hips, her dark eyes on Brenna. She stretched out one hand. "I'm here for what's mine, lass."

The labrys quivered on the ground by Brenna's foot, then shot aloft and sailed to Dyan's waiting grip. She fingered a chip in one gleaming blade, and her lip curled in outrage. "I'm not believin' ye chipped my axe!"

"I'm not believing you pushed me off a *cliff,*" Brenna retorted.

Dyan grinned, a stunning flash of white teeth. "See to my lady's protection, Brenna."

"Dyan, please. See to mine."

"Jesstin." Dyan spoke the name with great affection, and then she was gone.

The square was bedlam, with deadly clashes every few

yards, leaving writhing bodies in their wake. More and more of those corpses crumbled to dust under Tristaine's growing power.

Tears rose in Brenna's eyes as other familiar faces began to emerge from the black altar's grave.

Myrine, Jess's close friend, who had stayed behind to ensure Caster's death when the flood drowned their valley last year. Theryn, who redeemed her honor by dying beside Myrine in Tristaine's defense.

And Camryn, streaking back into the world, pure Amazon pride incarnate, flush with the ancient honor of raising arms to protect her queen. Sirius, restored and whole. And then Ayla, Remy, and others lost to Tristaine only last night.

Breathless, Brenna scanned the trees where she'd last seen Jess. For a few terrifying minutes, she couldn't find her. The red moonlight ignited the boiling fog around her knees into a scarlet soup, and the trees were a chaos of fighting women.

The tide was turning quickly for Tristaine. Even as her living warriors flagged, her army of immortals overwhelmed Botesh's dispirited forces. Again and again, Brenna saw that poignant gratitude on the faces of the dying ghost-warriors.

Across the square, Kimba took out two undead Amazons with one harrowing swing of her sword. Closer by, Dana and Kyla, apparently unhurt, fought side by side with Camryn against a faltering trio of opponents.

The harsh snap of static buzzed loudly in Brenna's ears, a raw, ugly sound. She turned back to the shattered altar and the almost-forgotten specter that still hovered above it. The twisting tendril of smoke that was Botesh flickered like a sinister shroud in a fierce gale. She was the source of the hissing crackle that filled Brenna's mind, the same cacophony that provided the dissonant background of her first vision.

Even as Brenna watched, the mist above the altar drifted and diffused, then began to form again. A vaguely feminine

figure materialized, suffused with a murky scarlet light. In her physical incarnation, Botesh's body held womanly contours and all the grace and allure of a bristling tarantula.

"Samantha!" Brenna was unable to take her eyes from the burgeoning shape of the Amazon sorceress. Samantha's hand clasped hers, and Brenna held on tight.

The face of Botesh was forming now. Brenna felt Samantha sag beside her as she absorbed one horror too many, and she slid a firm arm around her waist. The hatred blazing from Botesh's features felt like the dry skittering of that tarantula across a sweat-soaked back.

The powerful figure of Botesh rose higher in the air. She appeared only marginally human. The skin of the undead queen was armored with small interconnected scales, and her jaws widened to expose multiple rows of wickedly sharp fangs. Brenna learned there were worse things than the horror of Botesh's eyes—like the guttural, rasping fury of her reborn voice.

"Harlot queen!" Botesh lifted a broadsword as long as Brenna was tall and swung it around her head.

Brenna realized the half-demon was not targeting her and Samantha. She whirled and saw her intended victim. Shann was running, but she had not yet reached the center of the village square. She was nowhere near any cover, and none of Tristaine's warriors were close enough to defend her. Brenna screamed Shann's name in warning, but her voice was drowned out by the ear-splitting shriek Botesh released as she attacked.

Shann saw the raving queen streaking toward her, and she stood still, her body braced and centered.

Samantha gasped and pulled hard on Brenna's shoulder, forcing her down. Brenna looked up just in time to see two other figures in full flight above them.

Dyan's fist was snarled in the torn leather of Jess's

collar, hauling her bodily through space with her. In midair, they thudded in tandem against the very solid back of their adversary, and Botesh dropped under their joined fury like a raving beast brought down by dogs.

The impact of their landing scattered the rancid fog still carpeting the village square. Botesh's newly human form held the same size and power Dyan commanded in this world, and she jumped immediately to her feet.

Dyan and Jess fought together like the two lifelong friends and sisters in arms they were, each mirroring the other's deadly thrusts. The beauty of their brutal dance all but hypnotized Brenna, but they fought a formidable enemy.

Botesh injected centuries of repressed wrath into every wide swing of her sword, and the hissing static emanating from her scarlet skin made it difficult to focus. She seemed tireless, spinning to parry every blow from Jess's sword and Dyan's double-headed axe.

Part of Brenna watched Shann as she circled the fierce battle toward her and Samantha, her eyes riveted on Dyan. Brenna grabbed Shann's hand as she reached them and pulled her close, encircling her with one arm and Samantha with the other.

J'heika, rise.

Samantha didn't seem to hear the challenge this time, but it rang clearly in Brenna's mind. *"I'll trust in our Mothers to guide us when the time comes,"* Shann's silent voice repeated, and that guidance was there. Brenna knew immediately what she had to do.

"Dyan!" Brenna roared, with a force that stripped her throat raw, and she held out one hand. "Tristaine's blade!"

Dyan spun at the command and faced Brenna, and she, too, obeyed immediately. Her labrys left her grip and sailed through the air in a gentle arc, and its hilt smacked into Brenna's open palm.

Brenna balanced the axe in both hands and looked at Shann. Shann smiled down at Brenna with pure pride and touched the hilt. At Brenna's nod, Samantha rested her fingers on one of the labrys's gleaming blades.

Brenna clenched her jaw as the shock of power coursed through her body again, reuniting her with her mother on one side and her sister on the other. The labrys, regenerated by the combined energies of the Crone, Mother, and Maiden, sparked again with divine light.

"Jesstin!" Brenna bellowed.

Jess, fighting solo now, was hard-pressed to fend off Botesh's ruthless advance. She finally twisted free and dodged past her opponent, then whirled to see Brenna.

Brenna took the labrys in both hands and hurled it to Jess, praying fervently to her Mothers or Grandmothers or anyone else who could possibly guide her often errant aim.

Which was perfect. Jess dropped her sword, surged up, and snatched the glowing labrys out of the air, spinning before her boots hit the earth. She braced herself and snarled into Botesh's frothing face.

"Your granddaughters will mock your grave, Amazon."

It was the worst fate imaginable in their Nation.

Jess swung the shining labrys with all the power she had, and one curved blade punched deeply into Botesh's chest.

The effect was immediate and gruesome in the extreme. Botesh exploded in a torrent of foul-smelling blood, so copious it seemed her human form held no viscera, no bones, just an appalling flood of crimson. Jess and Dyan were both liberally spattered, and they staggered back.

The hideous static filling the square went silent, so abruptly the sudden lack of chaos was disorienting in itself.

Brenna drew a series of quick, deep breaths, fighting off a surge of light-headedness. She felt Shann leave her side, and she turned to Samantha.

"Sammy, I want you to sit down."

"Okay." Samantha folded her legs and plunked down immediately. Brenna knew she had seen enough. Her nerves had to be flash-fried.

She patted her sister's head, then ran past her. The square was filling again with Tristaine's warriors, cheering raggedly. What was left of Botesh's Amazon army had disintegrated en masse with her last sulfuric breath. Brenna sighted Jess and arrowed straight for her. She had dropped to the ground in exhaustion, but was already sitting up when Brenna fell to her knees beside her.

"Jesstin—"

"Bent," Jess gasped. "Not broken." She lifted a hand to forestall any other questions until she could catch her breath. Brenna braced her until she was reasonably sure she could stay upright.

"Sit still." Brenna whipped off her linen sash and folded it, then pressed it against the deep, seeping cut across Jess's shoulder. "You wrecked all my good stitchery, ace."

"Doesn't hurt."

"Macha crap, this doesn't hurt." She checked her pulse, then pulled the torn and bloody topshirt aside to examine her ribs.

"I'm just spent, Bren." Jess still struggled to draw an even breath.

Brenna ripped a strip of fabric from her topshirt and bound Jess's lower leg. "I remember ordering you not to lose any more blood."

"The night's ending, Brenna."

Jess was right. The trees were taking on that whispered illumination that came before the first hint of dawn. The red moon was less florid now, its malignant light weaker. The false night Botesh had summoned was giving way to first light.

"Come here. Let's get you warm." Brenna shifted

behind Jess so she could lean back into her arms. The move was strategic. Jess really did need her body heat. Both of them needed the physical contact. But Brenna also wanted a private moment to let her feelings play across her face, without worrying Jess. They were both shaking, Jess obviously with cold and shock, and Brenna with profound relief.

The extinction of the villainous queen had freed the souls of the warriors she had imprisoned in Tristaine's trees. Brenna held Jess and watched an amazing light show unfold. Streams of individual glowing sparks were ascending into the night sky in two separate directions. One stream arced toward the north and the star system those Amazons called home.

"Those are the spirits of the stone queen's clan." Brenna pointed to the other river of sparks, spinning eastward toward their own constellation. "And those are the souls of Botesh's tribe. It looks like Tristaine freed three clans tonight."

"How do you know all that?" Jess squinted at the same sparks. "I'm seeing pretty little lights."

"You want me to be a seer? Hush and let me see."

"Yes'm."

Tristaine's own immortal warriors were leaving now, returning home. They were a stream of brilliant silver lights, spiraling slowly up toward the Seven Sisters, still faintly visible overhead. There were several figures—Tristaine's most recent fallen—who lingered for a last farewell. In the distance, Brenna saw Camryn's glowing form standing close to Kyla.

Nearby, Dyan and Shann spoke quietly, inches apart. Dyan's larger figure loomed over Shann, but the exquisite tenderness between them was unmistakable. Brenna could see Shann's eyes, and they glowed with a profound joy. The words exchanged by these adonai were for their ears alone.

Finally, Dyan turned and walked toward Brenna and Jess. She put her hands on her hips and grinned down at them with fond pride. "I've come to give ye what's yours, Jesstin."

Jess had dropped the black labrys after it pierced Botesh's gory heart. Dyan gestured, and the two-headed axe rose from the ground and drifted lazily to Jess's open hands. Her fingers closed around the hilt, and Brenna felt tears rising in her eyes.

"You and I are champions of Amazon queens, adanin." Dyan nodded toward Brenna. "Serve your lady well."

"With my life, teacher." Jess answered with a title considered a high honorific in Tristaine.

Dyan sketched a blessing in the air and was gone.

Jess relaxed in Brenna's arms like a tired child, and she cradled her like one. That Jess would allow such a public display of weakness told Brenna all she needed to know about her exhaustion. She had to get her to the healing lodge soon, and there would be urgent need for her own skills there.

But for now, in this brief lull between battle and rebirth, Brenna and Jess held each other and watched the sun rise.

Chapter Twelve

Six days later

Brenna clenched her teeth against the vicious sting and counted backward from ten.

"The needle does smart a bit," Jess had said. Jess had said *lots* of things since Brenna met her. She ruled supreme in the abyss-is-ditch, mountains-are-hills, Amazon art of understatement.

Between the fiery jabs, Brenna released a deep breath and searched for distraction, something to focus on other than the burning at the base of her throat. She closed her eyes and thought of her father. Shann's low voice filled her mind again, telling her two daughters the story of her first love.

"His name was David, and he was a good man." The fire-light played over Shann's fine features. Brenna and Samantha sat on cushioned chairs in her private cabin, warmed by the crackling fire in the hearth. Jess stood close by, listening, her arms folded. She had healed well in the days since the final battle.

"David and I fought in the same cell of the Resistance," Shann continued, "before the City Government hunted down and destroyed its leaders. We had two daughters before David was murdered and I was imprisoned. I was told my children died in the same explosion that killed my husband. They released me after four years in Prison, and I was exiled from the City."

Shann fell silent, gazing at her hands folded in her lap.

"And how did you find Tristaine?" Brenna asked gently. She didn't want to interrupt the flow of this sad history.

"Tristaine found me." Shann looked up and smiled at them. "Dyan and several of our sisters came across my sorry self, lying unconscious in a ravine high in the foothills. I'd been wandering for days, perhaps weeks. There were rumors of settlements in the mountains, and I had some vague notion of finding one. I'd passed out from hunger, and it's a simple miracle Dyan's patrol discovered me. The first of many miracles."

Shann lifted a kettle from a grate near the hearth and refilled their mugs with steaming cider. "My Dyan was a miracle in herself. I never dreamed I'd find love again. Certainly not that love, that powerful, bone-deep sense of rightness and belonging I felt in Dyan's arms. So my Mothers delivered me to my destiny with this clan, this family of Amazons, and the lifemate They always intended for me. And I never went back."

Shann put down the kettle, rose from her chair, and went to the window. "I believed what the City told me, and I never went back for my daughters. I've suspected our bond almost as long as I've known you, Brenna. I was too much of a coward to tell you earlier."

Brenna cleared her throat. "Why a coward?"

"I didn't want to admit to either of us that I'm a mother who abandoned her children."

"Lady," Jess said quietly, "you didn't know."

"I didn't question." Shann raked her fingers slowly through her hair. "I had better reason than most to suspect the City's duplicity, Jesstin, yet I accepted their death sentences as blind fact."

"When I heard your voice emerge from the stone queen, Shann," Brenna said, "you told me you were sorry."

"I have no conscious memory of those words, dear one, but I can validate the message. My heart has been saying something very like that to you, and your sister, for twenty years."

"And when I gave you Dyan's instructions for fighting Botesh?" Brenna asked. "I saw your face, Shann. You looked scared."

"Terrified," Shann confirmed. "Just when I'd discovered you both, when I finally had you and Samantha back, safe and whole—Dyan tells me I must expose my daughters to hideous danger. In order to embody the three faces of the Goddess, I knew the three of us must face the maw of Botesh herself. My protectiveness made me secretive and deaf even to the counsel of my wisest advisors." Shann rested her hand against Jess's face for a moment.

"I'm sorry you went through so much." Samantha's inherent kindness warmed her voice. "But why are you so sure about us? When did you know?"

"I first suspected when Brenna heard an immortal voice address her as 'j'heika,' Samantha." Shann smiled and returned to her chair by the hearth. "It's an honorific, an old Amazon word for queen. That's how I learned Brenna would inherit my crown."

"Which still has not been decided," Brenna put in. "Or in any way agreed to, Sammy."

"Hey, better you than me." Samantha nudged Brenna. "I heard that 'j'heika' thing too."

"Yes, Sam," Shann said. "Your hearing that title confirmed my hopes. You and Brenna are both of the royal line."

"But, Shann…" Brenna's head was starting to hurt, and Jess stood behind her and rested her hands on her shoulders. "What royal line? I thought Tristaine's queens were chosen. You were. The crown doesn't pass from mother to daughter."

"Except in times of Tristaine's greatest travail." Shann leaned forward and took Brenna's hand. "Think back, Blades. Remember the scrolls of our Mothers and the promise Artemis made our clan."

"Artemis..." Brenna frowned.

"When Tristaine is in deepest tribulation…"

"She will be led by three generations of blood-bonded queens," Jess recited. Brenna mouthed the words with her, remembering that spectral voice.

"Thank you, Jesstin." Shann smiled at her second. "This century presents tremendous challenge to our sisters. Artemis keeps Her word, adanin. I believe our reunion is goddess-sent."

"Shann. Wait." Brenna felt a bit dazed. "You're queen. And I'm your daughter. And you think I'm supposed to rule Tristaine after you. I'm still trying to wrap my head around that much, mind you. Now you're talking about a granddaughter. This is some future kid? A child Sammy or I might have?"

"Perhaps, Bren." Shann's gaze was on Samantha.

Samantha's face lost all expression. "My baby is dead, Shann."

"Brenna was told you were dead, Samantha. And I believed it of you both."

"And we're finished, Brenna."

Vona straightened and stepped back to examine the vibrant colors of the design etched at the base of Brenna's throat. The older woman's face was a fine webwork of wrinkles and laugh lines that deepened with her smile. "I hope you'll be pleased, honey."

"How could I not be?" Brenna stepped down from the high stool she had perched upon the last three hours, wincing at the stiffness in one hip. "You've drawn our clan's glyphs for forty years, grandmother."

"And no two alike." Vona's nimble fingers corked small vials of ink. "By the sound of things, they're almost ready for you out there, dear. Go on. See what your handsome adonai thinks of your sigil."

Brenna kissed Vona's cheek, then ducked out of the tent into the frosty night air.

The square was thronging with Amazons just beginning to settle into place for the covenant ceremony. It was the first time Tristaine had assembled in full since lighting the funeral pyres for her fallen warriors. Nineteen lost in all, a stunning toll. Tonight was the clan's first step out of grieving, a time to celebrate their salvation.

Six festive bonfires burned at intervals around the square, illuminating their gathering in a warm gold light. Brenna searched the crowd for Hakan and saw her resting against her wife's shoulder, cloaked in heavy furs. Shann had fought for Hakan's life over a series of three nights and only today released her from the healing lodge.

Samantha's light hair made her easier to spot. She sat with Vicar and Wai Li, cradling their son on her lap.

"That hurt like a sumbitch." Dana pulled her collar open and peered at the top of her shoulder. Her own glyph had been drawn just before Brenna's.

"Thank you." Brenna fanned her throat ruefully. "Repeat that in Jess's hearing, please. You ready for this, Dana?"

"Sure." Dana grinned down at her. "Couldn't be much spookier than wrangling with Botesh."

They strolled together toward the square. Shann stood in the center of the open space, near the blasted patch of ground that once had held the black altar. It was a benign and featureless plot now, a charred scar in the earth that bore no trace of menace. Tristaine's artisans were preparing a stone monument bearing the names of their dead to sanctify the spot.

Brenna listened to the musical blend of hundreds of women's voices that filled the air with a benevolent murmur. Laughter appeared and faded like patches of sunlight in the crowd. Shann received the greetings and blessings of several Amazons before they sat on blankets and furs around the square. As if feeling her gaze, Shann turned toward Brenna and sent her a small, private smile.

Brenna smiled back. Shann had always evoked deep feelings in her, but now they were harder to classify. Brenna had never held illusions about her parentage. She was forced into adulthood so quickly, she'd had no time to romanticize a phantom mother and had little frame of reference for that bond now. Shann wasn't pushing her. She'd made it clear to both Brenna and Samantha that her door was open and her hearth kindled at all times.

Jess's reaction had infuriated her.

"Ah, makes sense?" Brenna repeated. "That's all you have to say?"

"Aye."

"Jesstin. What part of Shann, Queen of Tristaine, being my long-lost mother makes anything resembling sense to you?"

"I thought Shann had the most beautiful smile in the world, until I met you." Jess traced the curve of Brenna's lips with one finger. "You have our lady's light."

"I have our lady's DNA." Brenna perched her chin on Jess's sternum and contemplated the embers in the fireplace. The red glow was their small cabin's only illumination. "And I have a name for my father, Jess."

"That you do."

"Shann doesn't have any pictures of him. I wonder if seeing his face would tell me anything about his personality."

"You already know his heart, querida." Jess stroked

Brenna's hair. "Your David earned the love of the wisest woman we know. He fathered two fine daughters. And he'd be richly proud of his eldest, Brenna."

"Jess." Brenna was touched. "Thank you." She kissed the swell of Jess's shoulder.

"Your hand unleashed Tristaine's power, Bren. You've earned the gratitude of the entire clan. And I'm learning, finally, to share you with my sisters."

"Jesstin." Brenna lifted herself on one elbow and peered down at Jess's firelit face. "What are you talking about?"

"You came to Tristaine as my adonai, lass." Jess lifted Brenna's hand and fingered the silver bracelet encircling her wrist. "You've grown into a true Amazon in your own right. It's time you chose your glyph."

Brenna felt that truth resonate in her gut, and warmth spread through her in a wave. She smiled and touched Jess's face. "Yeah. It's time."

"Uh-oh. Is this a trance?" Dana patted Brenna's head gently.

"Nah. Just thinking." Brenna wrapped Dana's arm in one of her own as they walked. "This ceremony tonight. It's big, for me."

"It's big for me too. It's like becoming a nun."

Brenna sputtered.

"No, it is," Dana said. She waved at someone in the sea of women around them. "We're turning away from all the material stuff we grew up with, to live in a sisterhood for the rest of our days. And we're pledging our fealty to something bigger than us. In this case, Tristaine," she added.

"Hm." Brenna appraised Dana's open face with something like maternal affection. "Amazon as spiritual vocation. Great topic for our next storyfire." She shook Dana's arm. "It's the perfect time to welcome you to the clan, Dana. You're

already important to these women. Your courage in battle won a lot of respect around here."

"Yeah, about that." Dana faced Brenna and folded her arms. "Uh, thank you. You were nice to me before anybody else was, Brenna. You and Shann. And you had less reason to be nice to me than anyone. What with me tasering Jess in the gut and all. So thanks."

Brenna smiled up at Dana, then stood on her toes and kissed her cheek.

Dana grinned broadly. "You don't see that hulk of yours anywhere nearby, right?"

Brenna looked over Dana's shoulder directly into Jess's smiling eyes. "Nope, not a sign of her."

"Cool. See you out there." Dana turned and smacked bodily into Jess. "Dang!"

"Careful, youngster." Jess steadied her while Dana muttered something about dang mountains and lifted her hand from Dana's shoulder when she yelped. "Ah, sorry. I know it's sore. Can we see it?"

Dana closed her collar around her throat with an apologetic shrug. "Nah, not right now. I'll show you guys later."

"There's someone you want to show first," Brenna guessed.

"Yeah." Dana smiled. "I want her to see it first."

"As it should be." Jess clapped Dana on the butt. "Go find her, adanin. We'll be starting soon."

Brenna stepped into Jess's arms and leaned against her, grateful for her added warmth. They watched Kyla emerge from a group of seated Amazons and go to Dana.

"May I?" Jess touched Brenna's collar.

"Please." Brenna smiled. "I wanted you to be the first."

Jess opened her topshirt and bared the shining glyph above her breasts. Warm light ignited her eyes.

"Tell me," Brenna said softly.

"It's beautiful, lass. Colors like jewels." Her fingers drifted above the circular design. "The sign of the healer is here, cresting the field of the Seven Sisters. This bottom border is the gold plant that marks a seer." Jess grinned down at her. "I see no signet of royalty, however."

Brenna lifted her eyebrow, a gesture she knew mirrored Shann perfectly. "I design my own glyph, thank you."

"True enough," Jess agreed. She dipped her head and kissed her, a pleasant buzz that lingered, then deepened and grew heated. Brenna melted against Jess, and her hands snuck into her wild hair. They were both saved from public embarrassment only by Shann's soft call.

"Give witness, adanin!" Shann stood by the barren grave of their vanquished enemy. "Tonight we welcome two new sisters to Amazon Nation. Draw near and attend their covenants to Tristaine."

Jess raked her hair out of her eyes, caught her breath, and offered her arm to Brenna. Their first few steps into the square were slightly unsteady.

Kyla and Dana joined them, and the four women walked across the open space to join Shann as a ripple of greeting rose from the watching crowd.

"Are we ready, dear ones?" Shann raised a hand to welcome them to her side. Her eyes lingered on Brenna, and they were warm and proud. "Let's begin."

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TRISTAINE BOOK FOUR

by

Cate Culpepper

2007

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The Clinic: Tristaine Book One
Battle For Tristaine: Tristaine Book Two
Tristaine Rises: Tristaine Book Three

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DEDICATION

For Mac
Who bettered the lives of hundreds of kids
Loved her dogs and Dan Fogelberg
And helped me catch my first fish
Rest well

Chapter One

Jess ran with the mustangs, her stride long and smooth and effortless. Her powerful legs churned through the high grass of the pasture, her dark hair a snapping wildness at her neck. A smile tugged irresistibly at Brenna's lips as she watched her lover. Every line of Jess's body radiated strength and joy.

Brenna stood with several other Amazons on a low ridge overlooking the meadow. Jess and a dozen of her warriors raced among the horses cantering through the field, their cries answering the trumpeting of the beasts. They darted in and out between the loping mustangs, some leaping aboard their broad backs, others avoiding their flashing hooves in a teasing dance. Brenna's pulse spiked higher in an exhilarated rush.

Well, half exhilarated and half appalled. This would be Brenna's fourth year in Tristaine, and the third time she'd witnessed the drawing of prime horses from the clan's herd. This annual selection was eagerly anticipated, a highlight in a season rich with festivals and celebrations. The women watching with Brenna were having a high old time, yelling encouragement to the warriors below. For most Amazons, this summer rite was jubilant fun. For Brenna, it was still a bit more harrowing than thrilling. In that way, if no other, she remained a City girl.

"They look like kids down there," Kyla said beside her. "Tomboys running with big friendly dogs."

"Dogs who weigh at least a thousand pounds each, on the hoof." Brenna let her fingers coast across the base of her throat. She often stroked the gem-bright glyph etched there when she

needed reassurance and Jess's strong arms weren't immediately available.

"What was that?" Kyla's arm slid through Brenna's, her dancing brown eyes still fixed on the chase below. "You're talking to yourself again, Br—*sheesh*!"

"What?" Brenna jumped and stared wildly into the running herd, searching for Jess.

"Dana." Kyla grinned and pointed. "She's trying, but she still hasn't got the hang of the whole getting on thing."

Finding Dana in the milling crowd of women and horses was easy enough. She was picking herself up out of the grass, slapping dirt off her butt and scowling. She glared at a large roan, then skipped into a fast run straight toward him. Dana launched herself into the air, a dive of impressive height and distance—unfortunately, so high and distant she catapulted right over the trotting horse's back and crashed gracelessly to the grass on its other side.

"Ouch," Brenna and Kyla gasped in tandem.

Dana rolled immediately to her feet, bellowing obscenities loudly enough to reach the cheering section on the ridge.

"Mustang, two," one of the other Amazons sang, "City soldier, zilch!"

Laughter met this remark, but the merriment was sparse and faltered quickly. Brenna glanced at Kyla and saw the muscles in her delicate jaw standing out. She pressed Kyla's arm gently.

"How many of Tristaine's battles does she have to fight?" Kyla murmured, "How many glyphs does Dana have to earn before she stops being a City soldier and becomes an Amazon?"

"You know Dana is Amazon to the core, Ky, City-born or not." Brenna nodded to acknowledge the apologetic looks a few of the women offered them. "I thought that kind of idiotic remark stopped after our last battle with Botesh. No one denied Dana's bravery and loyalty that night."

"Yes, but that was two years ago." Kyla drew in a deep breath and waved encouragingly at Dana. "Eight seasons of peace, and

Tristaine's warriors are itching for a fight. Amazons aren't above picking at each other if no new enemies present themselves."

Brenna studied Kyla silently and with some sadness. Her tone held a note of adult wryness that still seemed foreign to her. Brenna remembered the exuberant teenager Kyla had been when they met almost four years ago. That was before she lost her wife, Camryn, to a crossbow bolt intended for Jess. Kyla also lost some crucial youthful essence in those dark days of grief.

But she had healed a little since then. Two years earlier, when the clan battled a demon queen, Kyla had been given the most extraordinary gift granted any Amazon. For a few precious moments, she had been reunited with her lost lover across the veil of death. Camryn herself had wished Kyla a happy, peaceful life, rich with love beyond their marriage, and Kyla was working hard to be worthy of that blessing.

She was singing again, and that was a gift to the entire clan. Grief had silenced Kyla's ethereal voice after Camryn's death, but as she healed, music refilled her spirit and created moments of sheer beauty around the Amazons' storyfires. And Kyla was finding joy in her sisters again, thanks in part to the "City soldier" who had fought so bravely for Tristaine. The friendship between Kyla and Dana had grown strong these past seasons, and Brenna saw Kyla's expression soften again as she watched her.

"Hey, Miz Brenna!" Aria cocked a curvaceous hip and waved five perfectly tapered, berry-painted fingernails. "Looks like your brawny adonai down there has chosen her horse!"

Brenna shielded her eyes from the sun's glare and focused on Jess running in the meadow below. She was pacing a pretty little bay with a white mane, woman and horse matching stride for stride. With a burst of speed, Jess vaulted aboard the mustang's back, a motion so fluid she seemed to meld with the bay, her lithe body a natural extension of the horse's grace and strength.

The mare made a brief fight of it. She shied and skittered, as if trying to pitch Jess off like a stubborn horsefly. Jess rode her like one, through a twisting series of circles and a few sharp

lunges, until the bay began to settle under her light touch.

A chorus of admiring whistles rose from the women on the ridge.

"That was *so* pretty." Kyla sighed. "Do you ever get tired of half the clan fawning over Jess after one of these public displays of macha?"

"Not as long as she remembers whose bed her macha butt warms at night." Brenna smiled at a private memory and then caught Jess's eye.

Jess reached down and patted the bay's neck, arched one brow at Brenna, and flashed a grin that was pure rogue, white teeth gleaming in her tanned face. Brenna fell in love all over again.

"Come on." She took Kyla's hand. "Let's go round up our tomboys."

❖

If Gaia intended Amazon queens to be remote, untouchable icons of virtue, Jess thought, she has to stop making Amazon queens who look like that.

She rested one ankle on the bay's neck and watched Brenna stroll into the meadow. If it had been blackest, moonless midnight, Jess would have been able to pick her adonai out of the group of Amazons with her. A pleasing sensuality flavored Brenna's movements now, a certain light, sultry confidence that had grown in her these last seasons as her roots in Tristaine ran deeper. Her blond hair was still short, but thicker and wilder than she'd worn it in the City. It drifted against her slender neck in gold waves. The clear green of Brenna's eyes could exude warmth or desire, or, as they did now, frank admiration. Jess soaked up the affection and pride in Brenna's gaze and fell in love all over again.

Jess took a hemp rope from her belt and slipped it over the bay's head, then lifted one leg across the horse's neck and dropped lightly to the ground.

"Hey, hotshot." Brenna rose on her toes to kiss Jess's cheek. "You did some fine horse-wrestling out there."

"Not much wrestling needed, lass." Jess straightened, letting her tall shadow shade Brenna from the sun. "Our herd's half tame. Hakan attends every birth, so Tristaine's foals know a woman's touch before their eyes open."

"Not that big old roan." Dana scowled, tipping her chin so Kyla could examine a bruise on her jaw. "Did you see that mangy mutt run out from under me? That horse is a damn bigot. It hates Amazons."

"We saw it, my little pookie." Kyla patted Dana's cheek.

"Hey, she looks familiar!" Brenna stepped closer to the mare and stroked the blaze of white on her forehead. "Jesstin, you found Bracken's twin!"

"Aye, she's of Bracken's line." Jess enjoyed the sparkle of pleasure in Brenna's eyes, and her obvious ease with this horse. Brenna's self-assurance had been a long time coming—she'd worked hard to overcome her fear of the big beasts. Jess coiled the hemp rope that encircled the bay's neck and offered it to Brenna.

Brenna looked at the rope, puzzled. "You want me to take her to the stables?"

"Up to you, Bren." Jess shrugged. "She's yours to stable if you wish."

"Mine?" Brenna smiled and laid her palm on the warm, firm swell of the mare's jaw. "Jesstin. You're giving me this horse?"

"Brenna, you've earned this horse." Jess patted the bay's side. "She's deep-chested, like my Bracken, so she'll have his endurance. She'll be gentle, once she's used to us, but fast as a—*mrrf*."

Laughing, Brenna surged against Jess, pulled her head down, and planted a kiss smack on her lips.

"Technically," Dana said, tapping Brenna's back, "this horse belongs to Tristaine, so she's not Jess's to give or yours to own, but—"

"Damn, girl, please shut up." Kyla rested an elbow dreamily on Dana's shoulder. "We're witnessing a real rite of passage here."

"Ah, I know that." Dana grinned at Brenna. "Congratulations, adanin."

Brenna still had her arms wound around Jess's neck. "Thank you, teacher," she murmured.

Jess smiled, touched by the honorific, and rested her forehead against Brenna's.

The bay mare chose that moment to break wind, genteelly rather than crudely, but Dana and Kyla were still reduced to fits of adolescent cackling.

❖

By the time the horses were gathered and tethered and the Amazons started back to the mesa, the sun had lost its bright sheen and was coasting toward the western peaks. Brenna walked beside Dana, greeting other women as they filtered past through the trees. Jess and Kyla were ahead of them, Jess's arm draped across the younger woman's shoulders.

Brenna craned her neck to try to spot her bay in the small herd being led toward Tristaine's stables. Her palms already itched to stroke her mount's velvet-soft nose again, and she couldn't seem to banish the grin wreathing her face.

She remembered buying her first car in the City—an exchange of mundane commerce and necessity. Nothing like this thrill. Horses were far more than transportation to mountain Amazons. They were a vital, natural link to their shared history. That pretty brown beast with the white mane was Brenna's four-legged diploma into an important aspect of clan life, as dearly won as any of her City medical certificates.

Brenna took in the blue glory of the mountain sky shading to indigo with the coming of twilight. The fresh, clear air was

redolent of the pine, spruce, and fir that carpeted the hills around their mesa.

She noted Dana was scowling and rubbing her hip again. "I'm wondering if I should insist you drop your drawers so I can take a look at that."

"No way. I'm not gonna expose my naked buttock to you." Dana jerked her chin at Jess and Kyla, several yards up the trail. "Not with your goliath girlfriend up there, who would tear out my trachea in a fit of jealous rage."

Brenna grinned. "Somehow I think Jess would control her fury in the face of medical necessity."

"Eh, I'm the one who's jealous." Dana crammed her hands in the pockets of her trousers and kicked a pinecone off the path. "Look at her, Brenna. Not a mark on her. She's not even dusty. Jess lands the first horse she targets, and I fall on my butt three times in a row."

"We've both seen Jess take her share of falls on other days, honey." Brenna wound her arm through Dana's. "Even Hakan's taken a few dives off horses at a dead run. You're being a little hard on yourself."

"I just wanted to show her I could do it." Dana's brown eyes weren't on Jess any longer; she was watching Kyla. "It sure would have been sweet to see Ky's face when I landed one of the stupid runts."

"Yeah, it would have." Brenna studied her friend. Dana was growing into one of Jess's most able warriors. Fearless in battle, cool-headed and smart, she sometimes even mastered the stoic mask that marked a blood-tested Amazon fighter. Except when she looked at Kyla. "She loves you, Dana."

"I know she does." Dana nodded toward Kyla and Jess. "See that?"

Brenna glanced at the pair walking ahead of them and smiled. Kyla's arm was draped with friendly warmth around Jess's waist. She bumped the much taller warrior playfully with her hip as

they laughed together, the affection between them palpable and deep.

"Kyla walks with me like that now," Dana said. There was something stiff in her smile. "She paws me like that, all the time. We're good friends. We're adanin."

"But?" Brenna tried to see her.

"But she doesn't walk with me the way you walk with Jess."

"What do you mean?"

"Well..." Dana colored. "Think about it."

Brenna's sense memory had no trouble recalling Jess's muscular body against hers, heating the length of her side as they strolled down Tristaine's shaded paths. Their matched steps were more often a relaxed, sensuous dance than mere walking, as different from the platonic friendliness evident between Kyla and Jess as night and day. Brenna remembered the combined strength and gentleness of Jess's arm around her, and that led inevitably to more intimate memories, of arching beneath the strong hands holding her down...

Brenna shivered.

"That's what I mean." Dana smiled at her sadly. "Kyla doesn't walk with me like that. She doesn't look at me the way you look at Jess. I'm thinking she never will."

"Maybe." Brenna watched Kyla thoughtfully. "But I hope you won't give up on her, Dana. Kyla and Camryn were friends for ten years before they became adonai, remember? She's always been careful with her heart."

Dana sighed, and Brenna watched her visibly shake off the topic. "Well, give me ten more years and maybe I'll learn to sit a damn horse, at least. Hey, your little sister learned to ride faster than either of us, Bren. Sammy's gonna be jealous of your new hooves."

"Yep, she will." Brenna smiled.

"Won't bother you a bit, huh?"

"Not me."

"Ah, sisters." Dana bent down and lifted a glossy black feather from the trail. "I thank my lucky butt I've got no blood-kin in the clan. Where is Sammy, anyway? She was looking forward to watching us slide around in horse poop."

"She still had a sore throat this morning, so I talked her into staying back."

Brenna had to admit she still mothered Samantha, even now, well into their twenties. Her younger sister tolerated it reasonably well. Sammy was smart enough to realize she might still need some maternal care after the losses she'd suffered.

Brenna noticed that the dark, elongated shadow beside her was bouncing oddly. She glanced at Dana, whose gaze was pinned again on Jess. Dana had stuck the black feather in her chestnut hair and was walking with an overly long stride, her jaw clenched, her shoulders swinging in slow, brawny arcs.

Brenna snickered. Dana had an uncommon gift for physical mimicry, and she had Jess's long-legged saunter down to a T. "You know she's going to catch you doing that someday."

"Doin' whut?" Dana might be able to imitate Jess's moves, but her rendition of her mild brogue was a miserable failure. "Doan worry, lassie. Yer warrior's too dang tall ta see me from way up thar."

"But she's got uncommon hearing." Jess turned and waited for them, her arms folded. Kyla stopped too, grinning.

Dana straightened quickly, and Brenna reached up to tousle her hair, almost dislodging the feather.

"How does she do that?" Dana muttered.

Brenna smiled at Jess. "Well...she's uncommon."

"Brenna, lady!" A husky Amazon, well past middle age, hustled up to them, beaming ear to ear. "Sorry to interrupt your council, sisters, but Brenna, Shann asks that you come to the healing lodge. Nothing urgent," she added quickly. "She just wants you to check out some new herbs she found."

"Thanks, adanin," Brenna said. "I'll be right there."

"I'll tell Shann, lady." The woman turned, but Brenna touched her wrist gently.

"Carelle," Brenna said kindly. "Tristaine has only one queen. We have only one lady."

"Oh, Brenna." The wrinkles bracketing Carelle's mouth deepened with her smile. "I know that, dear girl. I honor Shann as the only ruler of my clan, we all do. Just forgive your adanin if we want to honor Shann's daughter, and our next queen, as well!"

Brenna smiled and patted the big woman. Carelle waved a cheerful farewell and trotted back toward the mesa.

"Jesstin." Brenna forced the words through clenched teeth. "Am I still smiling?"

Jess tipped Brenna's chin up to check. "And a lovely grimace it is."

Brenna hissed out a long breath and worked her stiff jaw back and forth.

Kyla slipped her arm through Brenna's as they continued down the trail. "Carelle didn't mean any harm, Bren."

"Of course she didn't. She's a nice woman." Brenna pulled open her collar and pointed to the colorful tattoo at the base of her throat. "But where on this glyph do you see a royal insignia, Ky? Hmm? Anywhere?"

"Let's take a look." Dana turned and walked backward, peering at Brenna's throat. "I see some stars, a little hand with a whirlpool in it, and a pretty weed."

"A *weed,*" Kyla groaned. "You wear the sigils of a healer and a mystic, Bren."

"Nothing queenly," Dana added.

"Thank you." Brenna snapped her collar closed, mollified.

Jess draped her arm around Brenna's shoulders. "No queen can be forced to rule, Brenna. All you have to do is decline Shann's throne."

"Which I've done, Jess, every way I know how." Brenna

kicked another black feather off the path, irritated. "I'm a good medic, but I won't pretend to be anyone's leader. Shann seems to hear me, but the word sure hasn't filtered through the ranks yet. *Lady* they call me, for heaven's sake."

"Aye, you're a fine healer," Jess agreed. "And a talented seer."

Brenna mumbled grumpily.

"You are, Brenna, you're amazing!" Kyla squeezed her arm. "You see into the realm of spirit more clearly than any mystic Tristaine has ever known."

Brenna sighed.

Dana nudged Kyla. "See, she's learned not to argue with that."

"Being called a seer bothered you at first." Jess kissed Brenna's hair. "You used to snap at me like a harpy whenever I mentioned your sight."

"Well, stuff just kept happening." Brenna fingered the coarse fabric of Jess's vest. "You can only have so many visions, and so many out-of-body strolls, before denying that you're having them starts to sound psychotic."

"Confidence in your powers came to you slowly, but with certainty, over time." Jess's rough palm caressed Brenna's upper arm. "Just as all our gifts take root and grow."

"Jesstin." Brenna peered up at her suspiciously. "Please tell me you're not implying I'll simply *get used* to being an Amazon queen."

Jess chuckled. "I don't presume to know what our Grandmothers intend for you, adonai. I'm just enjoying the journey."

Jess stopped walking and trained her cobalt eyes on the sky, and then Brenna heard it—a dry, cawing sound overhead. She focused on its source just as the large bird made a clumsy landing on a thin branch high in a pine by the side of their trail.

"Crow?" Dana squinted up at the black creature as it pecked slowly at the branch.

"Not this far from the City," Jess said. "A raven."

The bird seemed unsteady, rocking slightly on its narrow perch.

"A drunk raven," Dana added.

Jess crouched, resting her elbows on her knees, and studied the ground. Brenna saw two more long black feathers in the grass, and another further along into the trees. She looked up and spotted a raven balancing awkwardly on a thin branch. It rose with an angry snap of wings and flew in a slow, ragged arc toward the east.

Jess rose. "Something's up."

Brenna noted they all stepped closer to Jess, an instinctive raising of their shields. Jess nodded toward the trees and started toward them, and they fell in behind her with the ease of long seasons of drills. They wove quickly and silently through a stand of aspen, following the bird's lurching progress overhead.

J'heika, rise.

Brenna came to a dead halt, and Kyla very nearly smacked into her back.

"What is it, Bren?" Kyla steadied herself against her.

"Nothing," Brenna murmured. She touched Kyla in reassurance, then turned and followed Jess.

She didn't recognize this new voice. In the past, the voices that had whispered those two words in Brenna's mind had all sounded elderly. Shann said it was the Grandmothers calling her. This voice was someone new, someone young. Brenna hadn't heard this particular command in years, and a thrill of misgiving went through her.

❖

Jess hadn't felt this kind of prickling at the back of her neck in many seasons. She had learned to respect this rising of her inner hackles, as Dyan had called Jess's keen instincts for danger. Shann's adonai and the leader of Tristaine's warriors, Dyan had

died beneath a hail of City bullets shortly after naming Jess her second. Now Jess carried the burden of her clan's protection alone, and she relied on her gut. One addled bird didn't mean disaster, but any disruption in the natural world was worrisome.

She couldn't keep sight of the black bird's path through the canopy of green branches above them, but visual tracking wasn't necessary. Jess heard the discordant chorus of dying ravens before she saw them.

They emerged from the trees into a small, circular enclosure, a patch of sparse grass all but carpeted with dusty black feathers and droppings. Jess put out a hand to stop Brenna, a chill working up her back.

There were fifty or more birds milling in the clearing, staggering, flapping frayed wings without gaining flight. Mountain ravens were big creatures, with wingspans nearly four feet across, but these birds looked shrunken, diminished. Their cawing, usually a crisp, sharp cracking sound, was reduced to throaty rattles. Several were already dead, on their backs in the grass, their stick-like legs stiffened, their black eyes milky and vacant.

"Sweet Gaia." Kyla stepped carefully into the circle. "Jess, what's happening to them?"

"I don't know, lass."

"Could they be poisoned?" Dana nudged a dead bird cautiously with one foot. "What do these things eat?"

"Insects, carrion." Jess watched another bird convulse in the grass, then lie still, and an odd shiver coursed through her. "I can't see this many feeding off any one source."

"And they don't travel in big groups like this, do they?" Kyla hugged herself. "They're suffering, Jesstin. Is there anything we can—"

"Brenna?" Jess frowned and took her wife's arm. Brenna's posture was rigid, and she stared at the ravens intently. The color was draining from her face.

Brenna heard the sharpness in Jess's tone, but she couldn't

respond. Even if she hadn't been gripped by the paralysis of sudden trance, she was too filled with horror to summon any sound.

Dying Amazons, dropping in drifts at her feet. Young women, older ones, children, clothed in tattered gray shrouds, staggering, falling to their knees. Their faces were ghostly white, and contorted with the futile agony of trying to draw breath in vain. Other Amazons knelt at their sides, and the harsh cawing of the ravens sounded in Brenna's ears like the grief-filled shrieks of the bereaved. Then those who comforted the afflicted fell ill too, their hands clawing at their throats in terror.

"Kyla, back away!" Brenna's tone rang with command, and Jess started and reached for the dagger in her vest.

Kyla obeyed at once, stepping around the stumbling ravens until she reached clear grass.

Brenna went to Dana in three fast strides and snatched the black feather out of her hair. "Keep your hands away from your faces, all of you. Let's get out of here."

"Brenna, what the—" Dana began.

"*Move,*" Brenna ordered, and they moved.

Jess ushered Kyla quickly out of the circle. She took Brenna's arm as they weaved through the trees and felt her trembling.

"Head for the stream." The fingers Brenna wrapped around Jess's wrist were cold. "We need to wash our hands."

Jess swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. "You're thinking plague, Bren?"

"Maybe I'm wrong. I pray I am." Brenna closed her eyes. "I have a sister with a sore throat."

Chapter Two

The night was fragrant with the light scents of sandalwood and lavender.

Brenna asked Sammy to move from the cottage she shared with three other women to Tristaine's healing lodge until her symptoms cleared. It was a comfortable log cabin, scrupulously clean, but far more warm and friendly than any hospital unit in the City. Colorful arrangements of dried wildflowers brightened each corner, and the white pine walls were adorned with paintings from the artists' guild and drawings by the clan's children.

"This is overkill." Samantha sat propped up in bed against a thick sheaf of furs. Her arms were folded, but her gaze on Brenna was affectionate. "You used to do this at the Youth Home, Bree. You'd threaten bloody mayhem if they tried to make me go to school when you thought I was sick."

"I had to go by my instincts. You claimed to be sick every single Friday when you had a math test." Brenna frowned as she palpated the base of Samantha's jaw. "Does this hurt?"

"Yes, a cold claw digging into my throat hurts." Samantha gave Brenna's hand a playful slap. "Brenna, I have a head cold."

"Well, then you and your head need to stay under these blankets." Brenna pulled the furs up to her sister's waist. "I don't want you out spreading your phlegm all over the village."

"You're so uncouth. Hey." Sammy tapped Brenna's arm. "You look worried. Should I be?"

Brenna hesitated, studying Sammy's delicate features. Her color was good and her green eyes focused and alert. The circles beneath them might be a little more pronounced. Sammy, who

used to hit their shared pillow in the Youth Home fast asleep, hadn't slept a night through in three years. Brenna wondered if any woman ever truly recovered from the deaths of her husband and child. But physically, Sammy seemed no worse than she'd been that morning. There was still no fever.

Brenna brushed Samantha's wrist with her thumb. "We don't know enough yet, Sam. But, yeah, this might be more than a cold. I'll want to watch you carefully for a while. I promise you'll know everything as soon as I do."

"Okay. That's fair." Samantha sighed. "So, am I quarantined? To keep my phlegm to myself?"

"I'm afraid so, honey. For now at least." Brenna bent and kissed her sister's forehead, then stood up. "Try to get some rest."

"This might help." Shanendra, daughter of Elaine and queen of the last great Amazon tribe, smiled at Samantha with a sweet maternity as natural to her spirit as royal command. She carried a cup of steaming tea to Samantha and sat at the side of her bed. "This concoction is more wild honey than herb, to mask its bitterness. Sip it slowly, dear one."

Brenna breathed in the mild fragrance of the tea, puzzled. "Echinacea?"

"Astragalus." Shann patted Samantha's leg sympathetically when she grimaced at the taste. "I had no idea we could find it this high in the hills."

"Astragalus?" Brenna blinked. "You're feeding your daughter, and my sister, a tea made of locoweed?"

Samantha pretended to choke, and Shann laughed.

"Luckily, my daughter, and your sister, is not livestock, Brenna. There's no harm in this root as an infusion." Shann brushed Samantha's auburn hair off her forehead. "And it might help clear this foggy young head."

Brenna leaned against the pine wall and studied her only living blood-kin. Jess claimed there was a familial resemblance between Brenna and Shann, but she had never been able to see it

herself. There was no missing the likeness between Shann and her sister, though. Their profiles were similar, with high cheekbones tapering to strong chins. Brenna shared a lighter version of Shann's fawn-colored hair, but Samantha's curling tresses were the dark reddish-brown of their father, David.

Brenna had no conscious memory of him. He died when Sammy was still an infant. David and Shann had been fighting in an underground cell of the Resistance when the City Government launched a vicious campaign to crush the movement's leaders. David had been killed in an ambush of City soldiers and Shann had been imprisoned, and their two daughters placed in a spartan City Youth Home. Brenna and Samantha had only discovered their blood relation to Shann as adults, after fate reunited them in Tristaine.

Shann asked, "Will you feel abandoned, Samantha, if I take our wise seer away for a quick council?"

"Your seer, my sister, take her, take her." Sammy waved at them both vaguely. "But, Brenna, I have to meet your new horse, so don't let me die before you haul her up here to say hello."

"I'm not going to let you die." Brenna managed a smile. "I'll check you later."

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Jess stared at the beautiful oak carving of a winged woman in flight that graced an entire wall of the healing lodge's anteroom. The serene figure depicted was Gaia Herself to some of Tristaine's women, Artemis or gold-winged Isis to others. To Jess, She was simply one of the Mothers, and she had spoken to Her on a regular basis since she was a child. Jess reminded Her now that She promised centuries ago to protect Tristaine, Her last Amazon clan.

She listened to the low murmur of voices in the next room. Shann's soft laughter, a sound that had charmed and soothed Jess through her turbulent adolescence, helped calm her nerves now.

The curtain of bead-strings parted, and her queen and her adonai joined her.

Jess measured Brenna silently, reading a dozen subtle clues to her mood that only long seasons together taught her to interpret. Brenna's gaze was direct and warm, but there was a new stiffness in the usually flowing lines of her body. Jess touched her wrist, offering a brief comforting connection, and Brenna smiled her thanks.

"Have you eaten, Jesstin?" Shann tapped Jess's chin, then settled on a cushioned bench. "You're wearing your old rock-jawed glower again, my young friend. Stop it. We don't know what we're facing yet. Brenna, tell me your thoughts."

Brenna sat next to her mother. "I'm afraid we might be facing an epidemic, lady. Has Tristaine ever been through one?"

"Our journals tell us our clan has weathered many fevers over the centuries," Shann replied, "but we've read of no killing plagues."

Jess recognized Shann's intent focus on her elder daughter. Jess was awarded the same respectful attention whenever she spoke to the queen on important matters.

"Have you seen any signs other than the ravens?" Shann asked.

"No, but that was a pretty chilling sign." Brenna looked at Jess, who nodded grim agreement. She was acquainted with the forms death could take in Gaia's wild creatures, but the mortal throes of those dying birds had been eerie, gruesome in a way Jess couldn't explain.

"Jess and the others saw dying birds, lady." Brenna seemed to read Jess's mind. "I saw dying Amazons. I couldn't make out faces, just women weeping on their knees beside their dead sisters."

"Sweet Cybele." Shann swallowed visibly. "But can a pestilence of ravens truly threaten us, Blades? We've never known disease to jump from bird to human."

"They've known it." Brenna nodded toward the south. "Down in the City. It happened in one of the outer Burroughs about five years ago. Some form of influenza, fast and virulent."

"Fatal?"

"The mortality rate was almost sixty percent."

Jess drew in a sharp breath. "Lady. Should we call a clan council?"

"No, Jesstin." Shann regarded Brenna thoughtfully. "If this strain is infectious, it wouldn't be wise to call a full gathering of our sisters. Let's do this." She extended her hand to Jess, who stepped closer to take it. "In the morning, Jess, form a contingent of your most trusted warriors. Send them in pairs to each lodge and cabin to see if there's illness. Remind everyone, especially those with children and grandmothers, to take precautions."

"Would it be best to send them out tonight, Shann?" Brenna rubbed her neck, wincing. "If this is something really scary, time's going to be important."

"Hmm." Shann tapped her thighs. "I'll follow your counsel, Blades, if you feel strongly about this, but my own choice would be morning. Sounding an alarm at night can invite fear and rumor, and we don't have much true knowledge yet. I think we can allow ourselves these few hours."

Brenna hesitated, and Jess read uncertainty in her silence. Then her features cleared and she nodded. "In the morning, then. Jesstin, will you divorce me if I spend the night here? I'd like to keep an eye on Sam."

"I'll bed here too, lass, if you like." Jess moved behind Brenna and began a gentle massage of her neck. "Lady, get some rest. We can call you if our little sister in there stirs."

Shann smiled at them both, and when Shann smiled at the women she loved, they knew to their bones they were cherished. "Then with you two on watch, I'll retire to my humble cabin. Let me wish Samantha a good night." She parted the curtain of beads that separated the two rooms.

Jess grinned. Brenna was making cat-like sounds of pleasure as her strong fingers eased the tightness in her neck. “Why is my adonai so tense?”

“Your adonai spent most of the day watching your fine, unarmed self jump around with killer warhorses,” Brenna reminded her. “And if that weren’t relaxing enough, we had to stumble upon a possible plague that might wipe out half our clan.”

“You think Shann is wrong to wait until morning.” Jess’s breath stirred the silky hair over Brenna’s ear. She felt her uneasiness through the palms of her hands.

“Something’s happening, Jess.” Brenna leaned back into her, and Jess folded her arms around her waist. “I heard the queen’s summons today.”

Jess’s embrace tightened slightly. “Just the summons?”

“‘J’heika, rise,’” Brenna confirmed. “Nothing else. I didn’t recognize the voice.”

“Bren, did you tell Shann this?”

“Ah, Jess.” Brenna sighed and rested her head on the smooth curve of Jess’s shoulder. “Shann’s right, a few hours won’t matter either way. And everyone seems so intent on this queen...thing right now. I’ll tell her if it seems important.”

“I’ll trust you with that.” Jess rested her lips in Brenna’s hair. “For now, I’ll build us a nest by the window.”

❖

Brenna dreamed of the veiled woman for the first time that night.

She was young—Brenna could tell that much by the easy grace of her carriage. She wore a simple white robe. The silver fabric that shrouded her head and shoulders shimmered in the scant illumination of troubled dreams.

Brenna couldn’t see her features, but she knew with certainty that the veiled woman was watching her with an intensity that

sent a shiver up her sleeping spine.

"Hello," Brenna said politely. "Have we met?"

The apparition didn't answer. To Brenna's astonishment, she lowered herself gracefully to one knee and inclined her head.

"I honor you, j'heika." The voice was rich and warm with respect, and Brenna had heard it before. After a moment of stillness, the woman stood.

"It was you." Brenna strained to see her features through her gleaming veil. "You called me earlier today."

"Yes, I sounded the queen's summons." The woman's tone was calm, but then it grew stern. "Hear me, Brenna. You have seen the face of our enemy. Now act."

And that was all. The veiled figure faded and Brenna awoke, unrefreshed, in Jess's arms.

❖

By dusk that day, three other women and two children had joined Samantha in quarantine in the healing lodge. Samantha and both children were running low-grade fevers.

Shann called an emergency summons of her Queen's Council.

❖

"We have to go back to the Clinic."

An appalled silence fell after Brenna's words faded.

Twilight found the grassy park in the center of the Amazons' village deserted. Tristaine's women had gathered early in their cabins, as if the protective walls of their lodges could hold out the pestilence. Shann and the six sisters who formed her Queen's Council sat in a loose circle around a small, snapping fire enclosed by stones.

"Brenna." Dana cleared her throat. "No disrespect, you know that. But have you flat out lost your flaming mind?"

"Dana," Kyla murmured.

"No, Ky. This is nuts." Dana got to her feet. "Have you forgotten everything you ever knew about the City, Bren?"

"Tell me again, lady." Sarah, the oldest of the queen's advisors, rubbed her bald head, scowling. "You insist on including this rude young weed on your Council because...?"

"Because our young bring us energy and insight far fresher than yours or mine, grandmother." Shann's gaze on her elder was affectionate. She nodded at Dana. "We're listening, sister."

"Good. Because we need to find another way, Shann." Dana's normally animated face was set and still. "Returning to the Clinic would be a suicide mission, you know that. The City has *guns.* They have technology and an entire Army with *guns.*"

"An Amazon warrior can kill with her hands, little girl." Aria's sensual purr took the sting out of her words. She reclined in the thick grass and smiled up at Dana. "And Tristaine has always had her dealings with the City. Jesstin and Kyla survived their own exiles in that detestable sinkhole."

"Barely," Dana muttered.

"Tristaine has never needed the City," Sarah growled and spat delicately into the grass. "Lady, Amazons are hardy stock, or we'd have died out generations ago. And you're one of the greatest healers our tribe has ever had. Can't we use our own store of herbs and your knowledge of Gaia's healing lore to fight this illness?"

"We can and we will, grandmother." Shann lifted a kettle from a flat rock near their small fire and refilled Sarah's mug with a fragrant tea. "We'll call all the natural remedies we've harvested in these hills to our defense. But Brenna's vision was powerful, and it warns against easy cures. I've already begun our search for a new remedy, but that requires a great deal of testing, and time is precious to us now." Shann nodded at Jess. "I'd like to hear my second's thoughts."

Jess stared at the crackling flames in the center of their circle. "I've heard our sister's opposition to this plan, lady. I'm

still waiting to hear what hope Dana has to offer in its stead."

"Jess, Brenna—" Dana sighed harshly. "Dang, please know I don't mean to doubt you. But this is the first I've heard about any outbreak of this weird flu in the City."

"Dana, if that surprises you, you've forgotten everything *you* ever knew about the City." Brenna rose and went to Dana. Her tone was warm, even loving, but absolutely firm. "It hit the South Borough—zoned for mixed races, Caucasians banned. The Clinic needed human subjects to make a vaccine. Where would you expect to learn about that, the *City Gazette*?"

"And they found a cure, Brenna?" Aria asked. "Those barbarians down in the City?"

"No resource was spared once the Government realized their own class could fall ill just as easily as people in the outer boroughs." Brenna smiled without humor. "Yes, they had a vaccine and a cocktail of drugs that beat this flu in record time."

"We need the Clinic's medicine to save our clan." Jess looked at Dana. "You're right to respect the danger of this quest, adanin. The City is a formidable enemy. But we don't shirk from danger when the prize is so dear and the cost of losing beyond bearing."

"We haven't heard from one of my wisest councilors." Shann drew their attention to Kyla, who sat quietly in the grass. Her expression was almost serene, but her features were pale.

"I might throw up," Kyla began politely. "Because I'm terrified. I hate the thought of any of us going back down to that slaughterhouse. But I can't think of any other way to help our sick, Shann, and we've got so little time." She looked at Dana with regret. "I think we have to go back."

Shann murmured agreement, and another silence fell as she met the gaze of each of her Amazons in turn. "All right. We're not in perfect accord, so I'll pray we follow our Mothers' lights. We'll send a party to the City."

A sigh moved through the Council, and Dana and Brenna sat down again in the hush that followed. Twilight had become full

dark, and the stars were extraordinarily bright with no moon to rival their flickering. Overhead the Seven Sisters, the constellation that housed the spirits who guided Tristaine, glowed brilliantly.

Jess was the first to pull her gaze from the star-drenched heavens. "I'll need a team of six, lady. Four in the City, two as backup nearby."

"You'll need me to get into the Civilian Unit in the Clinic where the study was done." Brenna returned their grave regard. "I was assigned there as a medic before I was transferred to Military. I might still have contacts there."

"And a few enemies with grudges, I bet." Kyla frowned at Brenna and nudged her leg with her foot. "Caster had blood-kin, didn't she?"

"She was married, with two teenagers. Boys." Brenna's gaze grew distant. "But Caster was a scientist, Ky, not a Military leader. We haven't sighted any City patrols since we found this mesa. I don't think either Caster's sons or the Army have much invested in avenging her death."

"Caster's kin probably sacrifice virgins to Tristaine nightly in thanks." Sarah drew on the pipe that was perennially clenched between her strong teeth, lighting her withered cheeks with a robust glow. "Artemis herself owes us for freeing the world of that lunatic shrike harpy bitch, spit thrice on her grave."

"Sheer poetry, Sarah." Aria lifted one long arm and her many bracelets trickled down her wrist. "If we're to take on this dangerous quest, we must prepare. I can have food packed for our intrepid warriors by dawn, Shann."

"Thank you, sweet girl." Shann smiled at her old friend. "Jesstin, who will ride with you and Brenna?"

"I should go, lady." Kyla looked at Jess. "Camryn and I hid in the City before we broke into the Prison to find Jess. At least I know enough about how to act like a City dweller to get by."

"Well hell, if Kyla's going, I am too." Dana scratched her scalp fiercely, frowning. "And I'd have to anyway. I've been down there more recently than any of you guys."

"You train your warriors well, Jesstin." Shann looked at Dana with approval. "They speak their minds, but even if they don't agree, they'll fight for the good of their clan."

"I try," Jess sighed. "I'll take Hakan and Vicar too, lady."

"Time is of the essence." Shann stood in one graceful motion. "Aria will arrange provisions. Sarah, please alert Hakan and have her prepare our party's horses and weapons. The rest of you, to my lodge. We have maps to study and strategy to plan."

❖

Tristaine's cartographers were genuine artists. The parchments bearing their etchings were multi-colored, jeweled landscapes, richly detailed and accurate to the league. Jess spread out their largest map on the burnished surface of the oak table in Shann's private lodge. Finished only that spring, this map held their most up-to-date charting of the terrain between their mesa and the City.

Half an apple hovered beneath Jess's nose. Tristaine's apples were the size of the City's cantaloupes, and the fruit's fresh, tangy scent tickled her nostrils. She smiled and pushed the apple away gently with one finger.

"You should eat something." Brenna laid the fruit aside. "This is looking to be a long night."

"I will soon. Just don't want to drip juice on our maps." Jess lifted Brenna's hand and sucked a drop of juice from her thumb. She looked around the small cabin, illuminated with a mild gold glow by oil lamps and the fire in Shann's wide hearth. Shann was laying out a light spread of cold meats and cheeses on a low table along one log wall. Kyla and Dana were studying the entries in Brenna's journal that chronicled the clan's migration up to the mesa.

Jess wasn't hungry. Her body thrummed with a current of restless energy, a familiar sensation that came with shifting into crisis mode. She tried to ignore the uneasy churning in her

gut, which was both unfamiliar and unwelcome. Jess had never wrestled this particular brand of gnawing dread before at the dawn of any mission. She stared down at the map and cracked her knuckles, and Brenna nudged her hip gently. She'd been trying to break Jess of the habit for years.

"Keep it up, ace," Brenna murmured. "See how much fun it'll be, pulling a bowstring with arthritic fingers before you're forty."

Jess heard the strain in her wry tone and knew it didn't concern the future of her knuckles. Brenna stood stiffly beside her, her gaze unfocused, worrying her lower lip with her teeth. Jess put a finger to Brenna's chin and turned her head. When their eyes met a low, reverberating pulse sounded in Jess's sex, followed by a rush of warmth. *Ah, battle lust,* she thought ruefully. *I'd take you on this table here and now, girl.* She brushed her thumb lightly across Brenna's full lower lip. "Second thoughts, lass?"

"Several dozen." Brenna looked up at Jess with naked uncertainty. "We're not really going to do this, right? We'll come to our senses soon?"

"Aye, querida, absolutely." Jess stepped behind Brenna and slid her arms around her waist. "This is a bad dream. We'll wake before you know it, and morning will find us both whole and well."

Brenna leaned back into Jess and sighed. "And damned if I don't believe that, coming from you. How do you do it, Jesstin?"

"What's that?" Jess nuzzled the lush softness of Brenna's hair, breathing in her clean scent.

"How do you make me feel so safe when I know good and well we're both about to pitch headlong off a cliff?"

Jess felt that unpleasant roiling in her stomach again. "I'll admit to wishing we had other cliffs to choose from, Bren. But this City drug offers us hope. It's worth the risk."

"You offer us hope." Brenna shook her head. "I swear, Jess, I don't think I've ever seen you rattled. The entire clan looks to

you to lead our defense, and you're as calm and centered as a sage—even tonight."

Jess ached for Dyan's presence with a longing that was almost physical. It seemed many long years had passed since her mentor's death. She'd give much to feel that rough palm on her neck again and to hear Dyan's low brogue whispering guidance.

"Hey, Jesstin." Brenna turned in Jess's arms to face her. "Your hands are freezing." She reached up and touched Jess's forehead, concern darkening her eyes. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm not sick, Bren." Jess tried for a reassuring smile and found it. "Just eager to get started."

Brenna studied her and then nodded and laid her hand on Jess's chest. "I just want to promise you something, Jess, okay? I know this mission is dangerous as hell, and I won't let you down. I've got your back in this. You hear me?"

"I hear, adonai." Jess lowered her head and brushed her lips softly across Brenna's. "And I thank you for your promise. You know I trust you with my life."

"Brenna?" Dana was holding Brenna's journal, flipping through its last pages. "Where was that mountain pass you warned us not to take when the clan was trekking up here? The one you had the dream about, with the waterfall of blood?"

"Ah, yes, delightful memory." Brenna smiled weakly at Dana. "Yeah, the dream warned of a disaster if we tried to get the entire clan over that pass. I asked Shann to take another route. It added a good two weeks to our travels, but it was necessary."

"Well, I'm afraid we're not going to be able to avoid it this trip." Kyla took the journal from Dana and brought it to the table that held the unfurled parchment. "We'd lose way too much time going around."

"Six women travel more lightly than six hundred." Jess studied the break in the mountain range on the map. "We won't be hauling wagons of supplies. We can risk the pass."

"And Kyla's sharp eyes will find the safest path over it." Shann joined them at the table and slipped her arm around Kyla's

waist. “Our young singer can best most of Tristaine’s warriors when it comes to scouting a trail, Jesstin.”

“Aye, lady, I plan to abide our little sister’s guidance on this journey.” Jess felt their gazes on her as she unsheathed the dagger in her belt. The women in the cabin fell silent, waiting for her to begin.

Jess touched the tip of the dagger lightly to the small swirl of color in the map’s upper left corner. “Our mesa.” She skated the tip across the map’s surface. “And here, the site of our first village in these hills.”

They all stared down at the vibrant patch of blue that marked the mountain lake that covered their first home. Then Jess traced an oblique, curving line from their mesa to the dark streaks at the base of the map that signified the City. “This looks to be the easiest grade down, lady. No sheer drops, once we’re over the pass.”

“The bloody waterfall pass,” Dana said, and Kyla tapped her head smartly.

“Even the shortest route will still mean a very long ride.” Brenna followed their planned path with her finger. “If this is the same strain of flu that appeared in the City, Shann, it could prove fatal within a week.”

The tension in the cabin ratcheted a notch higher, but Shann answered Brenna calmly. “Our sisters have an advantage over the unfortunates who fell to this plague in the City, Brenna. Sarah was right; the women born to Tristaine are physically hardier than City-dwellers. Our life expectancy tops theirs by a decade. Our air is cleaner, our produce more nourishing, our immune systems are stronger. It will take this flu longer to kill Amazons.”

“But we weren’t all born to Tristaine, lady.” Kyla touched the older woman and nodded at Dana and Brenna. “Many of our adanin came to us as adults. Will their few years under Tristaine’s healthier sun be enough to protect them?”

“Those years will offer a welcome edge.” Shann paused a

moment, then regarded all her women soberly. “But don’t mistake me, sisters. Barring some miracle, we’re going to lose precious lives before this is over. The very old and the very young among us are most at risk. All we can do is move heaven and earth to keep our losses few.”

Jess reached for Brenna’s hand and held it, their fingers twining.

“And we have good hope for that.” Shann spoke with assurance again. “Tristaine has a rich, varied stock of natural remedies, and a talented guild of healers to help me find stronger ones. We may not be able to cure this pestilence, but we can slow its progress.”

“We’ll make all possible speed, Shann.” Jess pointed to a spot on the map. “We should come out here, in the hills northeast of the City’s downtown district. We can pasture the horses by this creek. How far from this position to the Clinic, Bren?”

“Far enough.” Brenna bent over the table and tapped its wood surface, an inch from the edge of the parchment. “Somewhere here.”

“That’s a long way for six Amazons to walk City streets without rousing suspicion.” Shann frowned thoughtfully. “You’ll need help getting close to the Clinic, Jess.”

“Aye, lady.” Jess raised an eyebrow at Brenna. “We’ll call on an old friend.”

“Jodoch?” Kyla smiled with genuine pleasure. “Damn, Jess, I’d love to see our sweet bear of a brother again!”

Dana frowned. “We’ve got a brother bear in the City?”

“Remember the guy who helped Jess and me escape from the Clinic, Dana?” Brenna took Jess’s hand. She frowned and chaffed her still-cold fingers. “That was Jode.”

“Oh, yeah, Jode. He’s an Amazon’s son.” Dana nodded. “His mother was Jocelyn?”

“My old friend raised a strong and loving man.” Shann’s tone was touched with sadness, and Jess shared her sense of loss.

Jocelyn had been like a grandmother to her. “Jode is Tristaine’s true friend. Go to him, Jess, but protect him and Pamela from exposure to our enemies as best you can.”

“We will, lady.” Jess sheathed the dagger in her belt. “Vicar and Hakan can shelter with Jode and move on the Clinic if our first attempt fails. You’re sure you can get us into this Civilian Unit, Bren?”

“I know how to find someone who can get us in. If she will.” Brenna drew in a slow breath. “She’s our best bet, Jess.”

“As with all our missions, some spontaneous changes to our plan may be necessary.” Shann put one arm around Kyla and the other around Dana. “Luckily, Amazons are nothing if not creative.” She smiled at them, and Jess felt a warm tendril of reassurance ease the tension in her gut. “Trust in each other, adanin. The four of you have faced great danger together before and seen Tristaine safely through the night. The fate of our clan could not rest in more capable or courageous hands.”

Jess met Shann’s gaze and saw her queen’s faith in her shining as tangibly as a nimbus of warm light. She swallowed.

“And now, you will all find your beds.” Shann hugged Kyla and Dana, then released them. “Sleep and replenish your energies, sisters. The sun rises soon.”

Chapter Three

Brenna stopped short, smiling in spite of her weariness. The thought of a praying queen conjured the image of an ethereal, devout woman appealing to the heavens with upraised eyes and clasped hands. Tristaine's queen was devout, but hardly ethereal, and her arms were waving in agitated circles as she paced in one of the clan's beautiful gardens.

It was how Shann prayed. Loudly, when she thought it necessary. She was having an earnest discussion with one or more of her Mothers, and Brenna waited respectfully until she had finished.

Shann's voice softened to a friendlier tone as she bid farewell to her guides, and then she turned and smiled at Brenna. She stepped out of the garden and through the dew-soaked grass, pulling her light shawl around her. The pre-dawn air held a mild chill.

"We're almost ready, lady." Brenna walked beside Shann toward the village square. The clan was beginning to stir. She saw women emerging from their lodges, preparing for the day's work. It was an oddly quiet dawn, though, bereft of the cheerful greetings and singing that usually hailed summer mornings in Tristaine. Even the sparse birdsong seemed faint and tentative.

"It will be a dangerous ride, little sister." Shann slipped her arm around Brenna's waist, and she was glad for its warmth. "You have treacherous ground to cover, and you must travel swiftly. Are you sure it's wise to ride your new horse?"

"I'm sure." Brenna nodded. "Hakan had her half-trained before we culled her, and Jess and Bracken will help keep her in line."

"Did you sleep at all?" Brenna felt Shann's appraising gaze.

"Even if your mount has a sure step, you'll bruise just as easily toppling off her asleep."

"Speaking of sleep." Brenna cleared her throat. "I've had a visitor."

She told Shann about the veiled apparition's first appearance, relaying all the detail and nuance she could remember. "And she came again last night."

"What did this woman say?" There was an element of awe in Shann's tone. She had no second sight, and Brenna knew she was fascinated by these glimpses into other realms. "Tell me everything, adanin."

Brenna waited until the drifting remnants of her vision swam clear again in her mind.

She found it unnerving, these sudden transitions from deep sleep to acute awareness. Brenna still didn't understand why other-worldly beings had to wake her up to talk to her, and she wasn't sure she would have signed on for the job had she known this. What was wrong with a simple prophetic dream—

"Greetings, j'heika."

The veiled woman faced Brenna again in a timeless circle of light that seemed suspended between reality and illusion.

"Hello again." Brenna surveyed her mysterious emissary. She still wore a plain white robe, and the silver fabric draping her features shimmered with a soft glow. The girl's body was supple and strong, and her stance held an almost regal confidence. "Did you ever tell me your name?"

"My name is unimportant, Brenna." Light sparkled around the woman's shrouded head. "You begin your quest today. You and your adonai ride with Tristaine's finest, and our home will be left vulnerable. I will be your lifeline to our clan. Tell your queen I will clear her path."

"What—wait!" Brenna reached toward her as the light around them began to fade. "Hey! Don't you dare shimmer out on me again, ma'am, come back here!"

The woman shifted, as if startled, and the illumination rose again.

"Want to clarify all that, please?" Brenna asked. "Start with the lifeline reference."

"Forgive me, j'heika." The specter spoke with genuine respect. "But you'll understand soon. You must focus on reaching the City with all speed."

"All right. I can live with that." Brenna relented. This apparition was obviously on Tristaine's side, and she appreciated her help, whoever she was. And while the energy coursing from her aura was urgent, it held a certain benevolence that Brenna trusted. "I do need to know what to call you, though. Withholding your name for no reason is a little rude."

The veil dipped as the woman inclined her head. "I'm called Elise."

"And that was all?" Shann asked.

"That's all she said." Brenna looked at Shann curiously. "What is it, lady?

"My grandmother's name was Elise." Shann studied the awakening sky. "Your great-grandmother. I never knew her. She lived and died fairly young, in the City. But she was of our line, Brenna. If this is our Elise, she might well be able to clear a path between our worlds."

"But why would she want to?" Brenna wasn't sure she wanted to know the answer. "What are you supposed to do with this cleared path, if you get one?"

"I have no idea, dear one."

Brenna shivered, and Shann stroked her back comfortingly.

It was fully light now, and Brenna stood beside Shann on a small rise and drank in the beauty of their village below. She would travel far and face great danger before seeing her home again.

"I'm afraid I have to burden you further, Blades," Shann said quietly.

"No, you don't have to. That's okay." Brenna turned to meet Shann's knowing smile and sighed. "All right, I guess you have to. What burden?"

"I want you to find out if your niece is alive."

Brenna stared at Shann and her throat went dry.

Samantha was told her infant daughter died at birth in the City Prison. But the woman bearing that news had been Caster, the Clinic scientist who hated Tristaine beyond all imagining. Caster had tortured Jess in the City Clinic. The Amazons had had to destroy their first village to keep it out of her grasp. She had been killed in the flood that drowned their former home.

Shann had long believed Caster might have lied about Sammy's baby.

Brenna had seen what losing her husband and child had done to Samantha. The younger sister Brenna had grown up protecting had been an exuberant spirit who, even motherless, found delight in the simplest of life's pleasures. The Sammy they knew today was a wan shadow of that girl. Still loving, still warm, Sammy had remained quiet and withdrawn in her two years with the Amazons. Brenna could only imagine the joy of returning a living daughter to her arms.

"But, lady," Brenna whispered. "I wouldn't know where to start."

"Just find out what you can. When you can." Shann folded Brenna's arm in hers. "If Samantha's child lived, what would have happened to her?"

Brenna had to swallow hard past the angry knot in her throat. "She would have been placed in a City Youth Home."

"As you and Sammy were, when you were taken from me." Shann looked out over their village, the shadow of an old pain drifting across her features. "Start there, Blades."

They continued, arm in arm toward the village square as the sun inched over the eastern ridge. Brenna could see several horses assembled in the square, and Jess among the Amazons preparing them for travel.

"This quest for my granddaughter," Shann said. "You know I ask it as queen as well as the child's blood-kin."

"I guess I'm not seeing the difference, right now."

Shann stopped and faced her. "What did Artemis promise Tristaine, Brenna?"

"Which time?" Brenna rubbed her temples. "She promised Tristaine a lot of things. Her protection, for one."

"Yes. And what form will Her protection take?"

Brenna tried to concentrate. She wanted to see Sammy. She wanted to be with Jess. She wanted to get going before her nerve failed. She remembered the passage in their ancient scrolls. "'In the time of Tristaine's deepest travail, she will be led by three generations of blood-bonded queens.' That's the first part of Her prophecy, at least."

"If Samantha's daughter lives," Shann said calmly, "She might be fated to rule this clan after you and I are dust."

"You mean after your reign." Brenna drew in a long breath. "And mine?"

"So I believe, yes."

"Still?" Brenna couldn't speak for a moment. "Are we back to this? Lady, you've heard me deny Tristaine's crown, time and again."

Shann said nothing. Brenna grit her teeth, refusing to soften at the compassion in her mother's gaze. "What about the second part of Artemis's prophesy, Shann? Why didn't you ask me to quote that?"

Shann nodded. "'Of these three blood-bonded queens," she recited, "One will be blessed with great powers. The final destiny of Amazon Nation lies in her hands. She will prove Tristaine's salvation, or her destruction, for all time.'"

"And what if these so-called 'great powers' refer to my second sight?" Brenna felt tears threaten, and she blinked them away angrily. She knew she sounded like a petulant child, but she couldn't seem to help herself. "You realize that means a time might come when the lives of all our sisters will rely on *me*. The

fate of our entire clan. And it's just as likely that I would destroy Tristaine as save it!"

Shann studied her for a moment. "I see how this prophecy has haunted you, daughter. You fear failing Tristaine when she needs you most. But tell me, what queen who has ever ruled Amazons escaped such a fear?" Shann's smile was rueful. "I've shared it myself, Brenna, more times than I care to recount. May Gaia save Tristaine from ever crowning a queen too arrogant to imagine failure."

"But lady, Shann..." Brenna was desperate to make her understand. "You're a real queen. Okay? You're the most amazing leader I've ever seen. You brought six hundred women and children through a mountain range and founded a new village. You outwitted a deranged scientist and destroyed a shrieking demon. And that's just since I came to Tristaine! I'm a *medic*, Shann."

"Yes, Blades, you're a fine healer, and much more." Shann appraised her keenly. "I've seen her in you, this young queen you won't recognize. At times you've seemed filled with the power to lead and inspire. All of us have seen this gift, and so have our Mothers. Haven't you wondered at the wording of the queen's summons, Brenna? *J'heika, rise.* You're called to awaken. These voices you hear *know* that this queen is already within you—"

"Didn't those voices see me drop a full haunch of venison into the cooking fire?" Brenna broke in. "And last winter, I might have poisoned Adik with a remedy she was allergic to if you hadn't stopped me. I'm the one who tripped Oisin in the training drill when she broke her wrist. Shann, I've got all I can do just trying to make myself a half-decent Amazon, much less lead a whole tribe of them!"

"Brenna, one of a queen's most important tasks is to accept her humanity." Shann looked stern now. She cupped Brenna's chin. "Yes, you might stumble, and badly. You might make the wrong choice at a crucial time. But the same is true for every woman who walks beneath the Goddess' sun. You can't allow the

fear of failure to absolve you of your obligation to your clan."

Brenna's head was pounding. She couldn't think about this anymore. "You're asking too much, lady."

"I'm not asking anything, dear one. I'm not one of the Mothers you need to convince. You must argue your future with your spirit guides." Shann took Brenna's shoulders. "But for now and always, Brenna, you are an Amazon of Tristaine. Whether or not you ever serve as her queen, you owe your sisters the very best of your powers. The best of your courage. In every way you can offer them."

They stared at each other, mother and daughter, queen and seer, City-born both and Amazons to their last breath. Strength seeped back into Brenna's legs, and she straightened.

"Besides." Shann's eyes warmed again. "Why assume *you* are the most powerful queen?" She kissed Brenna's forehead fondly. "Go see Sammy. She wants to say goodbye."

❖

Brenna opened the outer window that stood above Sammy's bed in the healing lodge. Her horse's twitching nose pushed its way through the bead curtain, questing for the apple Brenna had placed on the sill. There were a few muted chuckles from the other women in the room who shared Samantha's exile.

"She's beautiful!" Samantha was slightly hoarse, but her delight was obvious. She slid up against the furs folded behind her to stroke the mustang's cheek. "What's her name?"

"Hippo."

Sammy looked at Brenna. She was pale except for the pinpoints of color the fever brought to her cheeks, but a smile dawned on her lips. "You're naming your first horse after my beloved Hippo?"

"I am." Brenna grinned as the horse chomped on the apple contentedly, her long ears twitching. "That name carries good juju in our family."

Hippo had been a small stuffed toy, the only one allowed Samantha in their early years in the Youth Home. As a toddler, Sammy rarely let it out of her sight.

"And hippo is an old Amazon word for horse," Brenna added. "So our clan approves as well."

The mare had had enough of beads tickling her neck, and she shook her massive head with a snort and backed delicately out of the window.

"I've got her, Bren." Jess's rich alto sounded outside, and Brenna waved her thanks.

"Our clan," Sammy repeated.

"Hmm?"

Samantha's glassy eyes focused on the colorful glyph at the base of Brenna's throat, and she touched it with one finger. "Your clan's been very good to me, Bree."

"Hey, it can be your clan too, kid." Brenna registered the chill in her sister's fingers, and she folded them gently into her hand. "You know you can choose a glyph of your own, whenever you feel ready."

Samantha just smiled at her with a look of such sad sweetness Brenna felt tears threaten again. They both knew Samantha wouldn't be choosing a glyph. She wasn't an Amazon.

Blood relation had nothing to do with it. Either the long, harrowing history of Amazon Nation resonated in your bones, or it didn't. In Sammy, it never had. She loved many of the women she met in Tristaine and was loved by them in return. She took to riding horses as naturally as Brenna breathed. As the daughter of their queen, the clan had welcomed Samantha with affection and respect. But by her own choice—out of grief for the loved ones she'd lost, or through the simple lack of some vital bond more spiritual than genetic, Samantha remained a visitor among them.

"We're ready, lass." Jess swept aside the curtain of beads and rested her elbows on the windowsill. She smiled down at Samantha and brushed the backs of her fingers against her cheek. "How's my ornery little sister?"

"Full of phlegm," Sammy sighed. She clasped Jess's hand and kissed it. "You be careful on this trip now, Jesstin." She nodded at Brenna. "And bring her back unscratched, please."

"Aye, adanin. I'll do my very best." Jess looked at Brenna with concern. Brenna nodded slightly, acknowledging the fever that worried them both. "Be well, my Sammy." Jess ducked back out the window, and the bead curtain clicked closed.

Brenna knew she had to say goodbye now, neatly and quickly, or she'd be reduced to a slobbering mess. She bent over Sammy and rested her cheek against her warm forehead. "Be good. Do what Shann says. I'll see you in a few days."

"Okay," Samantha murmured. Brenna sat up. Sammy's eyes were drifting closed, but she smiled again. "Shann said...you have to give me the keys to Hippo...and let me ride her when you come back."

"That's a promise," Brenna whispered. She kissed Samantha's cheek and then got up.

❖

Jess finished tying her last pack to the sling across Bracken's back. She stroked her horse's neck, and he lifted one hoof and clocked it impatiently against a stone. Bracken's sentiment was clear—enough mush, time to hit the trail.

"Work on your patience, old friend." Jess grinned and gave her mustang's neck a last pat. "And keep your little sister over there under close watch on this journey. She carries precious cargo."

She turned and watched Hakan help Brenna climb aboard her bay mare. Hakan's arms were layered with muscle, but her big hands on Brenna's waist were gentleness itself. She served expertly and well as the clan's master of horse, but Jess valued Hakan equally as a warrior and a friend. The ebony sheen of her skin was marked with several scars earned fighting in Tristaine's defense. Jess couldn't ask for a more able sister to ride with her on this mission.

Dana and Kyla were just mounting their horses. The last of their party, Vicar, Jess's blood-cousin, frowned as she straightened the blanket that would cushion Kyla's legs from her gelding's coarse hide. As fair as Jess was dark and just as tall, Vicar's frown could strike terror into more than one stout Amazon heart. She shared Jess's reputation as a fierce fighter, as well as her protective adoration of Kyla. Kyla grinned down at Vicar and gave her nose a playful tweak.

It was a good cadre, Jess thought, a balanced collection of skills and brave spirits.

More women were trickling into the square now to wish them safe travel. Jess closed her eyes and inhaled, long and deep. She smelled horses, the faint smoke from cooking fires, bacon sizzling in a nearby lodge. And as always, the light, green scent of pine and spruce.

"What we smell lingers in our minds more clearly than what we see."

Eyes still closed, Jess smiled. Shann's quiet voice at her side was deeply familiar and welcome.

"Aye." Jess blew out a long breath. "It's what I yearned for most in my time in the City. The Clinic reeked of chemicals and fear." She suppressed a shiver. "I conjured the aromas of home to pass the nights."

"And now you lead the sisters you love most back to the source of your nightmares." Shann touched Jess's corded forearm. "Jesstin, does Brenna understand how much you fear returning to the City?"

Jess blinked. "We're all scared, lady. And we know what we need to do, in spite of our fear."

"It's different for you." Shann looked at Jess searchingly. "Captivity was an unimaginable horror for you, dear one. Not just the physical hardships you suffered—dreadful as those were. You were locked away from the stars and the sky, night after night, for seven months. I feared such a thing would kill you. It

was a full season before that haunted look began to leave your eyes."

"Shann—"

Shann nodded encouragement, but Jess found nothing to say. She wiped a small bead of sweat from her upper lip.

"It doesn't matter, lady," Jess said finally. "We both know I have to do this."

"Yes." Shann lowered her head and sighed. "All right, but hear this, Jesstin. Let your sisters take care of you, when you have need. Don't be so strong that you shut out their comfort. You are not alone this time."

"Aye, Shann. I hear you."

Shann cradled Jess's cheek for a moment, then stepped back so she could swing aboard her horse.

Bracken turned with gentle pressure from Jess's knee. Jess looked at the column of five mounted Amazons who waited with gathered reins for her signal. She looked at Brenna and tried to convey all her love and pride in her brief smile. Jess turned and nodded at Shann. "Your blessing, lady?"

Shann stepped back until all six riders could see her, and then lifted one hand in benediction. "Amazons, may our Mothers guide your path," she called, her words ringing clarion clear in the crisp morning air. "Your sisters will hold you safe in their prayers until we see you again. You carry with you all our hope. Ride for Tristaine!"

Jess let out a short, sharp whistle and was answered with immediate discipline by five others. The women standing in the square unleashed a lusty war cry of farewell, and Jess nudged Bracken into an easy canter. She heard the other horses fall in behind her in ordered cadence, and she led them toward the tree-lined path that would take them down off the mesa.

Jess knew she was not the only one whose vision blurred with tears at this parting. Shann was right. This time she wasn't alone.

Chapter Four

Jess set a brutal pace, and they held it for days.

Brenna trusted Jess to prioritize safety. They couldn't risk a horse stumbling from exhaustion, or a rider so weary she couldn't sit erect. Care had to be taken when they traveled steeper trails. But keeping those practicalities in mind, they rode steady, hard, relentless hours, and breaks were kept to an absolute minimum.

I'm sore in places I would have sworn under oath I didn't have, Brenna thought. She stared down between her horse's silky ears, envying Hippo's ability to shake off the clouds of small black gnats they kept riding through.

Hippo was proving an able mount. The little mustang was what Jess called a natural ride, suited by personality, temperament and build to carrying a human passenger. Jess's Bracken had literally leaned into Hippo every time she decided to outpace Brenna's command, and horse and rider soon reached a friendly accord, but the long miles of rugged terrain were telling on them both.

The path Kyla found that morning was wide enough to allow riding two abreast. A sheer rock wall rose on the left side of their trail. Brenna knew Jess could tell her if the wall was composed of limestone or granite or basalt, but all she truly cared about was it was solid rock. She found that reassuring, as the right side of their path was bordered by an equally sheer drop into empty space.

Jess always rode the outside of any precipitous trail, and Brenna's ever-present discomfort with heights was somewhat

eased by her protective presence. If Brenna wanted to peer over the edge, first she'd have to see past the rock-jawed Amazon warrior who rode beside her, and she much preferred to dwell on Jess's profile.

It was late afternoon, and the jagged cliffs were casting dark, slanted shadows across the rocky plains far below them. Brenna was almost too weary to appreciate the majestic beauty of their surroundings anymore, but the glory of the summer day still managed to register now and then. Having spent the first twenty-two years of her life in the City's urban sprawl, Brenna had never lost her sense of wonder and pleasure in the rugged loveliness of the high hills.

The forests had grown thicker as the Amazons descended from their stronghold, though the section of rocky ground they rode now was almost bare of vegetation. They had galloped through fields of dazzling wildflowers under blue skies rich with birdsong. They had forded cold, glittering streams, fast and deep with summer snowmelt, their passage carefully chosen at the rivers' shallowest points. Their party was covering ground more quickly than they could have hoped, but Brenna knew their pace would slow soon. They were nearing the pass of her dream.

"So how do we know one of us still won't come down with this devil-flu?" Dana called back. She clung grimly to the neck of her horse, having achieved an efficient, if not graceful, style of riding. "We still could, right?"

"We still might," Brenna confirmed. She and Jess rode directly behind Dana and Kyla, and Vicar and Hakan brought up their rear. "One of us, or all of us, could still get sick. Everyone in the clan was exposed, but some will fall ill later than others."

"That's why Jesstin brought backup, adanin, to improve our odds." Hakan sat her large stallion with ease, the silver glyph on her cheek glittering in the light of the afternoon sun. "Vicar and I will stay with our brother Jodoch. If the four of you aren't back by our deadline, we'll make our own sojourn to the Clinic."

"We'll be needed to break Jesstin's skinny butt out of the lock house," Vicar predicted. She winked at Brenna. "And bribe the rest of you out of whatever bordello she's sold you into."

"You could never begin to afford me, warrior." Kyla turned on her horse to see virtually everyone staring at her, and grinned. "I know, I sounded just like Aria, didn't I?"

"Just." Dana snickered.

Brenna was relieved to hear this gentle teasing. Despite their fierce reputation, laughter played a surprisingly large role in Amazon life. Thus far their journey had been a tense and silent one, and it was good to see her adanin smile again.

They were reaching a wide break in the rock wall that ran along the side of their trail. Brenna felt a cool breeze lift her hair as the wall gave way to a rolling vista of hills stretching toward the east. The pure mountain air provided miles of visibility, and Brenna was struck by the checkerboard of forested fields reaching to the far horizon.

Ahead of them, Kyla pulled her horse to a stop. "Jesstin? Is that—" She pointed out over the wide expanse of valley, and Brenna shaded her eyes and tried to follow her gaze.

"Aye, lass. I see it."

Brenna glanced at Jess, surprised by her flat, somber tone. She looked out over the valley again.

For several moments Brenna searched in vain for whatever had caught her sisters' notice. Then she found it. The mountain lake was an impossibly distant glint of color, made miniscule by the many long leagues that lay between it and their present course. It was probably the largest body of water in these hills, but when Brenna finally sighted it, it seemed a tiny, far away spark of diamond-blue light.

A sigh moved through all of them, a brief, mournful breeze.

"*Sigmen sulla nostra sede*," Hakan murmured.

Kyla leaned closer to Dana. "Blessings on our home," she translated softly.

They were seeing, for the first time, the final resting place of two dozen of their Amazon sisters. Those distant, pure waters covered the graves of women lost to Tristaine in the final battle with Caster, including Kyla's beloved Camryn. The village that had housed their clan for generations was destroyed by the flood the Amazons unleashed to wash Caster's rotting soul from the world at last.

Brenna saw Jess and Vicar make identical hand signs, a subtle and silent weaving of fingers to end their prayers. Jess patted Bracken's neck and regarded them quietly.

"Let's ride on, adanin. The pass waits."

❖

"Sheesh, Brenna." Dana threw her an incredulous look. "Do your dreams have to be so dang literal?"

The pass through the last high portion of the hills was not marked by any dramatic dip in the trail they had followed since dawn. The cliff wall bordered them solidly again on the left. From what Brenna could see, the path narrowed significantly just ahead, and that was worrisome, but the series of bloody waterfalls was worse.

All right, that's an exaggeration, Brenna scolded herself. There were no great gushing gory spigots of blood cascading over the rocky trail ahead. But there was a good quarter mile of smaller falls dotting the cliff's sides, wide streams of reddish, mud-colored water that splashed down on the path and over its side, like fitful squalls of rain.

"That trail aims to be wicked slick," Vicar drawled behind Brenna.

"Aye, it'll be tricky footing." Jess leaned out to see around a bend in the pass far ahead, and Brenna automatically hooked a finger in her belt, as if to anchor her on Bracken's back.

"The track looks wide and solid enough for single passage, Jesstin." The calm assurance in Hakan's tone soothed Brenna.

Somewhat. "The waters might have eroded the stone, but from here I see no crumbling edges."

"Bren." Jess spoke softly as she brushed Brenna's thigh. "This is probably the stretch where Samantha's friends fell."

"Yeah. Yes, I think it is," Brenna said faintly.

Some sad and certain insight told her the two women who had helped Sammy leave the City both died here. Her sister's recounting of those final brutal moments was still vivid in Brenna's mind. A fist-sized rock had bounced off the cliff and struck Lee Ann in the head. Her wife Karen lunged to catch her. They both slid off the trail, clutching each other and screaming, and were gone in a heartbeat. Samantha had been left alone in the wilderness, grieving yet more loss, and forced to find Tristaine on her own. Karen and Lee Ann were remembered around the clan's storyfires, whenever the names of loved Amazons lost to this world were evoked.

"Are you steady, lass?" Jess's gaze was patient and measuring.

"I am, Jess." Brenna drew herself up on Hippo's back, mentally inserting steel in her spine. Jess had enough on her mind without worrying about her. "Let's trot."

Jess smiled and cupped the back of Brenna's neck. "All right, sisters, move with care. We'll cross in roped pairs. Dana and I will lead."

Kyla sighed. "Are you going to butch me out again, Jesstin? I've ridden lead all day."

"And you're well capable of heading our line now, Ky." Jess shook out the hemp rope looped on her sidebelt. "But I'd rather have my Bracken's wee frame test any weakness in the rock. You'll walk behind Dana. Hakan? Keep a close watch on Brenna's beast. Adanin, string out and dismount."

They shifted cautiously, positioning their horses. Brenna bit her lip on a groan as she swung her leg stiffly over Hippo's back and dropped to the ground. She brushed her wrist across her forehead and realized she was sweating. The shrill cry of a hawk

reached her, and she caught a glimpse of it, descending to the rock floor far below in lazy spirals.

"Hey, Bren." Kyla was beside her, twirling one end of the rope already secured to her waist. "Want to try out some of those neat trick knots Sarah showed us last season?"

"Let's just stick with the basics, shall we?" Brenna smiled weakly and tied the loop of hemp around her waist with surgical precision. She started when Hippo suddenly shook her massive head, the coarse hair of her mane slapping across her face.

"Easy, little sister."

Brenna clawed her matted bangs out of her eyes and saw Hakan's encouraging smile. "You're with your adanin, and Artemis smiles on Tristaine. All will be well."

"Thanks," Brenna said softly, and meant it. Like Jess, Hakan was a warrior strong enough to allow connections of tender honesty, and her reassurance meant something.

Vicar's melodic whistle cut the air, signaling the readiness of their line. Brenna took in a deep breath and then coughed out the rock dust stirred by their movements. Kyla stood just ahead of her, roped to Brenna and holding the reins of her sturdy dun gelding. If she stood on her toes, she could see flashes of Jess's head beyond Kyla and Dana. Brenna tried to quell the fluttering in her stomach.

"Leave maneuvering space between our teams," Jess called. "If there's a misstep, find a brace fast and go flat. Mind the woman in front of you."

"Aye, Jesstin," Vicar acknowledged from the rear of the line.

"Aye, Jesstin," Dana echoed, in a much higher voice, and Kyla giggled nervously.

Brenna watched Jess and Dana start out, the slow clocking of their horses' hooves on the craggy stone the only sound in the clear afternoon light. The trail narrowed almost immediately, and Jess led Bracken at a slow and careful pace. Dana clicked

at her sorrel, following Jess closely, but leaving slack in the line connecting them.

When they were several yards ahead, Kyla glanced back at her, and Brenna nodded. She stepped closer to Hippo and stroked her soft nose. "You stay cool, shaggy sister," she murmured, then turned to follow Kyla out to the first slope of the pass. Hippo responded readily to her tug on the reins.

Jess and her horse had reached the first of the mini-waterfalls, and Brenna watched her tensely. Jess moved with athletic ease, keeping her back close to the wall, her slow side-step sure on the slick rock. She and Bracken were both drenched in that brief deluge, but they shook off the cold, muddy water without missing a stride.

Relieved, Brenna fastened her gaze on the rump of Kyla's horse in front of her. They had reached the narrowing of the trail, and there was a more distinct descent than she'd anticipated. Behind her, she heard Hakan whistle softly to her towering stallion as she and Vicar set out.

The going was precarious, but not overtly harrowing. Brenna had advised Shann wisely when she warned her to avoid this pass—trying to move hundreds of women and wagons across its narrow length would have proved sure calamity. But Hakan's assessment held true—the solid shelf beneath Brenna's feet offered ample space for the breadth of a horse, and her heart began to slow to a more bearable rhythm.

"Yee...shikes!" Dana's shrill cry rocketed Brenna's pulse back to full speed, and her head snapped up. Dana was passing beneath the first wide splatter of muddy water, and she shook herself vigorously. "Damn—frigging—freezing—"

"Girl, if you yell like that again, I'll kick you off this mountain myself!" Kyla snapped, her voice echoing off the cliffs around them. "You scared the holy pink bile out of me."

"Dana, there's a widish ridge to step across," Jess called. "All of you, mind your step here."

Brenna figured it was just as well that she couldn't see Jess at that moment.

Kyla was entering the spray of water now, leading her dun mustang with small, efficient steps. Brenna swallowed hard when her turn came to pass through the wide spatter, and she gasped as the chilly drops hit her. Cold, yes, but no worse than Tristaine's streams in winter. She blew out explosively to spit muddy water from her lips and tugged Hippo safely through after her.

Even with her heightened blood pressure, Brenna felt a small thrill of pride as she looked up into her horse's mild brown eyes. Tristaine's herds were no strangers to rocky peaks, and Hippo was taking this treacherous trail like the mountain-born mustang she was.

Brenna stepped on a flat slate of wet shale and her heel shot out from under her. She dropped hard and landed on her butt with an impact that snapped her jaws shut. Hippo snorted at the abrupt pull on her reins and pranced uneasily.

"Brenna!" Jess's shout whip-cracked against the rock wall.

I'm not near the edge. Brenna's left foot indeed dangled over the abrupt drop, but she was in no danger of falling. The first pain was so sharp she thought for an awful moment that she'd broken her coccyx, but then the spasm subsided to an almost bearable ache. "Don't try to get to me," she called breathlessly. "I'm fine."

She heard Hakan behind her, chanting soothingly to Hippo, who quieted readily. Brenna brushed her dripping hair out of her eyes and put a shaking hand to the wall.

"Get up slowly, Bren." Kyla was crouched against the cliff ahead of her, watching her anxiously. "I should have warned you about that patch of shale, honey, I'm so sorry."

"N-no harm done." Brenna gathered her feet under her and pushed up gingerly, wincing at the flare of pain in her hip. She couldn't see Jess, but she could feel her anxiety coming at her in palpable waves. "I'm all right, Jesstin," she called.

Jess whistled in response, and they moved on.

The rocky path was descending more noticeably now. Enough so that Jess risked a controlled slide of a few paces, banking her speed with the soles of her feet. She led Bracken through another brief downpour of reddish water. Dana was following her a little too closely, and she signaled her to lay back.

Jess half-regretted insisting on taking the lead. Like Tristaine's horses, Jess had been born to the high hills, and this precarious part of their trek held no great fear for her. But Brenna's fall had jarred her. She hated having women and horses blocking her way to her wife.

They were better than halfway across the pass. Jess's mind began to move on to the next challenge, to making up the time they'd lost creeping along this damned ridge. At first she thought the low buzzing noise must have been coming from some winged insect, until it registered more clearly in her ears as a growl.

Jess turned slowly, the pores of her skin opening, her senses narrowing to an intense focus. She recognized the source of the sound before she saw the tawny cat.

She and Dyan had encountered cougars at a distance twice on their night hikes, both small females. This was a large male, better than eighty pounds. It stood on a wide ledge approximately twenty feet above Kyla's head. The big cat was crouching, its long tail twitching in small arcs. Jess stepped closer to Bracken and unlaced her bow from his side pack.

"Hey! Easy, boy!" Dana tried to curb her horse, who was back-stepping skittishly. Jess's sisters hadn't seen the cougar yet, but their horses were more than aware of its presence. Vicar's roan unleashed a nervous whinny at the rear of the line.

Jess sent out a low, reverberating whistle to warn her adanin. For a heartbeat, she held out hope that the cat would retreat. It wasn't starving—well fed by summer game, its silver-gold cloak was sleek and layered with healthy muscle. But they had obviously passed very close to its holdings. The cougar dropped

deftly to a lower ledge, closer to Kyla, and Jess knew they had no time.

And she had no space. The bulk of Dana's horse blocked her view of Kyla and Brenna, and she had no clear line to the cat. Jess whispered a prayer to her Mothers, measured the width of the path, and took two long running steps. She vaulted off the rock trail and over Bracken's head, her feet landing solidly on the mustang's broad back. Her horse started beneath her but quickly stilled, and Jess was able to stand erect.

She took in everything in the scant seconds needed to notch the arrow and raise her bow. Dana looking up at her, her mouth agape. Brenna, lying flat on the rock, staring up at the cougar in fearful fascination. Vicar, stringing her own arrow. Hakan, calming her stallion as well as Brenna's mount. And Kyla, trying to soothe her horse, her back to the cougar that crouched above and behind her.

"Kyla, down!" Jess clenched her teeth and let fly. The obsidian-tipped arrow sizzled from her bow, split the air in a sharp arc, and punched solidly into the big cat's chest. It convulsed on the ledge and emitted a high-pitched snarl. A moment later, Vicar's arrow pierced its side. The cat staggered and fell from the ledge, narrowly missing Kyla's head. It struck the edge of their trail and then dropped into empty space.

It was too much for Kyla's horse. It neighed shrilly and reared, its hooves flashing dangerously close to Kyla's raised hands.

"Kyla, get clear of her!" Hakan was struggling to get past Hippo to reach them.

Jess saw one hoof clip Kyla's shoulder. Brenna cried out, and Kyla teetered on the edge of the path, her arms pinwheeling wildly.

She fell over the side.

"No!" Dana screamed, giving voice to Jess's horror.

Even knowing Kyla was roped, that Brenna was flat on the ground and braced, Jess's breath iced in her chest until she was

able to convince herself that Kyla hadn't just plummeted to the stone floor far below. The hemp cord arrested her fall, though her weight dragged Brenna a good two feet toward the edge before Hakan reached her and braced her. Jess saw Kyla clutch the rope and knock against the stone wall as her abrupt descent stopped short some fifteen feet below their trail.

Jess set her foot on Bracken's rump and jumped off his back, landing close to the cliff wall. Dana was fighting her way past her horse to get to Brenna, so recklessly Jess feared she might go over too. She followed her, moving carefully but fast, minding the rope between them didn't snag.

"We're well set, Jesstin!" Hakan was half-draped over Brenna, her big hands gripping the rope. Brenna's smaller ones were white-knuckled around the cord, but she looked up at Jess and nodded wordlessly, her eyes enormous.

"Vicar!" Jess saw her cousin stilling their horses on the narrow stone shelf.

"They're steady, Jess," Vicar called. "I'm on my way."

"Kyla, hang on!" Dana was lying on the rock, her head dangling over the edge of the trail. "Don't move!"

"Okay." Kyla's voice sounded high and faint.

"Dana, you're off rope." Jess untied the knot around Dana's waist with quick efficiency, her blood pounding in her ears. "Find an anchor and hold on."

Vicar reached them, muttering a low litany of curses. She stretched out on the ledge beside Dana. "Kyla, you hear me! Don't you dare let go!"

"Gee, thanks, Vic, okay," Kyla snapped.

Jess crouched at the edge of the drop and saw her, her red hair a splash of color against the tans and grays of the canyon wall. Kyla's face was upturned, but her eyes were squeezed shut against the grit and small bits of gravel dislodged by her fall. She had managed to find a protruding stone wide enough to brace one foot. Her other boot dangled over empty air. The rope tethering her to the world had slid up under her armpits. If Jess didn't get

to her soon, Kyla risked hanging herself or dropping through the loop entirely.

"You have me?" Jess barked.

"Aye, Jess!" Vicar and Dana both held sections of Jess's rope, ready to lower her over the ledge.

Jess wound the cord around her wrist, pivoted, and stepped over the edge of the cliff. She risked one glance at Brenna, who still lay beneath Hakan, clenching Kyla's rope. Brenna's plea for her safety, and Jess's answering reassurance, passed silently between them in that quick look.

"Heads up, Ky." Jess stepped down the wall carefully, letting Vicar and Dana ration out her line in even intervals. The cord bit into her back, and she heard small pebbles bouncing off the rock in her wake. A light gust of wind rocked her slightly.

"Careful, Jess!" Kyla was trying for calm, but fear strained her voice. "You're almost here."

Jess checked her line and covered the last few feet, coming down on Kyla's left side. "Hold," she called to Dana and Vicar, then squinted at Kyla and smiled. "Hello, little sister."

Kyla smiled back tremulously, but she had reached the end of her bravado. Her face was ashen, and she was gripping the rope bloodlessly. Her right leg was trembling, holding all of her weight.

"We'll do this." Jess balanced carefully, and then slid her right arm beneath Kyla's hips. "I'm going to lift you a bit."

"I'm s-scared to take my foot off."

"It's all right, lass." Jess was close beside her now. "I've got a good hold on you. Hakan and Brenna have your line, Dana and Vicar have me. We'll go easy."

"Okay," Kyla whispered.

Jess winked at her, then tightened her left hand on the rope and slowly raised Kyla a few precious inches. Kyla gasped as her foot left the rock, but she managed not to flail and kept her upper body straight.

"I've carried you on my shoulders a hundred times, adanin."

Jess let Kyla feel the solid brace of her arm beneath her. "You steady?"

"Yeah. Better." Kyla's teeth were chattering.

"Good. Keep your eyes on the rock in front of us. Take one hand off the rope, and pull the loop down around your waist."

Kyla made a whimpering sound, but she complied. The slack in the coil allowed her to arrange it more securely around her body.

"They'll pull us up in stages, Ky. Nice and slow." Jess checked their stance, and then looked up to see Vicar peering grimly over the ledge. She whistled.

"On three," Vicar barked.

Jess heard her count down, and then felt a strong tug on her rope, raising her several inches. She kept her right arm firmly under Kyla's hips, and they moved smoothly upward together.

"Let your feet touch the wall," Jess coached quietly. "Look straight ahead. You're doing well, lass."

"Thanks." Kyla gasped as they rose another two feet, and she flicked Jess a glance. "Jesstin?"

"Aye."

"You can butch me out any time. Okay?"

"Okay."

It wasn't a long climb, but every inch of it was torturous. Jess whispered assurance to Dyan, promising her she wouldn't fail, she wouldn't let her blood-sister die.

"We're right here, Ky!" Dana leaned over the ledge and extended her hand, still a good three feet from Kyla's head.

"You're not roped, you bloody fool!" Vicar snarled. "Keep well back! Again now, don't jerk—one, two, three!"

Kyla crested the edge first. Vicar reached down and snagged the cloth of her tunic, and she and Dana hauled her bodily over the lip of the ledge. A deep wave of relief swept Jess as Kyla's weight left her shoulder, and she saw Hakan's broad hand above her head. She grasped it, and felt herself hoisted as if she were light as a child. She scrambled up onto the trail, panting.

Kyla lay back against Vicar, ghostly white, her eyes closed. She still gripped the slack hemp rope. Dana knelt next to her.

"Dana, rope on." Jess shook out her stiff fingers and tossed the end of her line to Dana, then felt Brenna's cold touch on her forearm.

"Well done, hotshot," Brenna whispered and kissed Jess's cheek. She was as pale as Kyla, but she stepped nimbly past Jess and knelt on the ledge beside her. She laid her hand gently on Kyla's head. "Honey? Can you open your eyes?"

"No," Kyla muttered, opening them. She released a shaking sigh. "Sheesh."

"I know." Brenna felt the back of Kyla's head, and then her neck and shoulders. "Are you hurt, Ky?"

"I don't think so, I'm just shook." Kyla shrugged, wincing. "My shoulder smarts a little."

Dana snatched her hand from Kyla's shoulder as if she'd touched a hot iron. Jess noted that both Kyla and Brenna were regaining their color, but Dana's features were still the shade of old linen.

Brenna examined Kyla's shoulder. "I can't see it well here. Can you move your arm?"

"Sure." Kyla demonstrated feebly, then gaped at Dana. "Dana, did you see the size of that cat?"

"Yeah." Dana smiled sickly. "So, you're okay?"

"That was a fine shot, Jesstin." Vicar was still seated on the stone, supporting Kyla. "You're still a bloody second faster than me, damn your eyes."

"Your arrow hit true as well, Vic." Hakan brushed rock dust off her palms, leaning against the cliff wall. "Dyan would smile on us all today."

Her old friend's smile chased the last of the chill from Jess's blood.

"Hey, Jess? Come here, please." Kyla sat up, looking calmer.

Brenna rose, and Jess took her elbow as they exchanged places on the narrow shelf. Jess knelt beside Kyla, who looked at her silently for a moment.

"Well, you saved my life again," Kyla said. "Thank you, Jesstin. I'm going to bake you a big pie."

"You're welcome, little sister. Blackberry apple."

Kyla kissed her soundly on the lips, and Jess grinned. "Think we're ready to put the last of this pass behind us?"

"Yeah, I'm game." Kyla let Jess pull her carefully to her feet. Kyla craned past Jess to see Brenna. "Aren't you amazed that neither of us threw up, Bren?"

"I was just thinking that!" Brenna was taking in her line carefully. "Shann's going to be so—"

She was interrupted by the sound of Dana, still on her hands and knees, vomiting copiously into the canyon.

Chapter Five

Brenna found the ghostly hooting of a horned owl fitting music to mark the end of this nightmare-inducing day. In their urgency to reach the City, sleep was snatched in judiciously rationed hours, and she intended to wring every drop of peace she could from this brief respite.

Kyla was already fading, curled on her side not far from Brenna. They hadn't laid a fire yet, but the full moon cast enough light to reveal Vicar laying out a meal of dried meat and berries. Hakan was setting their horses to graze in a small grassy field this side of the trees.

Brenna winced as her bruised hip protested, and she stretched out gingerly on the folded blanket Jess had spread on the sparse grass of their campsite. She could still see the moon, embodied as Selene in Amazon lore, kissing the tops of the trees before beginning her long, slow glide across the night sky. Brenna silently petitioned her to take her sweet time.

Brenna examined the rope burn across her palm, longing for her journal the way she used to long for a drink, with the same fretful nostalgia. Carrying any written account of life in Tristaine would be pure folly if they were captured, but Brenna missed her nightly ritual, the scratch of her quill across the page in the peaceful cabin she shared with Jess.

As if summoned by her thoughts, Jess emerged from the trees, her tall figure silvered in moonlight, carrying an armload of dry kindling. Brenna sat up, deciding she craved her adonai's touch more than food, sleep, her journal, or air in her lungs.

"Grub's about ready, Stumpy." Vicar sucked two fingers noisily as Jess layered the wood in the firepit dug in the center of

their circle. “We’ll have enough left over for a tasty stew.”

“Your recipe, Bigfoot?” Jess gripped the small of her back and stretched, wincing, then smiled at Brenna. “Hope my lovely lady has packed strong colonics.”

“Ah, this is just your runt of a horse, he’ll go down fine.” Vicar sprinkled an herb over the dried meat. “I’ll get our fire started. At least I’m still faster with a flint than you, cousin.”

“Spark away, mate.” Jess lowered herself on one knee next to Brenna and kissed her lightly. “I’ll bring us water, Bren, then join you soon.”

“Dana’s already gone to the spring.” Brenna patted the blanket beside her. “Sit down, Jesstin, rest your bones. This is me butching you out.”

Jess offered another tired smile and settled stiffly onto the blanket beside her. They sat quietly for a moment, leaning into each other. It was possibly the first time in days neither of them had some urgent task to perform, and Brenna relished their shared stillness.

Jess nodded at Kyla. “Ky’s shoulder?”

“It’ll be tender for awhile, but she’s all right.” Brenna breathed in Jess’s familiar scent, marveling at the quiver of arousal that managed to sneak through her weariness. “She’s out like a light. Let’s let her sleep. We’ll feed her a Bracken sandwich before we mount up.”

“What’s this?” Frowning, Jess took Brenna’s hand and turned her palm toward the light beginning to flicker from the campfire.

“It took me a second to get the right grip up there.” Brenna shuddered, remembering the ghastly sight of Kyla teetering on the edge of the abyss. “It’s not bad, love.”

“Bet it hurts, though.” Jess examined the thin burn the rope had left across the base of her palm, then turned and rummaged in Brenna’s pack. She drew out a serrated leaf of aloe and snapped it smartly in half, then squeezed a drop of its thick juice onto her callused finger.

Brenna watched Jess smooth the cool unguent across the burn, her touch as tender and healing as Shann's. "Speaking of the pass," she said, "was it strictly necessary, Jesstin?"

"What's that?"

"Shooting a raging cougar…while standing on top of a horse…on a mountain ledge less than four feet wide?"

"I thought I looked great." Jess's mild brogue twirled the word. She blew softly on Brenna's palm. "Keep this clean, now."

"Well, Kyla better bake me a pie too." Brenna brushed woodchips off Jess's lap. "Spiked with enough cannabis to make me forget watching you shimmy over the edge of a cliff."

"Ah, even better than blackberry apple! We'll take two." Jess raised Brenna's fingers to her lips and kissed them. "You did stunning well on the pass today, lass. There was a time coming anywhere near a drop like that would have frozen your bones."

"Yeah, and that time was about six hours ago." But Brenna smiled, hearing her praise and warmed by it. Jess was right. She had conquered a lot of her fear.

She remembered another horrific day, years ago, when she had clung to the side of a cliff next to Kyla. Jess's description nailed it. Her bones had frozen so solid she couldn't move. Vicar had to all but pry her fingers off the rock to get her going again. That rescue had been Brenna's introduction to Jess's wild cousin, and it had taken some time to overcome that withering first impression. She remembered Vicar's gruff pat on her back today as they left the pass.

Brenna smiled a welcome at Hakan as she stepped into their camp, marveling again at the big warrior's ability to move through brush in absolute silence. "How's Valkyrie's foot?"

"Hoof," Vicar snorted, feeding kindling to the fire.

"Val's foot is fleet again, thank you, little sister." Hakan peered down at Kyla fondly, and spoke softly. "It was a small stone, Jesstin, it won't lame him."

"Good, adanin. Get something to eat and tie a feedbag on

Vicar." Jess rolled her head slowly, and Brenna heard her neck crackle. "The night's passing fast. I'd best go see what's keeping our water-bearer."

Brenna touched Jess's arm. "Let me go, Jess. I'd like to splash some of this trail grit off my teeth before I eat anyway." She got up, stifling an unladylike grunt, and planted a kiss on the top of Jess's head.

"I miss ye already," Jess murmured. Her tired blue eyes looked almost vulnerable. "Be safe."

Brenna bent and kissed her again, this time on the mouth, slow and deep. Rich tendrils of pleasure swirled through her. She made herself straighten, feeling color fill her cheeks and hoping a cold splash of water would cool her ardor a bit. Jess's plaintive look made it harder to leave her, but she wanted a moment alone with Dana.

She stepped carefully around Kyla and made her way through the brush toward the faint sound of the rippling stream that ran just north of their camp. Brenna found she had energy left to appreciate the beauty of the night. The ebony, star-drenched bowl of sky above her would be a bank of smog-choked clouds in the City. She drank in the flickering glory of Tristaine's constellation while she could.

The pine-scented air had cooled Brenna's cheeks when she found the stream, wide but shallow, running swift and glittering beneath Selene's gold light. Dana stood in its center, the dark water swirling around her knees. She was gazing back toward the high cliffs they had struggled through that day. It was too dark for Brenna to see her clearly, but every line of Dana's body was slumped and pensive.

"Hey." Brenna didn't want to startle her, and she didn't. Dana turned toward her with a kind of calm resignation, as if she'd known her solitude wouldn't last. "You need any help?"

"Nah, I'm good." Dana nodded at the dripping canteens stacked neatly at the river's edge. "Just wanted to catch us some fresh trout before heading back."

"Good idea." Brenna bit her lip. She had seen Jess plunge her hands into fast-running streams and pull out flapping salmon. She'd seen Dana fall butt-first in the water trying to do the same. No need to draw on her psychic sense to know the young warrior wasn't up for fishing tonight. Brenna sat down on the mossy bank and watched Dana wade slowly to shore.

"We're making good time, huh?" Dana settled cross-legged beside Brenna, shifting to keep from getting her wet. "Even with the pass."

"Yeah, we're doing well." Brenna waved a mosquito away from her ear. "Better than Jess hoped."

"We've still got that long stretch from the foothills to the City." Dana picked a smooth pebble from the earth and skipped it across the stream. "Dang, Brenna, I hate us having to sleep. We need to get this drug back to Sammy."

"Samantha's young and strong." Brenna rubbed Dana's forearm. "I worry more about our elders. Shann and our healers will do all they can to keep them with us."

She let the quiet spin out between them. Dana would talk to her, usually, if she didn't push. She probably confided in Brenna more than anyone, other than Kyla, and she couldn't talk to Kyla about this. Brenna tried to see her face without appearing to stare. Dana's jaw was clenched, and her eyes were muddy and unhappy.

"I think I would have followed her over." Dana kept her gaze on the swift-moving river. "If that rope hadn't caught."

"No, honey, you wouldn't have."

Dana scowled. "Why do you say that?"

"Because four Amazon sisters who love you very much would have stopped you." Brenna imagined Jess knocked off the edge of the cliff, and she shuddered. "It must have been terrible for you back there, Dana."

"I died inside." Dana spoke without inflection. "I don't know what I'd do if I lost Kyla, Bren."

"I know how that feels." Brenna hesitated. She couldn't

promise that Kyla, or any of them, would survive this quest, and the thought of losing any of their adanin chilled her heart too. "Maybe we can take today as a reminder, though, that we should tell our friends the truth about important things, while they're still around."

"Yeah, like that's gonna happen." Dana skipped another stone across the stream. "Hey, Kyla, I'm crazy in love with—*blat*!" She pretended to throw up. Brenna laughed, and Dana smiled at her ruefully. "And your stupid girlfriend is still showing me up, I hope you noticed."

"Yes, I spoke to her about that." Brenna turned her head and spat delicately to fend off another whining mosquito. "I'm getting feasted on out here. Care to escort me back to our posh holdings?"

"I can do that." Dana sighed and climbed to her feet and gave Brenna a hand up. "Don't tell Ky I went all mushy on you."

"Nope, your mushiness is yours to reveal." Brenna snagged the straps of three of the canteens and wound her arm through Dana's. "Come on, or there won't be any horse cutlets left."

"Oh, dang. Vicar's cooking?"

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Curled in Jess's arms, Brenna slept hard and deep.

"We must talk, j'heika."

Brenna groaned. Not again. Surely whatever this was, it could wait until morning.

"Brenna, wake up."

The voice, while still respectful, carried a certain command this time.

Brenna lifted her head, and stood facing Elise. She discovered a new element had been added to this spectral plane—a marble basin stood on a waist-high pedestal between them, full to its oval surface with clear water.

"If you're going to sleep this rarely," the younger woman said politely, "You must find a way to reach me while awake."

"Good evening, Elise." Brenna greeted her just as politely. "Do you have news of home?"

"Some." The sparkling veil moved, as if Elise had inclined her head. "The plague progresses, j'heika. More of our sisters fall ill."

Brenna discovered her hands could still prickle with anxiety in the spirit world. "How many, Elise? Do you know how my sister is? Her name is Samantha."

"I'll bring you to one who can tell you." Elise hesitated for a moment, and something in her uncertainty made her seem fully human to Brenna for the first time. Her hands rose slowly, slipped the silver veil off her brown curls, and settled it around her shoulders.

Human or divine, Elise's beauty was ethereal. She gazed at Brenna through dark-lashed jade eyes, and her skin held the pale perfection of porcelain. Brenna took in the girl's exquisite features in one glance and felt her heart constrict with sorrow.

Tears moved soundlessly down Elise's face. Her expression was sweetly composed, but there was a depth of grief in her lovely eyes that punched Brenna in the chest. An immediate need to offer comfort filled her, and she stepped closer and touched Elise's hand. The graceful fingers resting on the edge of the marble basin felt warm and real.

"Little sister," Brenna said softly. "Tell me why you're weeping."

"I have always wept." As Elise spoke, a tear fell from her calm face and dropped into the basin of water between them. Ripples spread in gentle circles, joining tears shed for unknown years. "I will always weep, if the path of Amazon Nation continues on its present course."

Brenna was at a loss. "Can you tell me any more?"

"You are our best hope, j'heika." Elise smiled, a heart-

breaking contrast to the falling of the next tear. She gestured to the circular pool between them. "Look closer. Seek counsel from Tristaine's wisest queen."

Brenna peered into the basin's clear marble depths. The surface of the water shimmered, reflecting both Elise's visage and her own. As she watched, more ripples spread across the small pool, blending their images and dispersing them. Brenna drew a long breath, feeling her body relax.

A new face began taking shape in the water, and Brenna strained to see its features. Just as they seemed ready to form, the image drifted apart, and Brenna cursed silently.

"Breathe deeply and evenly, adanin," Elise coached her quietly. "She wants to appear. Give her time. Be patient."

"You don't know me very well," Brenna muttered. But then the face dawned clearly in the water, and it was dear to her. Brenna drank in the kind wisdom in those gray eyes, relief and pleasure sluicing through her.

"Sweet demon's bile!" Shann cried and pressed a hand to her breast. "Brenna?"

They were standing together on either side of the marble basin, Shann in Elise's place. Brenna took her mother's hands across the small pool.

"It's all right, lady. It's really me."

"How did you do this?" Shann looked down at herself, fascinated. She wore the spun silk robes of her high office.

"I didn't. I think Elise did. This must be what she meant by clearing your path."

"I bless this Elise for bringing me to you." Shann's gaze warmed. "Tell me, how are Jesstin and our adanin?"

"We're all safe, Shann. We draw close to the City." Brenna tried to quell the anxiety gripping her throat. "How is Sammy?"

"Our Samantha holds her own. I'm with her every moment I can be."

"And Tristaine?"

"Two-score of us have taken ill since you and Jess left, Brenna. We've mixed remedies that seem to slow the fury of the fever, but we haven't stopped it. And we've lost two, dear one."

"Oh, Shann," Brenna whispered. "Who?"

"Aracina, Aria's blood-grandmother. She was over a hundred years old and her heart was weak, and she slipped away quickly. And this morning, Elsbeth's baby daughter, Lynne, left us without a cry."

"Ah, lady." Tears filled Brenna's eyes. "I'm so sorry. I promise you, we'll return as quickly as we possibly can."

"Other winds blow through Tristaine that concern me deeply, daughter."

"Tell me."

"There is unrest. Only this morning..." Shann paused, and gazed down into the full basin. She lifted her hand, and looked at Brenna questioningly. "Someone is telling me—"

"Go ahead," Brenna encouraged her.

Shann dipped her hand into the water and stirred it gently. As Brenna watched, Shann's glyph, worn on her wrist, began to pulse with a gold light. Her signets of royalty and healing emerged clearly through the shimmering water.

Colors and shapes began to flicker again on the turning surface of the pool. Brenna began to recognize forms—the stand of aspens that marked the trail leading to Tristaine's mesa, and then their village square. She saw their lodges, and a gathering of their sisters, and then—

Then Brenna was there, standing next to Shann, witnessing the scene as if she had been present at the time. She could smell fresh pine and heard a roiling of angry voices.

"With all respect, Shanendra." A wiry Amazon with long gray hair stood with her fists on her hips, scowling at Shann. She was surrounded by half a dozen other women, and most of

them looked just as angry—or afraid. "You're showing signs yourself of this vile plague. How can we be sure you still rule us with a clear head? How can you be sure?"

"What?" *Alarmed, Brenna touched Shann's arm and watched her hand pass right through it. Shann didn't turn or respond to her. Brenna might be witnessing this scene, but it was in the past, and she was seeing it as a phantom. Shann was flesh and blood here, and she couldn't see or hear Brenna. And her cheeks were lightly flushed with fever.*

"I can trace your line back six generations, Bethany." The queen's tone was rather dry. "I'll recite them for you, if you wish. My mind is my own, and I'll trust my Council to tell me if my judgment falters."

"I'm not sure we can share your trust in the Queen's Council," Bethany retorted. "Not with the lives of our children at stake."

"Shann. Lady." Another Amazon stepped forward, her hands lifted in appeal. "Forgive Bethany's passion. As leader of our mothers' guild, she carries the safety of our little ones close to her heart."

"No closer than mine, Ethne." Shann gestured gently. "Go on, tell me your fears."

"Elsbeth's sweet baby breathed her last at dawn, lady. The youngest of our clan are at greatest peril from this terrible sickness." Ethne clasped her hands, pleading. "We must get the children out of the village!"

There was a grim stirring of agreement among the women.

"And take them where, adanin?" Shann went to Ethne. "What safe haven do you hope to find out there?"

"Anywhere but here," another voice called. Brenna saw Martine, another of the mother's guild, push past Ethne to face Shann.

"To the City?" Shann met the woman's glare evenly. "That's where the only cure for this illness lies, sister."

"Of course not the City, lady," Martine snapped. Brenna had always found her unpleasant, and her fervor was a little frightening now. "There are a dozen small settlements on the other side of the range. One of them will take us in."

"And in thanks, you'll bring them the plague." Shann shook her head. "The harm is already done here, Martine. All of Tristaine has been exposed. If you enter another village, its people will have even less defense against this sickness than we do. More will die."

Brenna was drawn by the effortless leadership that was part of Shann's natural aura. She wore royal command as comfortably as her own skin. She walked among her Amazons, looking into each face. Several were from the mothers' guild, Brenna noted, but not all. Strong, loving sisters for the most part, but carried away now with fear for their young.

"Have courage, adanin. At least here, our children can be strengthened by the remedies we've managed to find. And our sisters will return soon, with medicine that can save most of us. Amazons will not sacrifice the lives of innocents in a futile bid for safety."

"Shann—" Martine began.

"No, Martine." Shann turned and faced her. "You've heard my decision. No Amazon leaves this mesa."

"And if we feel we must?" Bethany had regained her composure, but her respect was tempered by anger.

"If you try to leave Tristaine, you will be stopped." Shann held Bethany's hard stare until the older woman dropped her eyes.

The mountain village and all its Amazons vanished, dwindling from reality to darkness in a heartbeat.

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Brenna started awake, her back chilled by a lonely draft. She sat up quickly, wincing, hoping against hope that Shann's comforting presence had somehow followed her onto the physical plane.

It wasn't yet dawn, and birdsong rang clear and sweet. Vicar sat cross-legged across the fire, feeding it twigs and keeping watch over their camp. She grunted a morning greeting at Brenna, her expression sour.

Brenna turned and confirmed what she'd known in deepest sleep—Jess had left their shared blankets. She raised an eyebrow questioningly at Vicar, who pointed vaguely over her left shoulder. Brenna nodded and got to her feet in slow, stiff stages. Fit or not, between clinging to Hippo's back and cuddling up on the ground night after night, she felt she'd aged decades.

She stepped quietly around the still forms still huddled around the fire. Every head but Dana's was covered with blankets or arms or packs, or anything that might block out her trumpeting snore. The snoring explained Vicar's morose glare and made Brenna smile.

Wrapping a shawl around her shoulders, she went in the direction Vic pointed to, remembering the small meadow near this grove of trees. She walked through the high grass, vestiges of her vision still drifting through her mind. The pre-dawn light made tracking Jess's steps in the fresh dew easy enough, but Brenna would have been able to find her now even in full darkness. At times she was simply drawn toward Jess, wherever she was, following some silent beacon that ended in her lover's arms.

She saw Jess now. She was dressed in her lightest breastwrap and leggings, performing a complex series of dance-like drills in the center of the meadow. Brenna rested against a young aspen and enjoyed the sight, knowing Jess needed privacy for this meditation.

Her limbs gleamed with a light sweat—she must be nearing the end of a long session. One leg whipped in a fast, deadly arc, cutting through the pasture grass, and then Jess balanced and

slowed, her movements becoming sinuous, coiled power in the muscle of her back.

Brenna knew Jess prayed to her Mothers in words, but this controlled, lethal dance was her best means of seeking the wisdom of her spirit guides. Her arms wove in a sudden flashing series of blows, and then her body straightened again and grew still. Brenna watched Jess's shoulders lift in a deep, cleansing breath, and then they settled into a more relaxed posture than she'd seen in days.

Doubtless aware of Brenna's presence since she entered the meadow, Jess turned and sauntered to her, smiling. She slipped her arms around Brenna's waist.

"Looks like that did you more good than an extra hour's sleep." Brenna patted Jess's damp chest with the edge of her shawl.

"It did. Good morning, lass." She dipped her head and brushed Brenna's lips with her own. "Are you well?"

"I'm well. But Shann isn't, Jesstin." She met Jess's stunned look, feeling slightly guilty at finding relief unburdening her fears while adding them to Jess's load. "Elise was able to bring us together through my dreams. Shann's caught it. So far she's still on her feet, but Bethany and others are pushing hard to take our children off the mesa."

Jess's brow furrowed. "That's idiocy. Don't they see—"

"No, that's the problem, they're not thinking." Brenna ran the soft cloth of her shawl down Jess's muscled arms, drying them. "Shann's in control, but I wish she had either Vicar or Hakan with her. What if this panic spreads?"

"Our lady has Aria and Sarah," Jess reminded her. "They're both formidable allies. Sarah will bellow sense into our sisters, and if that doesn't work, Aria will scratch out their eyes."

"But what about muscle?" Brenna grimaced at the thought. "May every goddess alive save us from raising arms against our own, but if it comes to that—"

"Oisin and Jackson are young, but they're both able warriors.

Better, they're honorable, cool-headed, and smart. They'll back Shann's every breath and hold any force to an absolute minimum." Jess stroked Brenna's hair. "Shann has coped countless times with dissent in our clan, adonai. Have faith in her. Just as our lady trusts us to bring swift help."

"I will." Brenna sighed and leaned against Jess. She knew they both still feared for their clan, but as always Jess's strength offered welcome reassurance.

She closed her eyes as a rough hand moved down her back, probing gently, easing her stiffness. Brenna cupped the gleaming swells of Jess's shoulders in her palms. Jess touched her chin, and tipped her face to receive her kiss.

It began as a warm, languid exploration of soft lips, reminiscent of their usual greeting on peaceful Tristaine mornings. Then Brenna felt a creeping thrill of arousal work through her as Jess's mouth roughened against hers and became more demanding. She ran her fingers through Jess's wild hair and pulled her head closer against her.

"I've offered my prayers," Jess growled into Brenna's neck. She lipped her way wetly to the top of her shoulder. "I'm sure my Mothers will grant me a moment of worship."

Jess lifted her head, and Brenna saw the heat building in her, the silvering in her lover's blue eyes that signaled her growing need. A similar sensual chord resonated in the depths of Brenna's belly.

Jess's arms went suddenly still around her, a courtly restraint that allowed Brenna time to make her choice. Once given, her permission would not be requested again, but it wasn't a difficult decision. Brenna signaled assent by softening her body and allowing her breasts to brush Jess's taut ones.

Jess's eyes turned feral and she buried her lips against Brenna's neck again, her long fingers deft and quick on the laces of Brenna's light topshirt. She clenched the cloth in her hands and yanked it open, baring Brenna to the waist with shocking abruptness. The first rays of the rising sun dappled across her

exposed breasts, her pink nipples quivering to life in the cool morning air.

"Ssssucculent..." Jess's sibilant brogue was impossibly enticing. Her rough palms swarmed over Brenna's full globes, cupping them, squeezing. A jagged bolt of desire surged through Brenna, and she threw her arms around Jess's neck too eagerly, knocking them both off-balance.

"Ooof!"

Jess landed hard on her back in the high grass, Brenna sprawled on top of her, and for a moment they enjoyed that lovely combustion of laughter and arousal that often flavored their lovemaking. But Jess was too heated to tolerate much distraction. She turned Brenna on her back and moved over her with urgent efficiency, stripping her leggings and lowering her own, then pinning Brenna's arms and legs to the ground beneath her.

Their kiss ran deep this time, the joining and melding of their mouths a lush banquet of sensation that was at once both tender and crudely demanding. Jess's lips moved lower and coasted over Brenna's cool breasts, pausing to suck at one turgid nipple, then the other, biting it gently, and she arched hard against her. Gasping, Jess stared down at her, and Brenna drank in the image, not of her friend and lifemate, but a crazed Amazon warrior pinning her to the earth, her muscular legs forcing her knees widely apart.

"You're mine to pleasure, querida." Jess's predatory smile sparked a rush of carnal heat through Brenna's groin. Jess lowered her hips, and the coarse hair of her mound brushed across Brenna's open sex. "And you'll not escape my touch."

Brenna's breath grew ragged, and she ground the back of her head into the grass as Jess thrust her hips, continuing the lewd scrubbing between her helplessly splayed legs. The intensity of the pleasure growing in her center almost frightened Brenna, and she knew Jess could see it in her face and in the hectic color rising in the smooth paleness of her exposed breasts.

Climax hit Brenna almost silently, propelled by the breath

that hissed explosively between her clenched teeth. Jess timed her ecstasy with expert care, slowing her movements as the waves of release washed through Brenna. Then she collapsed beside her in the grass, panting.

"Amen," Brenna gasped.

"Aye." There was a definite note of cocky satisfaction in Jess's tone, so well deserved Brenna couldn't even tease her for it. She was still coming down from the shivering heights of this shared prayer, and Jess stroked her arm with gentle patience.

Brenna hadn't realized how dearly they had both missed this most tangible expression of their love. Since the first ravens fell on Tristaine's mesa, she and Jess had had little time or privacy for intimate communion. Relatively modest, even demure in public, Brenna tended toward rather embarrassingly loud declarations of appreciation when pleasure took her. This morning, though, the immensity of her climax had been contained in that one long, drawn-out hiss, and tendrils of that liquid delight still swirled through her.

Vicar's faint, surly whistle reached them through the trees. The signal was a general summons, not an alarm, but it needed to be answered promptly.

"Ears," Jess whispered, and Brenna covered hers gratefully before Jess's sharp whistle split the morning air. They helped each other up and adjusted their clothing, snickering as they slapped grass off each other.

Brenna wound her arm through Jess's and they started back toward the camp. Their spirits were replenished now in every way possible, and they couldn't linger.

The City waited below.

Chapter Six

Jess let out a low whistle. To most ears it would be indistinguishable from the birdsong filtering from the surrounding trees, but the five women riding with her were instantly alert. They reined their horses to a halt.

Jess listened, her head tilted slightly to catch the smallest nuance of sound. She glanced at Vicar, who pointed to two sections of heavily forested terrain on either side of the path ahead. Jess nodded. She turned on Bracken's back and signaled Dana and Hakan with a complex flourish of hand signs. Dana squinted, then flashed Jess a silent thumbs-up.

Both Brenna and Kyla were fit and well-schooled in the basic tenets of close fighting, and Jess knew they could hold their own in any fair match. But Kyla was pledged to the guild of artists, and Brenna to Tristaine's seers, and they lacked the intensive training of Jess's warriors. She wanted them both placed with more experienced fighters.

Dana and Hakan paired with Kyla, and Brenna nudged her mount closer to ride with Jess and Vicar. The two parties peeled quietly off both sides of the trail and moved into the shadows of the trees on either side.

Jess felt a polite tap on her shoulder.

"I still don't know what we're doing," Brenna whispered. "Not that I have to. Just letting you know."

Jess checked the breeze to see how sound might travel before she answered. "I heard a man's voice, Bren, just over the rise ahead. Sounded like a command. We need to assume we've found hostile natives, until they prove us wrong. Shh, now."

She raised a hand, and their horses stopped. Jess lifted her leg over Bracken's neck and dropped soundlessly to the ground, then turned and helped Brenna slide down Hippo's side. Jess took her coiled rope from her belt, and Vicar unlaced the sleek bow and quiver from her horse's back.

The summer earth was blanketed in soft grass and moss, which helped silence their approach. Jess dropped to the ground and crawled to the top of the curved ridge. She scanned the grove of trees below and the six uniformed figures filtering through them.

She heard Dana's brief whistle and acknowledged it, but the signal was unnecessary. She'd fought enough City soldiers to recognize the breed on sight. Jess shivered as a coldness worked through her, a familiar chill that ran through her blood and prepared her to fight. She looked to her left and returned Vicar's steely smile.

They weren't outnumbered, but they were certainly outgunned. The City patrol was armed with bolt-action rifles. The Amazons carried daggers, slings, bows, and escrima sticks, short, thin clubs favored for close fighting. Strategies clicked through Jess's mind in fast, methodical order. There was no going around this patrol or out-waiting them. If they weren't stopped now, her adanin risked encountering them again between here and the City.

And the Amazons would have to draw lifeblood. If any of these soldiers escaped and lived to warn their commanders, the protective cloak of secrecy guarding this mission would be lost. Shann bade Tristaine's warriors to fight without harm whenever they could, but lives must be taken today. Jess just needed to ensure soldiers died, not Amazons.

She reached for Brenna's cold hand and covered it with her own. Brenna's eyes were worried, but they crinkled with her smile, and she offered Jess a simple nod of confidence. Jess drew a deep breath and whistled a clear, mild series of notes. Their deceptive beauty signaled the necessity of killing, and the attack fell fast.

War cries burst from six throats and echoed crazily through the trees, sounding twice their number. Jess darted over the edge of the rise, feeling Vicar and Brenna surge with her on either side. They ran hard, kicking through the high grass, and then Jess dodged right, pushing Brenna with her, as one of their startled prey finally managed to squeeze off a shot in their direction. The bullet sang harmlessly wide.

"Base," Jess barked at Brenna, slapping the trunk of a large oak as she raced past it.

"Base," Brenna acknowledged behind her, sliding to a stop near the tree. It would provide her adequate cover while she sighted her targets.

There were roars and shouts from the City patrol, and more shots punctured the air. Jess and Vicar, running side by side, lengthened their stride and left the ground at almost the same second. Vic vaulted high into the branches of a tall oak, Jess into those of a red cedar.

Jess darted through the lush inner limbs of the tree, the rope coiled high on her shoulder. She balanced easily on a thick branch, then crouched and knotted the rope to it with a few deft twirls.

"This way, Sergeant!" Two soldiers were jogging closer, a man and a woman, clenching their rifles and stretching to see through the trees ahead.

Jess checked Brenna's position, and then dropped into thin air. The rope caught her and she swung in a vicious arc, using her momentum to kick powerfully into the first soldier's chest. He sailed backward and crashed into the woman behind him, his arms spinning helplessly, his rifle flying when he hit the ground.

Jess shrugged off the rope and snatched the rifle from the grass, and her fingers flew over the bolt release. Unfamiliar with firearms but understanding the general principle, she snapped the rifle's stock to her shoulder and fired twice.

Half expecting the twang of her bowstring, the two sharp cracks in her ear were painfully loud—but arrow or bullet, Jess's

aim was true. The reclining soldier was struck in the chest, and the woman behind him in the head as she started to rise.

Jess didn't wait to see her fall. She whirled and took in their small battleground. Vicar, still crouching on the limb of the oak, had felled two soldiers with arrows—clean shots and swift deaths. Hakan was finishing off the man she knelt over now, thrusting a dagger through his heart with a trilling cry. Jess searched for Brenna and saw her checking the two soldiers who fell from her bullets.

Then Jess heard Dana's full-throated roar and saw her grappling hand-to-hand with a soldier as tall and solid as a stone block. Kyla had jumped onto the man's back and wrapped her arm around his throat to cut off his air.

Even as Jess broke into a run, Dana executed the escape she had performed perfectly in drills a hundred times. She pivoted and twisted, using the man's superior strength against him, and broke his hold. Dana's dagger flashed, and the soldier bent double, bellowing in pain. Kyla slid quickly off his back, and he crashed to the ground on his side.

Jess reached them, and released a sharp whistle. Her adanin answered at once, and Jess closed her eyes in relief. All her sisters were still standing. Dana was next to her, panting, staring down at the soldier curled at their feet. Blood was trickling from her nose, but she looked otherwise unhurt. Jess gripped Dana's shoulder and then knelt beside the fallen man.

Boy, she corrected. The pale face that was revealed when she turned the soldier onto his back still held traces of acne. He clenched the gory shirt over his stomach, his teeth gritted in pain, and stared up at Jess through wide, shocked eyes. She studied the wound dispassionately. Dana's thrust would prove fatal, but only after long hours of suffering.

Jess put a hand on his chest. "What's your name, son?"

"Private Curtis Voakes, *bitch*!" the soldier spat, and a drop of blood flew from his lips and struck Jess's breast.

Jess felt Dana stiffen, but she didn't hold the boy's rage against him. He had just watched Amazons wipe out all of his brothers. She glanced up at Kyla, who understood at once and turned away. Jess wrapped her hands around the soldier's head and felt his convulsive trembling. A quick snap and this bloody fight would be over.

"Jess, wait." Brenna knelt beside her, breathing hard. She showed her the flask she held. "It's painless and very fast."

Jess looked into Brenna's beautiful eyes, soft and pleading, and slid her hands from beneath the boy's head. Brenna pressed her arm in thanks, then moved closer to the soldier and lifted his head with effort. She held the flask to his gaping lips.

"You're dying, Curtis." Jess sat back on her heels and studied him. "This drink will ease your pain and take you quickly. We can't force you to swallow, but you are dying today. I'd choose the easier path."

The boy let out a few explosive breaths, his heavy brows furrowed, looking from Jess's face to Brenna's. When his gaze fastened on Brenna's compassionate gaze, she tipped the flask. His sharp Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, and he coughed, hard. Jess looked up as Hakan joined their circle, then Vicar, shouldering her bow. Their expressions were impenetrable, but Kyla looked down at the dying soldier with tears in her eyes.

"You gonna throw us into a ravine?" The boy still struggled for defiance, but the pain and his fear were weakening him.

"Your remains will be treated with respect," Jess told him. "Your kin will find you."

"That's more kindness than you'd have shown us, boy." Vicar only spoke the truth, and no one contested her.

Jess watched the drug take hold. The soldier's big body relaxed slowly as the pain left him, and he let out a hitching sigh of relief. His eyelids began to flutter.

"Annie," he whispered. His eyes closed, and Brenna lowered his head gently to the grass.

Jess waited until the boy's chest rose and fell one last time. Then she rose and helped Brenna stand. "Have we any injured?"

"No." Dana stood with her fists braced on her hips as Kyla examined her bleeding nose. "We're just *fine*."

"All's well, Jesstin." Hakan snapped her dagger into the sheath on her belt. "We took no mortal hits."

"And perhaps we've gained some time." Jess looked thoughtfully at the dead soldier at her feet. "We're long leagues from the City limits. These soldiers didn't walk up here, they had some kind of transport."

Dana lit up. "You're right, Jess! Let's go find us some jeeps!"

"Just as soon as we honor the dead, youngster." Hakan studied the small clearing, frowning. "Or at least find them some shelter from the wolves."

Jess raised her aching arm, and Brenna sighed and nestled against her side. She rested her lips in her adonai's soft hair and sent silent thanks to her Mothers that Brenna hadn't had to draw lifeblood in this skirmish. Her breathing was even now, and she seemed to be recovering fast from the sick adrenaline surge of the fight.

Violence had been alien to Brenna when she first came to Tristaine. Jess had known that within minutes of meeting her. Caster's vicious attacks on Jess and the rest of their sisters had ignited a protective passion in their gentle healer. Brenna had fought fiercely in Tristaine's battles, but so far she had been spared dealing out any killing strikes. Jess prayed she always would be.

She kissed Brenna's forehead. Then she went to Dana, and peered at her nose.

"It's not broken, Jess." Dana winced. "Don't you *dare* do that cracking thing with your thumbs."

"No cracking needed, adanin." Jess tapped Dana's cheek. "But you could have ducked. We were hoping not to draw notice in the City. This honker of yours will be swollen and bruised."

Dana sighed. “I guess I should have yelled ‘not the face.’”

“It’s still a very pretty face.” Brenna checked Dana’s injury. “I doubt we can find much ice around here, Dana, but at this altitude, river water is cold enough to help with swell—”

Jess heard the click and spun, and saw the soldier she had shot in the chest weaving on his knees, raising his rifle. Her hand rocketed to her belt, pulled her dagger, and threw it in one blinding motion.

The split-second before Jess’s blade thudded home in his neck, the soldier fired, and Vicar staggered and fell.

❖

“This is my fault.” Tears threatened to blind Brenna, and she dashed them away impatiently. She needed to be able to see to lay out her instruments. “I should have checked that soldier more carefully, Jess.”

“Bren, it was a battle.” Jess was washing her cousin’s upper back, and Brenna could see the faint tremor in her hands. “If anyone’s to blame, I’m the one who botched that kill.”

“I’ll take hush-money from ye both,” Vicar grumbled. She was stretched out between them on a folded blanket, naked to the waist, her hands loose on either side of her head. She hadn’t lost consciousness when the bullet smacked into the back of her shoulder, but the strong herbal sedative Brenna had given her was finally taking effect. Vicar’s words were slurred. “Just dig it out, healer.”

“Brenna, can you tell us anything?” Kyla stood nearby, watching their preparations anxiously. “There isn’t much blood.”

“No, we’re lucky there. It missed the subclavian artery.” Brenna summoned her will and silenced the sick guilt in her gut. “Vicar? I’m going to ask Jess to hold you. I don’t want you twitching at the wrong moment. Can you hear me?”

“Aye,” Vic mumbled. “Cooties...”

Jess draped herself carefully across Vicar's back, and Hakan settled into the grass near her head and clasped her wrists, more for comfort than restraint. Brenna had seen it many times, the gentleness and love in the touch of Tristaine's warriors when they helped tend one of their own, and it still moved her.

"Here we go." Dana spoke quietly, as if entering a church. She set their two brightest lamps near Brenna and Vicar, adding their light to the wan glow of the setting sun. "Is there anything else I can do, Bren?"

"Watch our periphery, Dana." Jess was watching Brenna closely as she measured Vicar's pulse at the throat. "We don't need more cougars or soldiers tonight."

"Will do, Jess."

Vicar's pulse was slow and even, and her long body was relaxed. Brenna knew she was hurting by her deliberate, rhythmic breathing, but there were no signs of shock. Brenna was calming herself, now, as she lifted a slender probe from her instrument case. Healing was her home territory. She knew what to do here, how to help. She rested her hand on the blond hair curling around Vicar's neck.

"Vic, I'm going to take a look. Try not to move. It's going to hurt a little, but nothing unbearable. Okay?"

"I'm set." Vicar closed her eyes.

And so was Brenna, once she had positioned the probe in the wound and vision couldn't guide her further. She advanced its slender length gradually, with meticulous care, her inner senses following its passage. The bullet had hit the trapezius on Vicar's left side—on an Amazon warrior, a thick and powerful muscle. Judging by the trajectory, it had missed both the scapula and humerus. Brenna blew out a breath in relief.

A soft grunt escaped Vicar.

"Good, adanin, we've found it." Brenna withdrew the probe smoothly, and selected a thin pair of forceps. These instruments had been a gift from Sammy when she became a medic, and they

fit her grip like old friends. “I think the bullet’s intact, Vicar, it’s embedded in muscle. Keep breathing slow and deep. This is going to smart a bit.”

“Just lie easy, adanin,” Hakan murmured at Vicar’s head. “We’ve got you.”

Brenna found the bullet. Her forceps gripped it, and Vicar moaned. “I’m sorry, Vic, I’ll be as gentle as I can. We’re almost there.”

Jess held on to her cousin more tightly as she stiffened, and then Brenna drew the small bloody bullet out into the light of the lamps. She heard the collective sighs of her sisters, and Vicar echoed them with a long, trembling exhalation.

“Well done, lass.” Jess cradled the back of Brenna’s neck. Brenna returned her weary smile.

“We’re far from home free.” Brenna patted the sluggishly bleeding hole with a dry cloth. “We have goldenseal to guard against infection, but this wound will take careful watching. How are you, Vicar?”

“Just keen,” Vicar muttered. “Jesstin, give me an hour. I can ride.”

“Aye, then you ride,” Jess answered easily. “The rest of us will catch up later. We camp here tonight.”

They laid their holdings near the field of their battle. Dana and Hakan had stripped the dead soldiers of their weapons and arranged them respectfully side by side. The branches laid over their bodies would help protect them from small predators until they were recovered.

“This surgical wizardry is how you got your nickname, Bren.” Kyla knelt beside Vicar and helped her drink from her canteen, smiling at Brenna. “Shann started calling you ‘Blades’ after you cut a bullet out of Camryn’s leg.”

“Ah, poor Cam.” Brenna smiled sadly at the memory. “She must have thought Shann had lost her mind, letting a Clinic medic waving a scalpel anywhere near an Amazon.”

"Our lady was showing her trust in you, adonai." Jess patted her cousin's bare back and climbed to her feet. "That helped Cam trust you, too."

Brenna saw Jess grow still and turn slowly toward the thick grove of trees that bordered their camp.

"Jesstin?" Dana called from her post across the clearing.

"I hear it, adanin." Jess turned and looked at Hakan, who nodded.

"Do we have company, Jess?" Kyla asked. Her stance over Vicar was suddenly protective.

"Aye," Jess replied, checking the dagger sheathed in her belt. "Not many—two or three."

Vicar started to lift herself on one arm, and Brenna stilled her quickly. "Absolutely not, Vicar, you lie still. Let us handle this." Vicar grumbled and lowered herself again.

Brenna got to her feet and went to Jess. "What exactly are your freakishly sharp ears hearing, dearest?"

"Our guests' blundering passage." Jess smiled apologetically at her. "Sorry, lass, but whoever they are, they're crashing through the far brush like mules. These aren't trained troops." She went to the soldiers' rifles they had stacked near their packs and took one, then tossed a second to Dana. "Hakan, stay with Vic. The rest of you, fast and quiet. Stay behind me."

Jess broke into a sprint through the trees and the others ran with her, shadow-close. Strident cricket-song helped cover the sound of their steps. Brenna kept up pretty well, she thought, given the fact that her knees were jelly again. This long, harrowing day just refused to end.

Jess sailed over a bush everyone else had to veer around, and in spite of her fear, Brenna was swept by a moment of breathless appreciation for Jess's sheer physicality. She shook herself mentally as they neared the base of a large oak that split their path, its branches heavy and thick with leaves.

Brenna, balancing lightly on her feet and ready to launch toward any threat, looked hard into the shadowy depths of the

oak. She spotted two separate patches of oddly shivering twigs about halfway up the gnarled trunk.

"How many, Bren?" Jess's voice was a low burr from a nearby shadow.

Brenna gulped. She was sure. "Two, Jesstin."

"Kyla, are they armed?"

"Not with anything that threatens us at this distance." Kyla stood close behind Jess, panting lightly. "They would have taken potshots by now."

Jess lowered her rifle and rested her hand on her hip, looking thoughtful. "*Come down*!" she bellowed.

Brenna actually ducked, as did Dana. When Jess wanted to roar, she could flatten the grass for a mile in any direction. Complete silence followed the command. Even the crickets had the sense to shut up.

Then there was a sudden, frantic rustling of branches and leaves, a breathless yell, and a body plummeted from the tree and thumped to the ground at their feet.

"Oh shit!"

Brenna heard a feminine cry from the figure above them, still clinging to the oak's trunk.

"Don't you hurt her!" There was an immense crashing of boughs as she descended.

Brenna knelt beside Jess and helped her steady the woman lying on the ground. She looked to be in her forties, reasonably fit. The breath had been knocked out of her, but she seemed basically unhurt. She lay gasping with her hands raised protectively, a pair of dark-framed glasses askew on her face.

Moving carefully, Brenna adjusted the frames so the woman could see them clearly. She rested her palm gently at the base of her throat and measured her thrumming pulse. "I think you're all right," she told her. "Just lie still a moment and catch your breath."

The crashing finally ended as the second woman leapt from the tree. She darted toward them, long brown hair whipping

around her face, but Dana caught her around the waist and hauled her back. She performed a quick search, then nodded at Jess and released her.

The woman skidded to a halt on her knees beside her friend. "Hey! You're okay, right?"

"Right," the second woman gasped. She lifted her hand, and it was taken with a tenderness that didn't escape Brenna. "Get me up."

They struggled to their feet, and Brenna rose with them. The women clung to each other, still a bit wild-eyed. They were dressed for travel, but their clothing was torn and muddy.

"I'm Brenna." She smiled in a way she hoped was reassuring. "Who are you?"

The first woman opened her mouth to answer, but then Jess rose from her crouch to stand beside Brenna, and her voice faded. It was obviously not unlike watching a tree sprout slowly before her eyes.

"I'm Je-Je-Jen—" she stammered, and Brenna bit her lip in sympathy and nodded encouragement. "I'm *Jennifer,*" she finished at last, still ogling Jess. She squeezed her friend's arm. "This is Evelyn."

"I'm Eva," the second woman corrected, pushing wisps of her abundant silver hair off her forehead. "This is Jenny."

"We're Jenny and Eva," Jenny confirmed. "You're very tall," she said to Jess.

"This colossus is Jesstin. Our sisters there are Kyla and Dana." Brenna wound her arm through Jess's to humanize her. Her adanin seemed willing to let her develop this first contact. "Tell us what brought you here."

"We escaped from the City, and we're going to find Tristaine." Now that Jenny knew her partner—the women were obviously adonai—was unhurt, she spoke with calm precision. Her lively green eyes studied them curiously. "We didn't get very far. That Army unit you guys tackled was looking for us."

"We heard you take them out." Eva had almost caught her breath. She swallowed, eyeing Jess's rifle. "We wanted to try to get closer to you, to be sure. You're Amazons, right?"

"Aye, we're Amazons." Jess extended her hand to shake Eva's, but Brenna stopped her quickly, and she stepped back at once.

"Listen, this is important." Brenna half-lifted one hand to hold their attention, and realized she was mirroring Shann. "We've all been exposed to a sickness. If you stay around us, you might catch it, and it's serious. Have you had all the City inoculations?"

"Oh." Jenny looked at Eva, and an unspoken communication passed between them. "Well, our boosters are up to date. And even if they weren't, we decided a long time ago we would throw in our lot with Tristaine, if we could find it."

"We decided your lot would be our lot," Eva agreed. She stuck out her hand, smiling, and Jess grinned and shook it firmly. "Tell us how we can help."

Chapter Seven

Brenna turned her head on Jess's thigh and peered sleepily at the four women clustered on the other side of their small campfire. Dana and Kyla had drawn second winds with the knowledge Eva and Jenny carried of the ways in which the City had changed since they had last seen it. They were revising their map of City streets, whispering and pointing out new routes.

Vicar was resting well. Jess's cousin had one of the highest pain thresholds Brenna had ever seen. She just wished she'd stop having opportunities to marvel at it. Hakan was stretched out on a blanket beside her, deeply asleep. Like most of Tristaine's warriors, she had mastered the art of finding sleep fast in the few hours of rest allowed them. Brenna noted one stubborn holdout had refused to submit.

She gazed pensively at Jess's still profile above her. The heavy muscle of the thigh beneath her head still thrummed with energy. She could see the outline of Jess's clenched jaw in the firelight. Brenna reached up and popped her lightly on the chin.

"Yesssss?" Jess turned half-shuttered eyes on her.

"I was looking for your off-button." Brenna caressed Jess's thigh with her knuckles. "Why so tense, Jesstin?"

"I'll be ready for sleep soon." Jess stroked Brenna's hair gently, and she struggled to keep her eyes open. "I like our new friends."

"I like them too." Brenna turned her head, enjoying the mild scratch of denim against her cheek. She saw Jenny's and Eva's heads huddled next to Dana's and Kyla's, looking as if they had joined their clan's planning sessions for years. "They love each other; they survived meeting you. My Amazon flags are flying."

"Aye, Eva and Jenny are both Tristaine." Jess spoke with a certainty rare for her on first meeting, but Brenna agreed with her. Some women were born Amazon, destined for Tristaine from their first breath. Others were not.

"No, the entire downtown district has changed." Eva polished her glasses with her shirttail, then slipped them back on and pointed at the map Dana held. "There's construction going on here, so none of these streets will get you through."

"Right," Jenny said and pointed to another section. "And both of these rural roads are guarded by Army details now, twenty-four-seven. There's usually only two guards posted here, though, at the City Line."

"Damn, Tristaine's lucky we ran into you, sisters." Kyla scratched her head. They all desperately needed baths. "Our map of City streets is at least two years old."

"Yeah, so much has changed since I was stationed down there." Dana frowned down at the map. "Your good intel is going to come in real handy, ladies, thank you."

"Well, we researched it enough." Eva looked at Jenny with rueful affection. "We planned this field trip to Tristaine so carefully for months!"

"Yes, and we still managed to attract the attention of an Army patrol three days out." Jenny leaned into Eva briefly, the laugh lines around her eyes deepening. "Scared the holy screaming hell out of us both."

"Were they looking for you in particular?" Brenna turned on her side and rested her head again on Jess's leg. "Are there warrants out for you in the City?"

"Not any we know of. These are excellent, by the way." Jenny peered at the nuts cradled in her palm. "Much better than those mealy peanuts the City dares to call trail mix. Anyway, we don't think the patrol was sent specifically after us, Brenna. I teach Public School, Eva's a psychiatric nurse. We're not really on the Government's radar. There's no reason the Army would be tipped off if we went missing for a few days."

"Jenny's theory is we got sloppy covering our tracks at our first two campsites." Eva accepted a nut Jenny held to her lips and chomped it thoughtfully for a moment. "Those guys were probably on a routine patrol of the outskirts, and they picked up our trail. We moved as fast as we could." Eva's friendly face sobered. "We heard the gunshots behind us, and those yells. It was pretty terrifying."

"Yeah. They were unlucky." Dana folded the roadmap of the City, her jaw set. Brenna realized the clash with the soldiers must have hit close to home for Dana. She had been one of their kind before coming to Tristaine. And no matter how many of their clan's enemies Dana killed, her inherent decency would always quail at the visceral horror of punching a knife into a human being. "They were all pretty young. Brave enough, but not well trained. And they weren't a clan. They didn't fight together like one."

"I'm sorry they had to die." Kyla looked at Jess with a compassion that told Brenna she understood the necessity of the command to draw lifeblood. "Amazons don't kill unless we must, Jenny. We just couldn't avoid it this time."

"We've heard that—that Amazon warriors honor all life. We've heard so many stories about you." Jenny patted Kyla's knee. "Rumors about Amazons still swamp all the women's bars in the Boroughs. Tristaine is very real to a lot of our friends down there."

I never heard those rumors, Brenna thought. *And I spent more nights in those bars than I can count.* A shiver of sadness worked through her, and she hunched closer to Jess. She had been single-minded in her City years. She went to bars to get drunk, as efficiently and quickly as possible, not to listen to gossip.

Dana snorted in disgust and gave up folding the roadmap, handing the snarled parchment to Kyla. "Well, at least we know the army's training is still no match for Tristaine's. There's not a single soldier in my old outfit I'd lay money on against any of Jess's warriors."

"Don't underrate the City's Army, Dana." Jess's low brogue was a pleasant burr against Brenna's cheek. "Some of the best Amazon warriors I've known have come to Tristaine from their ranks."

Dana looked startled. Then she smiled and began feeding twigs to their fire. Kyla bopped Dana gently on the head with her neatly rolled roadmap and then kissed her cheek.

Brenna closed her burning eyes, Jess's soothing touch in her hair lulling her toward sleep. She tried to listen to what Jenny was saying, but her voice kept changing, growing younger.

❖

This transition to the spirit plane felt disjointed, almost chaotic, and Elise's first words told Brenna why.

"Our queen grows weaker, j'heika." A tear wended its way down Elise's high cheek and dropped into the basin between them. "See our home."

The clear water swirled, and suddenly Brenna stood in the center of Tristaine's village square.

It seemed to be a full clan gathering, and somehow Brenna knew it was happening now, as she slept in Jess's arms. Perhaps not a full meeting—Brenna saw about two-thirds of Tristaine's number sitting on the log benches lining the square. Her stomach gave a nasty lurch, and then she realized the missing Amazons couldn't all be sick—those who were ill needed caretakers.

Brenna's sleeping senses were overwhelmed. Here, in this corridor between spiritual planes, she could feel every emotion coursing through the four hundred hearts around her. There was ragged tension in the women's silence, and Brenna saw armed warriors standing at intervals throughout the benches. That sight shriveled her soul more than the coming of the plague. Amazons prepared to lift arms against their sisters.

She sought out Shann with something like desperation and found her, seated on an elevated, high-backed chair at one

end of their circle. The fact that Shann didn't stand before her Amazons told Brenna all she needed to know about her mother's health. Oisin and Jackson, the warriors Jess had praised, stood protectively on either side of her throne.

"The force used last night was unforgivable, lady!" Bethany was not addressing the queen, but the clan. Outrage sparked her eyes as she turned in a slow circle to include all present. "When did Tristaine become an accursed police state?"

"We suffered one broken ankle, Bethany, when Martine wouldn't stop running and Jackson had to sling her legs." Shann's complexion looked gray to Brenna, but she sat with graceful posture and apparent ease, her hands folded in her lap. There was a slight threadiness to her voice, and she had to work hard to produce the volume needed to reach all ears. "Don't portray last night's foolish skirmish as a bloodbath, sister. You and your guild had clear warning not to try to leave the mesa."

"You're lucky you weren't all skewered on Dyan's labrys, Bethany!" Sara's cracked snarl sounded behind Brenna, and she slumped in relief. Shann's eldest Councilor was still hearty and hale. "And I'll gouge out your liver myself if you pull such a mutton-brained stunt again!"

"Your warriors can't be everywhere, Shann, not with so many of them down with this fever." Bethany was treading dangerous ground now, Brenna could see it in the stiffness of the women watching her. "We'll get our children out. By one's and two's, if we have to. You can't stop—"

"All right, I've heard enough of this codswallop." Shasa stood on the other side of the circle, one of Kyla's close friends in the artists' guild. "You can't just defy the word of the Queen of Tristaine, Bethany, Shann guides us all. And you definitely bloody hell *can't address our lady with such blatant disrespect, not in my hearing!"*

Shouts of agreement rose, many of them. But Brenna heard other voices too, some pleading, some angry. She saw three women arguing with Aria, whose smiling, crossed-arm charm

budged not an inch. Thank Gaia their lady had these strong sisters to back her.

Shann waited until the noise subsided, biding her time. Brenna realized she needed it to gather her strength.

"Amazons have walked the earth for centuries, adanin." Shann rose smoothly, showing no sign of infirmity, her voice strong and clear. "Tristaine is the last of Artemis's daughters, Her last Amazon clan. We will not *implode from within after defeating generations of powerful enemies!"*

The gathering was quiet, watching Shann avidly, and Brenna saw Oisin and Jackson exchange looks of relief.

"Sisters, believe me when I tell you the medicine from the City offers our children, and all of us, our greatest hope. We must give Jess and our sisters time." Shann's expression darkened again. "And they will bring the cure home to a family of Amazons, strong and united, not a gaggle of frightened, vicious alley cats. Do you hear me, adanin?"

"We hear, Shann!" A hundred women roared in answer—not all or nearly all, but enough for now, Brenna hoped.

"While we prattle here, our orchards go untended." Shann wisely turned them to practicalities. "We still have animals to feed and crops to tend and ill to nurse. Our council here is finished. Let's be about Tristaine's business."

Shann made her way back to her throne as her clan began to rise and filter from the square. She lowered herself to the chair's cushioned seat, her eyes closing. The usual small crowd of Amazons gathered around her, hoping for a moment of private council.

"Can you hear me, Brenna?" Shann whispered.

Startled, knowing she was invisible, Brenna leaned closer to Shann's lowered head. "Come back to us soon, Blades. Your sisters are frightened, and this rebellion is far from over."

Brenna wanted desperately to touch her mother's hand, but knew she could not. She murmured reassurance she knew Shann couldn't hear. "We're coming, lady. Please hang on."

❖

Selene was just beginning her fading descent into sunrise when Jess shook Brenna gently awake. The twittering music of morning larks reached her as she fought off sleep and sat up, wincing at the painful bruise on her hip.

"Bren? Have a look at Vicar."

Jess sounded calm, but Brenna's eyes flew fully open. Vicar was sitting up, braced by Hakan's arm. Brenna could see her shaking from ten feet away. She went quickly to Vicar and knelt beside her.

"How are you, Vic?" Brenna felt Vicar's forehead, which was clammy and cool.

"She woke a moment ago, cold as Hera's tit." Hakan's usually courtly language had deserted her. She shifted to keep from brushing Vicar's bandaged shoulder.

"Vicar?" Brenna said softly, measuring her rapid pulse.

"It's just the shakes." Vicar successfully quelled any trembling in her voice.

Brenna looked up at Jess, her hands prickling with dread. Fever would follow, if the pattern in Tristaine held true. Vicar's eyes were already hollow and glassy. "This might be more serious than chills, Vic."

Vicar cursed, but didn't try to refute her. "Jesstin, I have to be able to ride. Brenna can dose me with what remedies we have to keep me upright."

"No, cousin." Jess knelt and touched Vicar's leg. "You can't ride with us. Between the bullet and the flu, you'll lose strength fast."

"Jesstin—" But Vicar broke off, and she and Jess locked eyes. Brenna sensed an intense communication pass between them, the same kind of silent exchange she often shared with Jess. She watched Vicar absorb the knowledge that she had to stay back. It must be killing her to accept it.

"She can't stay up here alone, Jesstin," Hakan said.

Jess turned, and Brenna followed her gaze to Jenny and Eva, who sat quietly talking with Kyla near their packs. “Eva is a nurse. She and Jenny can tend Vic here.”

Kyla nodded, and she and Jenny and Eva got up and joined them. None of them looked as if they’d slept much.

“Vicar, I’m so sorry you’re ill.” Eva crouched and patted Vicar’s foot. “I’ll do everything I can to help Brenna make you comfortable. But Jenny and I think we should go with the rest of you down to the City.”

“What?” Brenna was sure she hadn’t heard correctly.

“We can help.” Jenny folded her arms against the dawn’s chill. “We know the City’s layout, and where guard stations are posted much better than any of you, Jess. Really, your map’s almost useless. We can help you reach your friend’s trailer safely.” Jenny looked a little pale, but when she smiled her eyes lit up. “To put it plainly, we want to be Amazons. This is our chance to earn our stripes.”

“Jenny, you guys just escaped from that madhouse!” Dana draped her jacket around Kyla’s shoulders. “Honest, you don’t have to pass an entrance exam to join Tristaine. They didn’t make me.”

“Your sister, Jen,” Kyla urged quietly.

“Oh, right,” Jenny said. “Brenna, Kyla told us you need to try to find your niece, who might have been placed in a Youth Home. My sister is a social worker in the City. Maybe she can help find this little girl.”

“But…” Brenna trailed off as she felt Jess’s touch on her arm.

Jess was studying their faces, and then she nodded. “Hakan, you’ll stay here with Vicar. Jenny and Eva will come with us.”

Hakan’s mouth fell open. “Jesstin!”

“You know enough about tending to watch over Vic, adanin. And a much better chance of fighting off any attack than Jenny and Eva would have. We’re close enough to the City that we risk another patrol. You can defend her if one comes this way.”

Vicar made a withering spitting noise, which Hakan ignored. When she spoke, her tone was respectful. "But you'll need backup, Jess."

"That's still you." Jess checked the position of the sun. "If we find that transport, we should be back by tomorrow's dawn. If two days pass, consider us captured or lost, Hakan. That would mean leaving Vicar, and going down alone. You'd be our last hope of getting that cure to Tristaine."

Hakan swallowed visibly. "I hear, Jesstin."

Brenna tried to reel in her chaotic thoughts, still fogged with her sleeping vision of Shann and the village. As always when she needed to center herself, she reached for Jess's hand. *We look to her with such trust,* Brenna thought. *We all count on this one brave warrior to lead us safely through this nightmare. It's just the salvation of her clan. And I wonder why she can't sleep.*

Jess smiled down at her, then went to Eva and Jenny. "In our queen's name, we thank you both for your help. You show great courage in taking on this quest."

"Now, please don't let us fuck up." Jenny sighed, and Eva chuckled nervous agreement.

"Let's break camp." Jess bent and tossed a folded blanket to Dana. "Leave two rifles and our food stock here with our sisters."

Brenna went to her satchel and took out several packets, then sat beside Hakan and Vicar. "Here, Hakan. Make a tea of this, using about this much. Vicar, I want you to drink a cup every six hours." Vic was still shaking, and Brenna helped Hakan adjust a blanket around her. "We'll bring you your own personal dose of that remedy very soon, Vic."

"Aye, Bigfoot." Jess knelt at Vicar's other side. "We'll test the cure out on you, to ensure it's not poison."

"Jesstin." There was no humor in Vicar's voice, and her brogue was low and grating. She clasped Jess's wrist, and in that moment, Brenna thought the two warriors were alone together in these high wilds.

"They raped our mothers, Jess." Vicar jutted her chin toward the City. "Them, down there. For generations, they've hunted us. They murdered our sisters, and they murder them still. They took Dyan from us. And young Camryn."

Brenna shivered. Jess's features were growing as stony and feral as Vicar's.

"Strike without mercy, Jesstin, if they try to stop you." Vic grasped Jess's collar. "With a righteous heart and a vengeful arm that seeks only the Goddess's justice. Bring down the rage of Artemis on the enemies of Tristaine if they bar your path."

Jess's hand covered Vicar's, still clenching her collar, and Brenna saw the words run deep in her. Then Jess looked at Hakan.

"Our Mothers grant your safety, adanin. You'll see us again soon."

❖

"What *is* that?" Dana sniffed the air, then held her injured nose. "What's that bloody stench?"

"The City," Jess replied tersely. She'd been smelling it since they emerged from the forest. Shann was right. Memories were revived more vividly by smells than by sight, and she was not enjoying hers.

"Man, you really can smell it all the way from here." Jenny's nose crinkled. "I didn't realize the City air had gotten that bad."

Dana took another cautious whiff, then spat on the ground. "What'd they do down there, bomb all the smelters?"

"The City stank just like this the whole time you lived there, Dana m'dear." Kyla slipped the green army jacket over Dana's shoulders and buttoned it shut. "You've just had a few years of pure mountain air to blow the poison out of your lungs. I remember it smelling this bad the first time Cam and I got close."

"It's auto exhaust and pollution and chemical waste. And fear." Brenna was lacing her boot closed with quick, tense snaps.

"You don't notice it if you're breathing it in every day. I'd forgotten too, Dana."

Jess saw that the sun had cleared the eastern ridge behind them. "Let's finish this, adanin. We need to get on the road."

They had found the Army transport easily enough. The boot tracks of the soldiers were clearly marked on the dusty trail. Rather than jeeps, the patrol had ridden into the hills in a large, canopied Army truck, a dark muddy green, with white stars painted on each door. The set of keys they had taken from a dead officer cranked its engine to life.

They had taken the soldiers' light jackets, too—the ones not too visibly darkened with blood—and Jess's broad shoulders strained against the scratchy fabric. She helped Brenna button her own jacket, knowing she shared her discomfort wearing clothing so recently owned by the dead.

"Eva, Jenny, one of you should ride in front to guide us." Jess went to the back of the truck, figured out the latch, and lowered the rear gate. The bed was lined with two short metal benches. "The rest of us will stow away here."

She whistled to Dana and lofted the keys to her. Dana snatched them out of the air with one hand, grinning. "You might be able to outrun me on a mustang, Jesstin, but I'm a maniac behind a wheel!"

"We're counting on it." Jess helped Brenna take the high step up into the truck's bed, then assisted Kyla and Jenny before jumping in herself. Immediately it felt like the canopy-shrouded interior was closing in on her. It took more effort than it should have to pull up the gate, latch it, and tie the canvas covering over its bolts. Jess settled on a hard bench next to Brenna, facing Jenny and Kyla, and started the breathing exercises Dyan had taught her to ground herself.

Dana slid open the panel that separated the front seats from the bed of the truck. "Listen, there are no seatbelts back there, and we'll be going over rough terrain. Hold on to what you can."

The truck's engine sputtered to life, and Jess braced herself

for a lurch. But Dana backed the transport around smoothly and then accelerated down a small hill. In spite of their driver's skill, the women in the back had to brace themselves as they gained speed, and Jess slid her arm around Brenna's waist to anchor her.

Dana drove all out. The greenery of the foothills gave way quickly to the sandy, gently sloping terrain that lay between the mountains and the City. They covered ground in minutes that had taken Jenny and Eva long, laborious hours to cross on foot. Jess closed her eyes and thanked the Goddess for smiling on Tristaine at last. This truck would save them entire days of travel.

Brenna's fingers curled around hers, her touch as welcome as warm water on her hands after a cold night's hunt. Her adonai's lovely smile was tired, but soft with affection. "Good morning, Jesstin. We never got around to saying that." Brenna had to raise her voice to be heard over the clattering of the transport. "I'd kiss you, but I'm afraid we'd hit a ravine and I'd knock out your teeth."

"I might want to risk it." Jess blew a tuft of hair gently out of Brenna's eyes. "Good morning, querida."

"So, we're hoping a bunch of rabid Amazons can pass for City soldiers for ten seconds?" Brenna asked. "Long enough to get past that guard post?"

"That's what we're hoping." Jess braced Brenna as the truck took a jarring bounce. Jenny and Kyla steadied each other quickly. "Dana has a fair shot at it. She knows the Army's lingo. With Gaia's luck, we'll be taken for yesterday's patrol, checking back in."

"And if there's trouble," Jenny said gravely, looking at the rifle tucked behind Jess's feet, "we'll shoot it out, if we have to."

"We'll be fine, Jen." Kyla slipped a companionable arm around her. "If anything happens, just do whatever Jess says. Like, right away."

The landscape flew past the small, plastic-shielded windows

near the bed's roof. They had a good hour of this rocky ride ahead, and Jess shifted to ease her lower back. Brenna sat with her eyes closed, and Jess figured she was still so spent after last night's scant rest, she might doze off in spite of the rattling truck.

A quiet urgency rose suddenly in Jess. She frowned a moment, puzzled. She wasn't usually prone to phantom impulses, but she decided to abide this one. "Brenna."

"Hmm?" Brenna opened her eyes at once.

"You own my whole heart, Bren." Jess turned on the bench, needing to see her face. "I love you more than my life."

"Jesstin." Brenna smiled and drew her head back a bit, as if to see Jess more clearly. "Thank you, adonai. But where did that—"

"Just needed to be said, I guess."

Jenny was looking politely away, but Kyla smiled at them openly.

"You guys are so great." There was a sweet poignancy in Kyla's tone that Jess heard even over the rumbling of the engine. Her little sister's features were soft and sad. "You two have the love every Amazon ever born dreams about, you know that?"

"You've felt that kind of love, Ky." Brenna touched Kyla's knee. "You know if you find a woman worthy of it, she'll change your life forever."

"Jesstin?" Dana knocked on the front panel, and Jess saw Kyla start. "Eva has us headed toward the entrance by the north access road, the one with the smallest guard post. We should pick it up pretty soon."

"Aye, Dana." Jess swallowed past a rawness in her throat, missing the canteen she'd left at their base camp. "Signal when we're close."

❖

Army units patrolled the outer perimeter of the City limits constantly. The vast bureaucracy of Homeland Security had

achieved what its shortsighted Citizens thought they wanted—all possible protection against foreign terrorists. But even their willingness to sacrifice basic human rights in the name of safety hadn't rendered the City immune to penetration.

The small guard post Jenny and Eva identified was manned by only two soldiers on an isolated stretch of rural road. Craning her neck between Dana and Eva in the front seats, Brenna caught a glimpse of the long, red-striped gate in the distance that barred the path past the station.

Jess and Jenny and Eva had finished tying up their hair. Through the scratched plastic windows, the women in the back of the truck should just be shadowy forms to anyone standing outside, but Jess wanted their silhouettes to resemble the genders of the soldiers in the lost patrol.

"Here we go, adanin." Dana was wearing the pair of mirrored sunglasses she'd found in a dead soldier's pocket. "Jess, like we agreed, I'll say 'kilo' if this starts to turn funky."

Jess whistled acknowledgement, and Brenna was grateful she still had hold of her hand. After an hour in this dank, enclosed space, Jess seemed as calm as if they were trundling up to a Tristainian picnic, but Brenna saw the faint line of sweat beading her brow. Jess looked down at her and winked, and suddenly they were there. Dana slowed the truck and cranked down her side window. They came to a creaking halt.

"Unit Red Fourteen, end of watch."

Brenna closed her eyes. Dana sounded bored and tired. She knew she was extending the female officer's plastic ID through the window, and Brenna whispered a swift prayer that this inspection would prove as brief and cursory as Dana predicted. A few unbearable seconds ticked by. Kyla and Jenny kept their gazes on the corrugated tin floor of the bed.

A khaki-colored form appeared near the front of the truck. Brenna could see it through the first window. It was impossible to tell whether the sentry was male or female. Jess's gaze was keen and still as they waited.

"End of watch," a man droned.

Brenna let out an explosive breath and then stifled it instinctively. Their tense silence held as the striped gates swung slowly open, and Dana pulled past the station with a laconic wave. They continued down the dirt road for a full minute before anyone spoke.

"Hoo," Dana said softly.

"Oh my, damn straight, hoo," Eva agreed fervently. She twisted in her seat to see Jenny through the panel window. "You okay back there?"

"We're just fine." Jenny fanned herself briskly. "Beautiful job, Dana!"

"Thanky, ma'am." Dana cranked the truck around a bend in the road, and Brenna saw Jess's face go still as she stared through the dusty front windshield.

A dense mass of buildings loomed ahead of them, high rises and squat factories of every shape and size, surrounded by a yellow cloud of low-lying smog. The City was opening its maw to swallow her and Jess whole again.

Brenna gripped Jess's hand tightly and held on.

Chapter Eight

There was only so far they could drive an Army truck into the City in broad daylight without drawing attention. Smaller Military vehicles were a common sight on paranoid urban streets, but one of them was bound to question the presence of a troop transport in the City's core.

"Keep a sharp eye, adanin." Jess shucked off the dead soldier's jacket gratefully. "We need a large space, untended."

The untended part should be easy enough, Jess thought. *Eva and Jenny chose this neighborhood wisely.* While well within the City Lines, this shabby street seemed all but deserted at high noon on a Friday. Dana trundled the truck slowly past a series of shabby, shuttered retail stores, most of them closed for good.

"There, Jess." Kyla was pressed against one of the small plastic windows.

"Aye, Kyla, good catch. Dana?"

"Yep, I see it." Dana cranked the wheel, and the truck lumbered into the wide entrance of a large, abandoned storage shed. Its concrete floor and walls were coated with dust and cobwebs, and it was deep enough that the truck was parked in shadows. It wouldn't go undetected here forever, but they only needed a day.

Jess slid off the metal bench, crouched stiffly, and unlatched the truck's tailgate. They clambered out quickly, and Dana and Eva joined them. Under the army jackets, the Amazons had donned several items of clothing Jenny and Eva had packed, to lessen the strangeness of their hand-sewn Tristaine attire.

"What do you say, Jenny?" Jess asked. "Do we look ready?"

"Hmm." Jenny went to Jess and straightened the collar of her long chambray shirt. "You still look a little über-Amazon in this, Jess, but then you would look butch in a bikini. I think you guys are disguised well enough as City dwellers to pass, yes."

"Now, the streets that lead to your friend's place outside the East Borough are just north of here." Eva slid the strap of her backpack over her shoulder. "It's a pretty rough part of town, folks, so be careful."

"We will, sister." Jess cast a longing look at the truck, sorry they had to abandon the rifles. At least their hand weapons could be concealed in their clothing. "Jenny, Eva, tell us your plan again."

"We'll walk east of this neighborhood until we find a land line." Jenny recited their strategy with confidence. Jess had heard her whispering it a dozen times while they traveled. "We'll call my sister, who will come and pick us up. Then Gina will help us find out everything we can about Brenna's niece."

"We'll find a way to refuel this hulking jeep." Eva adjusted her glasses and frowned at the truck. "Then tonight, at 3:00 a.m., we'll be parked on the frontage road that runs behind the City Clinic."

"You think you've got the gears of this rig down, Eva?" Dana looked worried. "It's not like driving a compact."

"Yeah, I watched you pretty carefully." Eva smiled and extended a trembling thumbs-up. "It might not be pretty, but I'll get us there."

"Thank you, Jen." Brenna clasped Jenny's arms. "For helping me look for Sammy's baby. We'll try to check the Clinic's database, but your sister has a much better chance of finding Foster Care records."

"We'll look hard, Brenna." Jenny patted Brenna's cheek. "I hope we find something that helps."

Jess knew it was time to move. The sun was high in the sky now, and they had to find Jode. "We'll see you tonight, adanin. Walk by our Mother's light."

"You two watch out for each other." Kyla hugged Eva tightly, then Jenny.

Jenny went up on her toes and kissed Jess's cheek, and then she and Eva were gone.

❖

Brenna remembered the East Borough as a sparsely populated ghetto on the outskirts of the City's Downtown District. The people who lived there were lucky to get basic services—water, electricity, heat—and were reminded of that fact forcefully when any unrest threatened.

The few schools were as ramshackle and antiquated as the policies that ran them. Housing consisted of dilapidated apartment complexes, Government-run developments, and the occasional isolated trailer.

In one of those trailers lived the son of an Amazon and his wife, driven into poverty because of their loyalty to Tristaine. It was still a stone in Brenna's heart that after helping her and Jess escape, Jodoch and Pamela had to leave their jobs and their home and go into hiding to escape Caster's wrath.

The cramped streets of the Borough baked in the high sun, and they encountered only a few other pedestrians on the cracked sidewalks. Brenna was relieved to see that none of the people passing by took any particular notice of their small cadre. In fact, none of them met their eyes, a defense mechanism among Citizens that was all but unheard of in Tristaine.

"Should we cut through, Jess?" Dana eyed the shoddy storefronts on either side uneasily. "This seems like the right neighborhood."

"Eva wanted us a bit farther north." Jess paused, and Brenna saw her frown darkly at two shabbily dressed men who stood looking at them from the curb. The men exchanged glances, then moved quickly on.

"Adanin, I give you Jesstin's killer stare of death." Brenna

smiled and nudged Jess. “Works every time.”

Jess led them several more blocks, then checked an alley darkened by the buildings on either side. “Through here.”

The alley was wide enough that they could walk side by side down its stinking length, avoiding the overflowing trash bins on either side. They were halfway through the dingy passage when Brenna heard the sound of approaching footsteps. Jess snapped her fingers, and Dana and Kyla moved smoothly behind them.

A loose clump of five people lurched around the corner into the alley. Four men and one woman, and judging by their gait and raucous voices, they had hit happy hour early and hard.

“Wonderful choice, Jesstin,” Jess grumbled aloud.

“We could try your killer stare of death, Jess,” Dana suggested.

Any hope that they could simply slip past this group faded as the men bunched across their path, falling silent as they drew closer.

“*Good* afternoon to you lovely ladies!” The largest of the men kept walking, his bleary eyes fixed on Brenna, until he almost touched her. Jess put out a calm hand and laid it on his T-shirted chest, and he backed off, his arms raised in exaggerated surrender. His friends clustered behind him.

“Man, it’s so cool you girls came along!” A second man grinned, blowing beer breath through his beard into Jess’s expressionless face. “Me and my family, we all got stranded when our van broke down over on Yesler.”

The woman with them giggled, holding onto the vest of the man who had his arm around her, almost too intoxicated to stand. They were all drunk, but there was an ominous sheen in the eyes of the two men closest to them. Brenna was all too familiar with the toxic street drugs that were the constant plague of the outer Boroughs, and these two looked ripped on them. It seemed unlikely that they could talk their way out of this.

“Maybe you guys could stake us a few bucks, just enough

for bus fare back home?" The bearded man grinned at Jess, scratching a small sore on his nose.

"We have no money." Jess checked their positions. The fourth man, more a skinny kid, had rested his butt against the brick wall, and was yawning widely. "We're just passing through."

"Well, what say you come party with us for a while?" The second man stepped closer to Jess, still smiling. "Then maybe we can pool all our resources, see what we got, and make everybody happy."

Jess felt Dana shift behind her, and she reached back and touched her wrist. "We have plans we can't change, and no time for this. Either let us pass, or draw arms."

The bearded man let out an explosive hoot. *"Draw arms?* We're just having a friendly conversa—"

But apparently his partner welcomed Jess's invitation, and he lunged at Brenna with a lusty roar. Jess shot sideways and rocketed her fist into his chin, cutting off his bellow abruptly and spinning him off his feet. She whirled and saw Dana and Kyla tackle the bearded oaf, taking him down against a trash bin. The woman's shrill scream echoed crazily off the brick walls around them. The kid bolted back down the alley, obviously wanting none of this.

Jess advanced on the man holding the hysterical woman, and he backed away quickly, dragging her with him, one hand raised in panic.

Jess heard the meaty impact of Brenna's boot in the midriff of the big brute, who was still scrabbling over the concrete to get to her. He grabbed her ankle and she fell. Cursing, he grappled in his shirt and yanked out a blue steel revolver.

Time condensed into seconds. The small black bore of the gun's muzzle weaved toward Brenna, who was crouching only inches away. Jess heard Dana's warning cry even as her dagger filled her hand, and then it was flying, all the strength in her arm launching the blade in a sizzling trajectory toward the center of

the man's chest. Its wicked edge passed so closely to Brenna's head that it sheared off a strand of her blond hair before slamming to the hilt in his heart.

"Jesus!" screamed the woman, careening in her boyfriend's arms, her hands plastered over her face. *"Jesus, stop!"* He yanked her away, and they staggered into a run back down the alley. Jess gestured to the others to let them go.

The bearded man lay slumped and insensible in piles of wet garbage. Jess went to Brenna and helped her to her feet. She was shaking and pale, but unhurt, and Jess kissed the top of her head. She walked to the man sprawled on his back and knelt beside him.

The last spark of life was leaving his eyes. Jess watched dispassionately as it faded, waiting until the last guttural breath left his spit-flecked lips. Then she grasped the hilt of her dagger and drew out the obsidian blade. She wiped the blood off on the man's shirt methodically.

"It was a necessary kill." Jess heard Dana behind her. "Well done, Jess."

Jess stared at the ebony sheen of the blade, a gift from Dyan. She rose and sheathed it in her belt. "Are we injured?"

"We're whole, Jesstin." Kyla put her arm around Brenna and squeezed her shoulders, and Brenna was able to offer her a tremulous smile. It had been very close.

"This kind's not likely to run to the police for help." Dana nudged the leg of the bearded man with her foot. "I don't think we need to worry about pursuit."

"Then let's find our brother." Jess stepped over the dead man, and they left the alley and its silent denizens behind.

❖

Their shadows slid across the cracked plaster wall of a utility substation. Brenna crouched in the high weeds beside Jess. "Do you think that's it?"

"Aye, seems likely." Jess tossed a dead bush aside so she could see the tinny length of the trailer that stood a stone's throw away. The land it stood on looked barren and parched, but splashes of color from a carefully tended flower garden pleased the eye.

"Can you see any security system?"

"Guard dog." Dana nodded toward a small white puppy high-pawing across the fenced yard, sniffing the air industriously. "I can take him."

Jess touched Brenna's knee. A screen door on the trailer was creaking open, and a large man backed carefully down the two rickety steps. She twirled her fingers sharply, and the others rose with her.

The area was fairly deserted, but Brenna knew Jess wanted them inside as quickly as possible. They ran as one body, and Jess vaulted the low fence in one easy leap, sending the puppy into a frenzy of alarmed yaps. "Jodoch."

The man had been bending over something, and now he spun into a defensive stance. Jess skidded to a halt, obviously startled by the wild light in her gentle brother's eyes. "Jode, it's me."

Jode gaped at the four women who had magically appeared in his backyard, and his body relaxed. A smile wreathed his acne-scarred face. "Jesstin!" He took two steps and clapped his burly arms around Jess.

"Jodoch!" Jess grinned, returning the embrace. "Get us inside."

"Jeeze. Yeah, sure." Jode released her, looking around the empty lots adjoining his. "Come on in."

"Hello, Jodey!" Kyla, holding the squirming puppy, rose on her toes to kiss Jode's cheek.

"Hey, my sweet little sister!" Jode ushered them quickly up the wooden steps into the trailer. "Uh, Pam? Company for dinner!"

Light splashed through the small windows, but it took a second for Brenna's eyes to adjust to the relatively darkened interior. Jode's home was tiny but clean, cluttered only by the

pleasant disorder of daily life.

"Kee-rist, is that *Jess*?" A short, stout woman with a beautiful sway to her hips tossed a dishcloth over her shoulder, smiling. She bounced on her toes and peered past her. "What, did you bring the entire tribe? We're having Jell-O."

"Pamela." Jess bent down and kissed her cheek. "Forgive us our ambush."

"Something big must be up. You guys look like roadkill."

"Aye, there's trouble." Jess made quick introductions. Adding four women to the cramped living room made for much shifting of positions.

"Is Shanendra all right?" Jode ducked back in through the screen door, carrying the reason he had reacted with such swift protection when Jess startled him.

"Jode, you're a father!" Brenna brushed the backs of her fingers across the baby's downy cheek. It ogled up at her comically, wearing an infant's classic pleased to meet you, freaked out to be here look. "And yes, Shann's still with us."

"Hey, Brenna." Jode smiled down at her with a sudden shyness, jiggling the baby gently in his big arms. "You look fantastic."

"Yes, right," Pam called from the kitchen. "Now, if we could get all Amazons and all hulking carpenters to please sit the merry hell down, even short people might be able to see what's going on."

❖

Pamela claimed she could concoct a feast from two cans of pea soup and a chicken leg, and she proceeded to do so. Fresh spices and vegetables from a second garden supplemented an excellent meal that filled Jess with nostalgia for Aria's home cooking. Though artfully prepared, the vegetables were puny and stunted specimens compared to Tristaine's lush produce.

"It's been hardest on Pam." Still chewing, Jode brushed his

callused, scarred hands together, his elbows balanced carefully on a TV tray. "She grew up in a pretty well-off family in the City, with nice things. She's got nothing out here."

"Precious, feel free to throw yourself off the nearest cliff." Pam smiled at her husband with undisguised affection. She glanced down at the baby nursing at her breast. "I can name a few wee compensations for the loss of my stupid rice cooker."

"Are you finding work?" Jess measured the care-lines etched at the corner of Jode's eyes, but he nodded with enthusiasm.

"Yeah, plenty, actually. There's steady work on construction crews, at least in the summer. Pay's not much, but we won't starve. I've got a good hand with a band-saw."

And a good mind for mechanical engineering, Jess thought. Dreams of a more prosperous life were probably forever beyond this small family now.

"And this little guy will be handy too." Dana tickled the soft black hair on the baby's head with uncharacteristic tenderness. "Jodey Elijah Junior."

"Named for my mom, really, not for me. Jodoch is the male form of Jocelyn." Jode smiled at Jess sadly. "I sure miss her, Jess."

Kyla stopped stroking the puppy sleeping in her lap and laid her hand on Jode's leg. "All of Tristaine misses her, sweetheart." Though Jode was Jocelyn's only child, she had been spiritual mother to dozens in their clan, and one of Shann's most trusted advisers.

Jess checked the lowering of the sun through the window. "We have a few hours until we move, adanin. We'll spend them resting."

"Pam's great grub brought me back to life, Jess." Dana rubbed her belly. "I could stand to head out now."

Jess shook her head. "We're on schedule, Dana, let's stay with it. We won't find rest again until we leave the City. We need to replenish our energies while we can."

"I'll get the pickup ready," Jode said. "Jess, I don't like the

idea of just dropping you guys off downtown. You won't have any way of signaling for help if things go sour. What if your friends don't meet you? If I went in with you, at least you'd have one more pair of—"

"You'll get no closer to the City than the edge of the Borough, Jodoch." Jess swallowed and rubbed her throat. "You've risked enough for Tristaine, and your little one needs you home safe tonight."

Pam threw Jess a grateful look and rose from the sofa, balancing her gurgling infant easily. "All right, we have a baby to burp, and beds and a couch to make up. You," she said to Dana, "will sleep on the floor. Grub, she calls my dinner."

"You never learn," Kyla told Dana and knuckled her hair affectionately.

❖

"Shanendra, he is my son."

There was no transition this time, and no sign of Elise. Brenna just suddenly found herself standing in a corner of Shann's private cabin.

She could see her mother seated in the wide padded chair near the dark fireplace. Shann's head was resting against its high back, and her complexion was gray. But she gazed compassionately at the large warrior standing before her. Oisin and Jackson flanked Shann's throne, and they looked much less sympathetic.

"Perry, I know you cherish your son." Shann lifted a small cup of steaming tea and sipped it before she continued. "Tristaine cherishes all her children. But you cannot take your family off the mesa."

"Lady, I'm Tristaine's true daughter. I asked for this private council out of respect for your reign." Perry's large fists bunched at her sides. Brenna didn't know this warrior well, except as a quiet woman who was intensely devoted to her adonai and their five-year-old child. "But I'm telling you that we're leaving.

Alex has blood kin in the settlement south of the gorge. We'll go there."

"I'm not hearing much respect for our lady's reign, warrior." Jackson eyed Perry warily, her thumbs hooked in her belt. "You serve under Jesstin's command, and we follow our queen's will."

"Jesstin isn't here." There was a dangerous tension in Perry's low voice. "And she took her top commanders with her. I don't follow your orders, Jackson."

"Then you'll abide mine, Amazon." Oisin unsnapped the sheath on her belt, her threat unmistakable.

Shann reached out weakly and touched Oisin's arm, and she stepped back reluctantly. "Perry, all you will accomplish by leaving our village is bringing death to Alex's kin. I'm sorry, adanin. But I will use all the force necessary to stop anyone who tries to leave Tristaine's mesa."

Brenna saw the muscles in Perry's jaw stand out, and for a moment she thought Oisin would have to draw her knife. "I'm not alone, Shanendra. It's not just the women of the Mothers' guild who chafe at your rule now. Many of our warriors are sick, but some of us still standing have young to protect. I pray you remember that." The big Amazon straightened, nodded respectfully to Shann, and strode to the cabin's door.

Shann waited until it had closed and latched behind Perry. Then she rested her head on the chair's back again and closed her eyes. "Jackson. Double the sentries around our periphery tonight. We must guard our boundaries closely until Brenna and Jess return."

"It'll be done, lady."

"Thank you." Shann smiled up at the young warriors. "You've both been a wonderful support these last frightening days. I'm going to check in on Samantha before I lie down."

Brenna saw Jackson and Oisin exchange concerned glances.

"Carelle told us this morning your daughter is resting more

comfortably, lady," Oisin said. "Don't you think you should sleep now?"

"I'll sleep better if I see my girl myself, adanin." Shann grasped the arms of her chair and rose slowly. "Oisin, please go to our healers and ask if we should harvest more—"

Brenna saw the color fall out of her mother's face, and she tried to cry a warning she knew they couldn't hear. Luckily Jackson's reflexes were swift and sure, and she caught Shann as she fell.

"Cripes!" Oisin gasped. She helped Jackson lower the queen gently to the white pine floor. "Jackson, find Aria and Sarah. Bring them here. And a healer. Go!"

❖

"Brenna, Jesstin, it's time to go."

Brenna felt Jode shake her awake gingerly, and Jess stirred against her on the narrow bed. Shivering, she turned into Jess's arms and clung to her as Jode moved on to wake Kyla and Dana.

"Bren?" Jess sounded alarmed. "Are you sick, lass?"

"No. I'm okay." Brenna didn't want to move, but she had to. "Shann's running out of time, Jesstin. Please, we have to move fast."

Chapter Nine

Conversation was impossible while Jode's flatbed pickup rattled over the poorly kept roads, the worst of the jarring potholes cushioned by the sleeping bags they lay on. Brenna sweltered in the close confines of the truck's bed. The green tarp covering them was just inches above her nose, braced over plastic cartons at each corner. Jode had strewn small tools and sawdust over the tarp, effectively concealing the presence of the four women below.

Brenna felt Kyla's warm side on her left and Jess's on her right and drew reassurance from the contact, hot or not. When the road began to smooth beneath them, she groped until she found Jess's hand. "Darling. It's like our first date."

She heard Jess's rumble of grim amusement. Jode had helped them escape from the City in much this same way, and she was having flashbacks of green tarps and sick fear. Jess had to be affected by this claustrophobia more than any of them. The bed of the Army truck had been expansive compared to this close space.

"Bren, are you sure she'll be at this bar?" Kyla was invisible in the murk and barely audible over the thrumming of pavement beneath them. "Your friend?"

"It's Friday night," Brenna said sadly. "She'll be there. Are you sure you can find the utility doors at the back of the Civilian Unit?"

"You drew out a good map of the Clinic's compound." Dana squirmed, grunting in the darkness.

"You're on my hair," Kyla said.

"Sorry."

"There's plenty of cover behind the Clinic. You won't lack for hiding places." Brenna knew she was reassuring herself as well as her adanin. "No expense is spared when it comes to landscaping Government facilities."

"Brenna." Jess sounded a bit hoarse. "Everyone down here has had this vaccine the Clinic brewed? Even those in the outer Boroughs?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Inoculations are mandatory." Brenna squeezed Jess's hand. "I know. I worried about exposing Jode and his family too, but they're protected." A sudden chill worked through her as she remembered the faint rasp in Jess's voice. "Jesstin. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fit enough for the night."

Brenna shuddered, fresh anxiety sinking into her gut. Then she slammed on her mental brakes, hard. Her imagination could not dwell on Jess in the grip of this lethal flu, not if she wanted to function.

"We're starting to hear traffic." Jess shifted against her. "Brenna, you're certain you can make safe passage from this tavern to the Clinic?"

"Yes. It's close, and I'll start out well before curfew. We left plenty of time." Brenna fingered the sheathed knife in her belt. "I'll be fine."

"Just be sure we don't have our butts wagging out there when curfew hits," Dana grumbled. "Perimeter checks are done ten minutes after the siren at every base I've ever known."

The speed of the truck abruptly lessened, and Brenna's throat went dry as Jode pulled off the pavement to park. The bed tipped slightly as he stepped out of the cab. The tarp rippled above them, and she felt a welcome gust of fresh air as Jode threw it back.

"Downtown and points north," Jode announced, cloaking his tension in joviality. "Everybody out."

Brenna sat up and searched the night sky, yearning for Tristaine's starfield, and as expected, saw only a shroud of City smog. The polluted clouds were lit a dull gray from the murky

illumination of streetlights. She pressed Jess's hand one more time, then followed Kyla stiffly off the tailgate of the truck, steadied by Jode's supporting arm. Her heart was beating a queasy tattoo in her breast.

Jode had chosen their drop-off point well, deep in the shadows behind a large retail outlet. He closed the tailgate with a firm click, then joined them. They stood quietly for a moment, hands joined in the center of their circle.

"Our thanks, Jodoch." Jess cleared her throat. "You served Tristaine well. Now our trails part again. We'll send you word when we can."

"See that you do, treetop." Jode swallowed audibly. "Don't get killed, please. And give my love to my Amazons."

Jess nodded and returned the gazes of her women. "We hold the life of our clan in our hands, adanin. May the Seven Sisters guide our path."

"Amen," Kyla whispered. She hugged Jode in farewell, and Jess took Brenna in her arms.

"Please, Gaia," Brenna whispered into Jess's shoulder. "Please don't let me fuck up."

"You have all my faith, lass." Jess kissed her, her lips lingering gently for a moment, and then she released her quickly.

"Don't you dare take any chances, Brenna." Kyla held her. "No falling off cliffs, no jumping into rivers. Don't you make me tell Sammy you got squashed by a City bus. I hate to let you out of my sight."

"I hate it, too." Brenna sighed.

Dana leaned over Kyla and kissed Brenna's cheek. "You be safe, little sister."

"You too. I'll see you in three hours." Brenna threw Jess another look and made herself move.

When she looked back moments later the shadows were empty, and gravel spun beneath the tires of a flatbed truck turning back toward home.

❖

Brenna had convinced Jess and the others that she should approach Nell alone. The shock of seeing her again would be enough of a jolt to her friend's fragile psyche without adding strange Amazons to the mix. She kept reminding herself of the wisdom of this strategy as she neared the entrance to Bruner's, her craving for Jess's protective presence as keen as thirst. She stared at her image reflected in the bar's glass door, then pulled it open.

The smell of alcohol was chemically pungent in the dim, high-ceilinged tavern, sparking in Brenna an almost atavistic revulsion. She used to inhale those stinging fumes as naturally as she now breathed Tristaine's pure mountain air.

Music from a jukebox jangled loudly from one corner. Whistles and sharp yells broke out as a new song started, evidence that the night's liquid intake was well underway. The single large room was crowded and dank.

Brenna found Nell where she thought she would, where Nell had been almost every Friday night for the last nine years. Many other nights too. She commanded a full booth without apology, her heavy backpack, filled with books, slung across the opposite seat.

Brenna stood beside her table. She knew Nell realized someone was there, she just wasn't looking up from her book in hopes that the intruder would go away. Brenna announced her presence the same way she had every time she'd joined Nell for a beer during medical school. She lifted her backpack, laid it gently on the seat next to Nell, and sat down opposite her.

Nell's eyes were owlish behind thick glasses as she glanced at the backpack beside her, then at Brenna. She jerked in her seat, her book clapping shut like gunshot, and hit the bottom of the table with her knee. The half-full pint near the edge of the table almost toppled, but Brenna righted it quickly.

Nell seemed frozen for a moment, staring at her with a lack of comprehension that was almost bovine. Her friend had one of the finest clinical minds Brenna had ever known. Gaia grant it was still working under that alcoholic fog.

"Sorry. Heightened startle reflex. It's the meds." Nell spoke in a monotone. She blinked at Brenna in incredulous silence.

"Will you talk to me?" Brenna tried to keep her dismay out of her voice. She had prepared herself for the ravages four years might have wreaked on Nell's appearance, but she was Brenna's age and looked two decades older. "If you're going to freak out or yell for help, Nell, let me walk away now."

Nell didn't answer at once. She downed a few swallows of the dark ale Brenna had salvaged. "If I were in my right mind, I'd make you go. You're taking a hell of a chance, Brenna, showing your face around here again. And you're not only risking your own hide, but mine as well. What do you want?"

"I need your help." Brenna swallowed. "Nell, I want you to give me your keys to the Civilian Unit."

"Sure. Here you go." A hint of Nell's glittering intelligence appeared. "Why do you need them?"

Brenna expelled a low breath. When Nell was calm and not too drunk, she could be reasoned with. "Because my family is at stake, and everyone I love. You'd be saving hundreds of lives, Nell. You don't need to know more, and the less you know the better."

"So I can't give away too much when the Fed's goons interrogate me? Brenna, how can I even consider helping you?" Nell's chewed fingertips gripped the edge of the table. "I've been through this once before. I was called in for *three* interviews after you disappeared. Because we worked together in Civilian, before you were transferred to Caster's Military unit. They thought I knew something about—"

"I'm sorry, Nell." Brenna reached for Nell's hand, and after a moment, she let her take it. "More sorry than I can say, for the

trouble I brought you. And I can't promise I'm not bringing you more now. But we're desperate. Will you listen?"

Nell looked down at Brenna's hand covering her own and rubbed her forehead. "Yeah. Talk."

Brenna checked their surroundings, grateful for the general clamor of the bar, and leaned closer over the table. "You give your keys to me and go straight home. I'll leave them under the pagoda, in the park across from the Clinic's main entrance. Then show up to work Monday as usual. You never saw me."

"And what will I find out on Monday?" Nell slid her hand from beneath Brenna's and lifted her glass again, draining it. "That political radicals have stolen a chemical weapon to wipe out the Army?"

"All they'll find missing is enough kestadine to save six hundred women and children. With luck, the Clinic will never learn who took it."

Brenna sat back, trying to calm her pounding heart. If Nell refused, they could get into the Clinic through the ventilation ducts. It could be done—probably—without triggering an alarm. But breaking into the pharmacy would sound sirens they had no way of disarming. *Please,* Brenna pleaded silently.

"You said, 'with luck.'" Nell smiled without humor. "Luck has not been my life's forte, Brenna. What if you're caught and they find my keys on you?"

"At the first sign of trouble, your keys go into a medical waste drop shaft. You know Clinic orderlies aren't paid enough to go through that slimy mess to find them."

She studied Nell's closed face. She was alone in the world and bitterly unhappy since adolescence. But she was a good woman, and she became a medic for the same reasons Brenna had. Nursing political prisoners involved monitoring their physical interrogations, even in the Civilian unit. Seeing her patients tortured was shriveling Nell's soul as surely as it had Brenna's.

"Six hundred lives," Nell mumbled.

A passing server plunked down a full pint of ale in front of Nell and collected her empty glass, an automatic refill born of long practice. Brenna shook her head when he raised an eyebrow at her, and he went on without comment.

Nell reached for her backpack, and Brenna held her breath. She unzipped a side pocket, and drew out five silver and brass keys on a simple ring. She put them on the table in front of Brenna.

Air gushed quietly out of Brenna's lungs, and she curled the keys in her palm. She stared at Nell, a small spark of hope igniting inside her. "Nell, come with us."

"What?" Nell sat up, alarmed.

"Not to the Clinic," Brenna said quickly. "Join us later tonight. Come with us to the mountains, to our village. It's a different life there. You could have a different life, honey."

"As a political criminal?"

"As a free woman." Brenna gripped Nell's hand again. "Nell, there's peace and beauty in Tristaine you will never know here. Please, think about it. What would you be leaving behind that you could possibly miss?"

Nell said nothing, staring into her beer.

"You could heal there," Brenna whispered. "I have."

The chaos and noise in the bar faded, and the murky light dwindled down to illuminate this one booth and Nell's worn face. They had never been the kind of friends who had heart to heart talks, she and Nell. They'd rarely spoken of their childhoods, and less of their dreams. They hadn't even talked about work. They drank together to forget what happened there. But Nell was her friend, and Brenna hadn't had many in the City.

"You'd have to sneak out after curfew." Brenna hoped she was hearing her. "Wait for us in the pagoda. We'll come for you, Nell. We'll bring you with us."

Nell patted Brenna's wrist, and her smile was wistful. "I've missed you, Bren. I can see you've changed. I wouldn't have known you."

Brenna tried to read her expression. “Nell. Please. You have so much to gain and so little to lose. You have three hours to decide.”

“I’ll think about it. I will.” Nell patted her hand again, then lifted the strap of the backpack over her shoulder. “It’s late for me, I’m going home. Be careful tonight, Brenna. And remember, if this goes wrong, I’ve never heard of you.”

“Thank you, Nell,” Brenna whispered. She watched her climb out of the booth and make her way toward the exit doors. She didn’t look back, and Brenna didn’t need her psychic sense to know she would never see Nell again. She lowered her head.

The harsh clank of a glass on the table jerked Brenna erect, her nerve-endings firing like pistons. A full snifter of whiskey sat before her. A dead man, holding a second glass, slid into the booth across from her.

He was dirty and emaciated, and his bare forearms were etched with needle tracks. He still would have been handsome, though, were it not for his missing eye, a dark, lid-covered dent beneath his brow. His one eye was whole but blood-shot with drink, and Brenna remembered that he used to have beautiful eyes, a crystalline blue, shining down at Samantha on their wedding day.

“Matthew.” It was all she could say, the only sound she could make.

“Brenna.” Matthew slurred her name, his teeth clenched so tightly his jaw trembled. “I couldn’t believe it was you. I couldn’t believe it. I had to buy you a drink.” He pushed the other snifter toward her, sloshing cheap whiskey over its rim.

“We heard you were dead.” Brenna pressed her hand to her mouth and tried to steady her voice. “Matthew, sweet Gaia—”

“You heard right.” He took a healthy slug of his drink and studied her in sullen silence. “We were going to name our child after you, Sammy and me, if it was a girl. Did you know that? We were going to name our baby Brenna, after you.”

"Matt, Sammy is—"

"She loved you that much. She thought you hung the stars in the sky." He leaned his elbows heavily on the table. "Hell, I loved you too, Brenna, like you were my own sister. Why did you kill us? Why did you blow my family apart?"

"Please, Matthew, listen." Still trying to draw even breath, Brenna clenched her hands in mute pleading. "Sammy is alive—"

"I don't want to hear about Samantha." Matthew slammed the snifter down on the table hard enough to crack its base, and a pocket of quiet formed around them. He stared at her with a muddy hatred, and soon the curious lost interest and the noise swelled again.

"I gave her up." The fury faded from Matthew's eye, and he looked at her dully. "I told them where to find her. It didn't even take them very long to convince me. Just one prick." He pointed vaguely at his empty eye socket. "My wife, with my baby inside her, and if the tip of that scalpel came any closer to my other eye, I would have led them to her hiding place myself. I don't think about Samantha anymore."

Brenna tried for words and failed, gripped by waves of desolation.

"I hope it was worth it," Matthew said softly. "Whatever you killed my family for. That woman you escaped with, are you happy together? Do you have a daughter? Did you name her Samantha?"

"Stop," Brenna gasped, and that freed her tongue. "She's alive, Matt! She escaped. Sammy is safe, she's—"

Fire filled Brenna's eyes as Matthew threw the contents of his glass in her face. The burning liquid splashed over her throat and drenched her breasts.

"I...don't...think...about...your sister...anymore."

She couldn't see him get up, but she heard his parting words.

"Rot in hell, Brenna."

Darkness clouded Brenna's vision as she sat there, trembling, whiskey dripping from her chin. She was inundated by its noxious, familiar smell.

Finally she lifted her head and saw the full snifter Matthew had set before her. Almost without her bidding, Brenna's shaking fingers reached out and grasped it. She emptied it in three long swallows, then coughed spasmodically as it burned its way down her core.

Nell's second beer still stood untouched on the table. Brenna drank that too.

Chapter Ten

Jess was shivering with cold, wracked with it in defiance of the mild summer night. So far, this malaise creeping through her was limited to a dry ache in her throat and these bloody chills. Jess's mind was clear and her legs were still strong. All she could do was pray to her Mothers they stayed that way.

"Hey. Jesstin." Kyla's touch on her arm was gentle. "You're shaking like an aspen treetop. Come here."

Jess hesitated but then shifted closer to Kyla and allowed her to slip her arm around her. Kyla rubbed Jess's arm briskly, and then moved the flat of her palm across her back in warming circles.

"Thanks, lass," Jess whispered.

"You don't have to thank me for this, Jess."

Jess tried to relax into Kyla's ministrations, but Brenna was due to join them soon, and she couldn't turn off the invisible beacon that searched the air constantly for her adonai. She frowned as a mild crunching sound came from Kyla's other side.

"These candy bars are great." Dana smacked her lips. "Chocolate candy bars are one of the few things the City has over Tristaine. Want one?" She extended a wrapped bar to Kyla and Jess. "Pam gave me two."

"I can't believe you're eating candy at a time like this." Kyla frowned, still rubbing Jess's back. She snatched the bar from Dana. "I didn't say I didn't want it."

A bricked circle of lush, high vegetation on the Clinic's outer grounds provided them secure shelter while they waited. It was hours sitting in wet grass with leafy boughs in their faces,

but only Jess seemed chilled by their damp vigil. She reached out cautiously and moved a thin branch an inch.

The Clinic awaited them like a malign sentinel, bathed in the harsh arc lamps posted at even intervals around the grounds. Beyond it, partially visible over the Clinic's north roof, were the looming walls of the Prison.

Jess had served hard labor there for six months. She'd been beaten there, and starved, and locked into a dank hole a thousand leagues from the sky. She was forced to leave Kyla and Camryn behind those gray walls when they took her to the Clinic, forced to imagine them beaten and starved.

"Jess? You want some of this? Dana's right, it's great."

Jess stared at the white sheen of the Clinic, and her shaking grew worse. The beatings had become torture there. Caster had made Brenna hurt her, Brenna with her gentle, healing hands, forced to apply a stunning electric shock to Jess's shoulder.

And Caster had stripped her. Her Brenna. Stripped her, tied her with ropes, and ordered Jess to whip her. That was her choice, scourge Brenna or betray Tristaine.

"Jesstin."

Kyla sounded so firm Jess started, thinking for a disoriented moment that Shann sat beside her.

Kyla's hand slid beneath Jess's dark hair and cupped her neck, then pulled her head down on her shoulder. Jess's muscles tightened, every fiber in her being resisting such intimate surrender.

"Stop it," Kyla said quietly. "Let me hold you."

"Jess? What's wrong?" Dana touched Jess's leg. "Is she all right, Ky?"

"No, but that's okay." Kyla stroked Jess's hair, rocking her gently. "Jess doesn't need to be strong right now. Don't worry; she will be when we need her. She always is."

Jess let out a hitching breath. A soft melody issued from Kyla's lips, not a lullaby, but a cheerful, lilting song Amazons sang at their harvest festival. Her rigid back began to relax, and

her shivering lessened. Dana's hand still rested on her leg. Jess felt its warmth.

Kyla's sweet song ended, and Jess sat up slowly, feeling as if she'd had ten hours of solid sleep. Kyla rested two fingers against Jess's lips.

"Again, you don't have to thank your adanin for simple comfort, Jesstin," she murmured. "Our love for you is your birthright, and it runs very deep."

Jess's sore throat tightened, and she kissed the tips of Kyla's fingers.

"Are you okay now?" Dana still sounded worried.

"Aye, I'm fine now." Jess tried to see through the smog to check the position of the moon. "How's our time, Dana?"

"That's the thing." Dana rose up on her knees cautiously and peered through the foliage. "It's got to be close to curfew, Jesstin. And I don't see any sign of—"

The raucous curfew siren blasted through the night, shattering the silence into quivering shards.

"Jess," Kyla gasped.

Jess steadied her, searching the skies as if the Goddess might drop salvation into their laps.

Brenna, Jess's mind screamed. *Where are you?*

❖

Brenna lurched out of the booth, her thighs knocking the heavy table painfully, barely registering the jangle of keys as they fell to the wooden floor. She bent to snatch them up, and nearly fell headlong as dizziness coursed through her.

Dear Gaia, she thought, *what have I done. How much time has passed?*

Surely, surely she had sat there only a few minutes with Matthew's whiskey drying on her face and boiling in her stomach.

Time enough had sped by to allow a dismaying number of

people to leave the bar. It was almost empty. Brenna focused on moving, the sheer physical mechanics of putting one foot in front of the other and following the few remaining patrons outside. After four years of sobriety, the alcohol hit her broadside like a horned ram, and she gave her head a fierce shake.

Brenna stepped out onto the sidewalk and looked around wildly. The streets were almost deserted, just a few pedestrians and vehicles heading directly home before curfew sounded. She leaned against a light pole and commanded her mind to stop reeling, then pushed off it and ran.

She was fast when she had to be, and she hit a dead sprint within seconds. The Clinic lay just adjacent to a park six blocks over. She could make it in good time if she wasn't stopped. Then Brenna realized that racing through City streets like a frenzied banshee increased the possibility of drawing unwelcome interest, and she made herself slow to a trot.

She rounded the corner of a bank and plowed directly into a police officer.

The young woman gave a bark of surprise and steadied Brenna, gripping her arms. "Hey, slow down!"

"I'm s-sorry—"

"Phew." The officer's nose wrinkled beneath her visor. "Smells like you've been hitting it pretty heavy tonight, ma'am. You know it's almost curfew?"

"I know." Brenna stared at the hand still clenching her upper arm. "I live close. I can make it."

"Better show me some ID." The policewoman released her and slipped a small notebook out of her breast pocket. "Public drunkenness may go down in the Boroughs, but not on my beat."

Just do it. You have no choice.

For years, the silent voices that instructed Brenna came from spectral sources. Tonight she heard her own voice. She didn't need otherworldly advice. She understood what she had to do for the clan she loved.

Brenna reached into her belt and drew out the small dagger. Calling on a move Jess had taught her years ago, she swept her right leg in a sharp circle and kicked the woman's feet out from under her. She went down with a shocked gasp and Brenna was all over her, the dagger clenched in her fist.

At the last moment she twisted, turning her blade from the exposed throat and cutting the leg, slicing the cop's Achilles tendon with surgical precision. The officer bellowed in pain and threw herself backward, smacking her head into the heavy cornerstone of the bank building. Brenna froze, her teeth bared, and she watched her sag into unconsciousness.

Brenna clenched the collar of the woman's uniform shirt and heaved with all her might, pulling her dead weight around the corner of the building and into the alley behind it. Panting, she knelt and tried to check the woman's pupils, a futile effort in the darkness, then she tore a strip from the officer's shirt and bound her badly bleeding leg. She was no older than Dana, her slack features youthful and fresh.

Brenna hovered over the senseless woman, her eyes squeezed shut, and tried desperately to make the surreal decision as to whether to take the life of a defenseless human being. The liquor made her brain sluggish and slow. If the head wound wasn't fatal, she would awake within hours. In hours, Brenna expected to either be locked in a Clinic cell or well outside the City limits, headed for the foothills. Any alarm this cop raised would be centered downtown.

Brenna snatched the police radio and gun from the woman's belt. She had crippled her. She would need time to crawl for help. She whispered a fleeting prayer over the motionless form and lunged to her feet.

She raced to the end of the alley and dropped the gun and radio into a deep tin trash bin, flinching at the hollow clang of their impact. Cramps hit her belly and she bent double and vomited copiously. She spat twice, and then she just kept running.

Brenna squeezed the small pouch tied to her belt and felt the

sharpness of the keys inside it. There was the drug store, and the street just beyond it ran straight to the Clinic compound.

The curfew siren blasted around Brenna and she almost fell. An appalled horror surged through her and she started to run again, faster than she'd ever run in her life.

❖

"They'll start a full perimeter search in two minutes, Jesstin." Dana sounded unnaturally calm. "No more."

Jess knew she had allowed Brenna all the time they could spare. They had counted on being inside the building by now, well before the arc lamps illuminating the Clinic's outer walls went to high and flooded the grounds in a harsh glare. Even the most indifferent sentry wouldn't miss three women crouching in the greenery of their refuge. Their only hope was to get inside before the curfew check started.

"Go for the utility doors." Jess fought down a roil of nausea, picturing Brenna captured or hurt, or worse. *I won't leave the City without you.* She didn't need to speak the promise aloud. It was visceral. "We'll get in through the heating ducts. They're right above them. Move with me."

Then they were running, ghosting across the neatly trimmed grass with the Clinic looming large ahead in the darkness, and they were halfway there when Jess saw her. Brenna was sprinting just as fast, coming around the north wall, crossing open ground against all common sense, searching for them wildly.

At the same moment, a steel door opened in the back of the Clinic, and two armed guards stepped out.

Brenna froze.

The guards didn't see her at first. They stood between the Amazons and Brenna, both lighting cigarettes, one of them laughing. Then the high, powerful arc lamps stationed around the compound clicked on, flooding the area with light.

Still running, Jess slapped Dana's shoulder and veered sharply, increasing her speed. For a sick moment, Jess thought she wouldn't reach them in time. The men had both spotted Brenna, and now one of them was lifting his rifle.

"Hey!" the guard shouted, and then Jess plowed into him, knocking him several yards through the air before they both crashed to the ground. She jumped to her feet and whirled, and the second guard cracked his rifle stock hard against the side of her head.

The night spiraled dizzily in Jess's vision and she dropped to her knees, pain pounding through her skull. She heard Brenna cry her name breathlessly, and then felt her arms around her, steadying her in the grass.

Jess heard Dana take down the second guard, and when she could see again, both men were lying senseless on the ground. "We need to get them under cover," she said. The blow to the head had her reeling, but the glaring light around them spurred her to her feet with Brenna's quick support.

Kyla and Dana grabbed one of the unconscious guards, and Brenna helped Jess grip the second man's collar and drag him toward the Clinic wall.

"Jess, down here!" Dana signaled them urgently.

Still half-dazed, Jess followed her, hauling the guard's dead weight around a waist-high wall of concrete and down four steps into the small utility bay. It was empty except for an old oil-soaked engine in one corner and provided adequate shelter from the floodlights.

Jess dropped the man, gasping, and leaned hard on the cool brick wall, hoping her stomach would settle. "Dana, Kyla. Cuff those men and gag them." She didn't know if either guard was alive, and she didn't care. They just needed them safely immobilized for the night.

"Jess? Let me look at you." Brenna's grip was firm on Jess's shoulders, turning her so she could see the bloody cut above her

hairline. Jess felt a drop of warm wetness drip down her throat. She lifted Brenna's cool hands from her face and held them, and let relief flood through her.

"I thought you were lost, Bren," Jess said hoarsely.

"Jesstin, I'm so s-sorry." Brenna's eyes were anguished, but she was alive, and she was here. "How bad is your head?"

Jess couldn't answer. She stared at Brenna. She smelled liquor on her breath, on her clothes. Brenna must have seen her shock.

"Jess, I didn't mean to—"

"Tell me later, Brenna." Jess held Brenna's chin and tried to focus on her features through her blurred vision. "The whys of it don't matter now. I just need to know if your mind is clear."

"Yes, I'm clear." Brenna looked up at her pleadingly. "I got rid of most of it."

"And the keys?"

"Right here." Brenna fumbled with the pouch on her belt and drew out a steel ring of long keys.

"Oh, bless you, Brenna, you got them." Kyla grasped Brenna's arm, still breathing hard.

"Over here, guys." Dana had finished tying off a gag around the guard's mouth, and she went to the double utility bay doors and tried the locked handle. She looked over at Jess, and her eyes widened. "You all right, Jesstin?"

"Aye, I'll live." Jess steered Brenna to the doors, palming blood off the side of her forehead. "Try them, Bren."

Brenna grasped a long silver key in both hands, and its tip jittered against the circular lock of the utility door as she tried to insert it. It didn't fit. She selected another, and Jess laid a calming touch on her wrist. This time the key slid home smoothly, and after some effort Brenna was able to turn it. They heard tumblers click.

"Thank Cybele," Kyla whispered and slid past Dana after she pushed the door open and braced it with one arm.

The Clinic's utility room was cavernous and dim, lit only by pairs of jacklights mounted on narrow poles that ran floor to ceiling. Their shadows cast jagged phantoms over the wide expanse of concrete floor.

"Are you sure you're not hurt, Brenna?" Kyla brushed grass off Brenna's shirt, and then stepped back with a look of surprise.

"Brenna's fine, Ky." Jess tried to speak gently. "She did well, she got us in. Now set our path, Bren."

"Okay." Brenna closed her eyes for a moment, visibly centering herself. Then she looked around, her breathing almost under control. "I think it's this way."

"Not over there?" Dana jerked her head toward a set of double doors in the far wall.

"Absolutely not," Brenna said at once. "That exit opens under the Military Unit. The Civilian ward is through here."

"Lead us, adonai." Jess followed Brenna through a maze of steel banks that stored the terminus of the circuitry and wiring of the buildings overhead. Spools of thick cable were stacked to the high ceiling, and they moved soundlessly around them toward the distant reaches of the echoing space.

"Our timing is lucky in one way." Brenna paused, then took Jess's hand and went on. "It's Friday night, the weekend. The Clinic's on minimum staff after curfew, even security just has a skeleton crew."

"That still leaves armed orderlies patrolling the halls." Dana turned in a cautious circle as she walked.

"Yes, but the cells are in lockdown now. When I left work this late, the orderlies were always swilling coffee at their stations." Brenna stopped them by a single featureless steel door, and Jess heard her blow out a sigh. "This is it, Jesstin."

"Good, querida." Jess waited until they met her gaze. "We meet by those back utility doors if we're separated. You all know your purpose?"

"Ky and Brenna hit the drugs, I find a computer." Dana tucked the back of her shirt into her pants briskly. "Jess will stake out the pharmacy and bazooka anything that moves."

"Clear enough." Jess nodded at Brenna, who pushed open the steel door. Jess tensed, half expecting an alarm to shatter the silence, but the peace held as they moved quietly up a short stairway and into the Clinic's Civilian Unit.

❖

All Brenna's senses, physical and psychic, were keyed to screaming tightness. The small amount of whiskey that hadn't been forcefully propelled from her stomach left a light buzzing in her ears, but she thanked whatever goddesses were listening that her step was steady.

She registered the white corridors extending out from the pharmacy and the main security desk like sterile spokes on half a wheel. She inhaled cleansers and disinfectants that stung her sinuses. She didn't think about Matthew or nearly getting her sisters captured. She didn't think about Jess being injured because of her, or of Shann being ill, or Samantha. She focused on the single guard, reading a newspaper, sitting at the desk, his feet up on its curved surface.

They stood against a wall near the outer atrium of the Unit, hidden from the small camera mounted on a ceiling bracket. As Brenna watched, a uniformed orderly appeared by the desk, and she willed them all to be invisible shadows in the dark hall.

"You see what's left of that poet guy in the east wing?" The orderly was talking to the guard as he dropped paperwork on the desk.

"That kid they did the surgery on?" The guard lowered his newspaper, his wheeled chair creaking beneath his weight. "They cut out the part of his brain that made him what, subversive?"

"Yeah, I guess. Guy's no better than a drooling stool. He can still write poems, though. Not very good ones."

"Hell, bad poems aren't illegal, just seditious poems." The guard snapped out his paper again and crossed his booted feet on top of the desk.

"Night, Vargas."

Relieved, Brenna heard the orderly retreat across the lobby. At least there was only one man to deal with. If they stood up, they would be in his direct line of sight, so there was no sneaking up on him. All four of them thundering down the hallway would alert the guard before they could possibly reach him, so one of them had to take him alone.

Brenna realized a silent communication was passing between Dana and Jess. Dana tapped her brow, and then patted her own chest, frowning. She was telling Jess she couldn't sprint down that hallway with an addled head. Jess grimaced, but then nodded agreement that Dana had to take the run.

It was risky. Dana was almost as fast as Jess, but the tile hallway was long, and Brenna could see the pistol holstered on the guard's belt from here. Inspiration struck her, and she touched Jess's wrist. She pointed to herself, remembered the signal for "distraction," and managed to relay it with reasonable accuracy.

Jess's brows lowered in consternation, but Brenna shook her head firmly. This was a better plan. She could see that Jess was clearly reluctant, but she signaled assent. Kyla patted Brenna's back, a nervous wish for good luck.

Brenna clawed her sticky bangs down in her face, and stepped out into the corridor. She strolled toward the security desk, weaving slightly, her hands clasped harmlessly behind her. She hummed tunelessly, relieved to see she didn't know the man.

"Get—" The burly guard looked old enough to retire, but his boots snapped down off the desk with alacrity, and he jumped to his feet. "Who the hell are you?"

"My name's Rebecca, Mr. Karney. Aren't you the charming Mr. Karney I've heard so much about?" Brenna added a light seductive sway to her hips. She had almost reached the desk. She

hoped this jerk could smell the whiskey still coming off her.

"Karney's not on Civilian, he's over in Mili—you stop right there!"

"You're not Mr. Karney?" Brenna continued past the desk, looking blearily around as if impressed by her surroundings. At least he hadn't drawn his gun, but she still might feel a Taser bolt rip into her back. "Too bad. I was supposed to meet him here." She turned and smiled as the guard stepped around his station and came toward her. Over his shoulder, she saw Dana take off on a fast and silent run.

"I don't suppose you might be willing to fill in for Mr. Karney tonight?" Brenna pretended to peer at the nametag on the guard's chest. "Mr. Vargas. There's supposed to be a great party at—"

"Look, lady, this is a secure facility." The guard clenched Brenna's upper arm with unnecessary force. "Unless you show me a pass, right now, you won't—"

Brenna never learned what she wouldn't do because Dana's braced elbow plowed into the back of the guard's skull, and she had all she could manage to help slow his fall to the floor.

"Ouch," Dana muttered, clutching her elbow.

Brenna's pulse was still pounding. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, but that *hurt*."

They rose as Jess and Kyla reached them. Kyla latched quickly onto Dana's arm to see if she was all right. Jess knelt and snatched the guard's heavy set of keys from his belt, then tossed them to Dana.

"Right, we'll store this little lad behind the desk." Jess spoke low and fast. "Dana, check the security monitors and be sure the Unit is quiet, then find the computer. Brenna, Kyla, see to the pharmacy."

Brenna flipped through Nell's keys with fingers that trembled only slightly, following Kyla to the large glass door that was reinforced with wire mesh. There were two locks, and Brenna needed several tries to open them both.

The overhead light went on automatically when the door

swung open, startling Brenna more than it should have.

"Easy, honey."

Brenna returned Kyla's smile gratefully. "Okay, first things first. Grab a few bags of disposable hypodermics, from that drawer over there."

She spun the ring of keys, this time easily selecting one of the small silver ones and unlocking the first cabinet on the left. She took out a small ampule filled with an amber liquid, and when Kyla brought her the syringes, she uncapped the needle and filled one carefully. "Here. Go jam this in that tacky Mr. Vargas's thigh. Make sure he gets all of it. It's a strong sedative. It'll keep him snoring for several hours."

"Happily!" Kyla plucked the syringe from Brenna's hand and spun on her heel.

Brenna had a few nasty moments when she couldn't locate the anti-virals. Kestadine provided no high and was not in demand by addicts, so it wasn't triple-locked within the recesses of the pharmacy. But the stock had been moved to another storage case, and Brenna felt a surge of relief when she found it.

Kyla was beside her again. "Ready, Bren."

"All right. We need both the serum and the vaccine. One cures, the other prevents new illness." Brenna indicated the small vials. "Each vial contains six doses. We need a hundred vials." She crouched and pulled padded canvas bags out of one of several bins below the counter. "Put them in here, one in each dent in the foam. I know these vials look delicate, but they're hard to break. Try not to drop one anyway."

"Don't drop one," Kyla repeated obediently, and went to work.

"Brenna? You have a minute?" Dana was squinting into the ghostly glow of the computer monitor that stood on the counter by the door. Brenna went to her and looked over her shoulder. "Can you tell me again what I'm looking for? Cause I sure ain't seeing it."

"You're in the right place." Brenna covered Dana's hand,

which was on the computer's mouse, and nudged it slightly. Screens of columned text flipped by. "These are the Unit's archives—records of all births and deaths are recorded here. We're looking for mid-October, three years ago. A female birth." She set the cursor over the last heading. "Look under this column, 'Disposition.'"

"That'll tell us what happened to Sammy's kid?" Dana sounded painfully hopeful.

"That'll tell us if it was a live birth." Brenna tried not to sound grim. "If the baby survived, Jenny's sister might be able to learn which Youth Home she was sent to."

Her lips moved in unconscious prayer as she went back to help Kyla. It might be all she could bring home to Shann and Sammy this time, the bare truth about the baby's life or death.

But if Samantha's daughter still lived, they would find her someday. Brenna remembered Matthew's scarred, doomed face, and the pledge settled deep in her marrow.

Their packing was nearly done. Brenna worked beside Kyla as smoothly as she and Shann had worked together in Tristaine's healing lodge. She let Kyla finish the final fastening of the cases and went to find Jess.

She was a tall, motionless shadow outlined by the dead glow of the security monitors, her still profile proof that Jess relied on her own senses more than electronic surveillance. She turned and signaled Brenna that all was still quiet.

"Uh, Bren?" Dana sounded strangled, and Brenna went to her quickly. "Ah, man. I'm so sorry, Brenna, I fucked up."

Brenna stared at the computer screen.

"I don't know what I did," Dana continued. "I was almost there, I'd just started checking October, then everything crashed and this static came up—"

"Shhh." The sound left her lips softly. Dana might be seeing a screen full of static, but Brenna was looking into a beautiful marble basin, filled to the brim with crystal water—but she

was seeing it through an odd, erratic shimmering. "Elise?" she whispered.

Dana turned and looked at her, then stepped carefully aside so she could move closer to the monitor. Brenna heard her call softly for Jess, but she didn't look away from the screen. Not until Elise appeared in front of her, seemingly materializing in the pharmacy's solid wall, surrounded by a nimbus of light.

They stared at each other, Brenna struggling to keep Elise's lovely features in focus through that distorting shimmer.

"Whatever potion you've taken has made our connection more tenuous." There was no judgment in Elise's tone, only concern, as a tear wended its way down her face. *"Can you hear me, Brenna?"*

"I hear, Elise." Brenna could feel her adanin behind her, warming her back.

"You must follow me."

Still facing Brenna, Elise's glowing form began to glide backward through the pharmacy wall and into the hub of the Unit.

"Is it the young maid who weeps, Bren?" Jess's breath stirred Brenna's hair.

Brenna nodded, her gaze riveted on Elise's retreating figure. She floated toward the arched entry of the most distant corridor. "Jess, I have to go with her."

"Say again?"

"Just trust me, I have to go with Elise."

"But..." Then Jess seemed to remember that Brenna led them as surely on the spiritual plane as their sisters followed her onto a field of battle. "Aye, Brenna, but I'm coming with you. Dana, keep watch while Kyla finishes our work. Use the guard's keys to get back to the utility bay."

"Brenna!" Elise's silent tone rang with command. *"You and Jesstin will come with me now."*

Brenna knew her sisters couldn't hear that voice, but she

wouldn't think of resisting it. It was too like Shann's at full power. "You two be careful," she whispered to Dana and Kyla. She snatched Jess's hand and pulled her out of the pharmacy.

Elise was visibly walking now, and the lines of her body were clearing in Brenna's sight. She and Jess followed her down the far corridor with the simple faith of children, trusting their Mothers to keep them safe.

Chapter Eleven

The tile beneath their feet was suddenly cushioned by plush carpeting.

Jess whispered behind her. "Where are we, Bren?"

"This is the visitor's wing. It's almost always empty." Brenna kept her gaze on Elise, who walked several yards ahead of them. She gestured at one of the ornate, widely-spaced doors they passed. "These are all guest suites. They keep them ready for Clinic's funders when they tour the Units."

She could sense Jess's tension like a prickling force field. They were taking a drastic risk by prolonging their time in this odious place, and Brenna was fervently grateful for Jess's trust. She didn't understand yet what Elise needed them to see, but she felt the spectral woman's urgency clearly.

"Oh boy," she whispered suddenly.

"Oh boy?" Jess repeated.

"That corner up ahead. If we turn it, we'll be visible from the other security sta—hold on."

Elise was stopping, waiting before one of the large suite doors. Her dark head turned and she looked toward Jess and Brenna, and then she melted silently through the wood of the closed door.

"Oh, *peachy*." Brenna pulled Jess quickly down the hall to the suite Elise had disappeared into.

"She went in here?" Jess asked.

"She sure did." Brenna flipped swiftly through Nell's ring of keys. "Damn, Jess, we medics never had keys to these private suites. If Elise can't materialize solidly enough in there to turn a lock—"

Apparently someone solid inside could. The round doorknob turned even as they gaped at it, and the door creaked open a few dark inches.

Brenna felt Jess's arm slide in front of her, shielding her so she could go first. Jess looked sharply up and down the hall, then pushed the heavy door further open, and they slipped inside.

The large, simply appointed living room was dimly lit by a single, low-watt lamp in one corner. It was plainly furnished. The sparseness of these quarters was nothing like the lavish comfort of the other suites Brenna remembered seeing in this wing.

Elise was nowhere to be found, and the room was nearly empty, except for the small child who sat cross-legged on the floor against the far wall, her simple white shift pulled down over her knees. She was awake at this late hour, drawing. Scattered sheets of paper littered the floor around her. She contemplated Brenna and Jess with large, solemn eyes under a short cap of auburn hair, frowning. She looked to be about three years old.

Brenna recognized her on sight, as surely as she knew her own face. Her cold fingers covered her lips, stilling the gasp that threatened to escape. Jess turned to her, startled, and then let her move past her toward the little girl. She stopped yards from her, trembling, and knelt on the frayed carpet. Suddenly she had no idea what to say. The child stared at her silently, beneath lowered brows.

"Hello, honey," Brenna whispered finally. "Thanks for opening the door for us."

"You're welcome." The little girl's piping voice was neutral, and she spoke with no childish slurring. She looked up at Jess doubtfully.

"We're not going to hurt you." Brenna tried to sound reassuring. "Are you...is your name Brenna?"

"No." The girl looked puzzled, and she pointed a sticky crayon at her. "Your name is Brenna."

"Who's out there?" A harsh cry sounded from the back of the suite, from one of the bedrooms. "Is that you, Mr. Vargas?"

Jess pulled Brenna quickly to her feet as they heard a low, electrical hum emerge from the dark entrance. Cascades of shock showered through Brenna. She knew Jess had recognized the voice too. Cracked and distorted it might be, but there was no mistaking its familiar menace.

A lavender sleeping gown draped Caster's painfully thin body, which was braced awkwardly in the electric wheelchair that rolled slowly into the meager light. A long shawl was draped over her lap. Her left arm was withered and useless, held in a clenched angle across her bony chest. Ridged scar tissue covered the left side of her face, but her black eyes glittered with the same brilliant, malevolent light.

Caster's good hand jerked on the control of her wheelchair and she came to a dead halt, staring up at them in open astonishment. "Great God in heaven," she exclaimed, her once famously mellifluous voice strained and high. "Why, it's Brenna! And my own dear Jesstin! You've come home!"

Brenna wanted to bolt for the child and carry her bodily out of there, but she couldn't unlock her knees. She had reached her resurrection saturation point for the evening, and her circuits were starting to snap.

Luckily Jess didn't share her paralysis. She went to the intercom unit on the closest wall and removed its wiring with a few well-placed yanks. "We have no business with you, Caster."

"You never call, you never write." Caster somehow made her destroyed voice cloying with sadness. "Now I find you trying to spirit my precious little one out into the night, and you won't stay for a cup of coffee? We have so much to catch up on!"

"She's not yours." Brenna looked down at her old nemesis with a sudden, welcome dispassion. "You don't deserve to breathe the same air as this child."

The small girl was still seated on the floor, rocking slightly and watching them, sucking on two fingers in meditative silence.

"Oh, don't sulk, Brenna." Caster sounded peevish as she

rubbed her atrophied arm fretfully. “I always found your tendency toward sulking most unattractive. You know that air-headed younger sister of yours was a convicted criminal. She couldn’t raise this baby. They gave her to me as a consolation prize.”

“Gave her to you?” Some part of Brenna was aware of Jess, scouting the room for any other means of sounding an alarm, but she couldn’t take her eyes from Caster’s scarred, bitter smile.

“That’s right,” Caster agreed, as if Brenna had somehow expressed sympathy with her outrage. She used her good hand to pull the shawl in her lap closer around her. “After all my years of distinguished service, all my awards, after more innovative scientific work than this Clinic will ever see again, they disposed of me. All my clearance, gone. All my staff, my labs, taken from me. All I could negotiate was this dreary flat and guardianship of this one small, sentimental keepsake, Samantha’s poor parentless babe.”

Caster gazed greedily at Brenna, and she knew she was savoring her rage. She forced any emotion from her features.

“Where is your family, Caster?”

“Right here, Miss Brenna.” Caster smiled brightly with half of her cracked face, and made a jabbing gesture toward the little girl. “You’re looking at my family. My loving husband and sons have disowned me! It seems it was much more fun to be related to a famous scientist than a national disgrace.”

The wheelchair whirred as Caster turned to Jess. “What was that charming blessing you bestowed upon me once, Jesstin? You predicted my granddaughters will mock my grave, I believe. How prescient you proved, my mighty warrior.”

“We’ve no time for fond memories, Caster.” Jess went to the long drapes that hung behind a threadbare sofa. She drew her dagger and cut the thin ropes that would draw them open.

“I have you to thank for my heartrending downfall, Jesstin.” Caster’s voice lowered and grew more guttural. “You and that heathen tribe of Amazons you love so much. You’re the ones who ruined me. Led by your smug pig of a queen, Shanendra. Give

her my best, dear, yes? Remind her that I've saved my prettiest set of surgical instruments for her dissection."

"Close your wretched mouth, woman," Jess snapped. "We'll leave you alive, but we're taking the girl."

"Oh no, you most certainly are not." Caster slapped the arm of her wheelchair, then snapped her fingers at the girl. "You come here to me, Elise!"

The room swam around Brenna.

She saw the child climb to her feet with a sigh and trudge over to Caster, her eyes downcast. In the same moment, the adult Elise appeared before her, shining and pure, and then it was just the two of them, facing each other over the brimming basin.

"This woman's very soul is vile, j'heika." Elise's jade eyes shimmered with tears. "And she curses Tristaine with her every breath."

"We're taking you with us, Elise." Brenna took her hands. "I promise you, we won't leave—"

Brenna's trance was shattered abruptly by the child's shrill cry, and she caught herself against the back of a chair.

Jess had the finely calibrated reflexes of a lynx, but the head injury slowed her. Elise's scream and the Taser Caster had hidden in her shawl erupted in the same second. The wired bolt hissed across the room and struck Jess just below the throat. Brenna watched in horror as she snapped rigid, her back arched, and then fell to her knees.

"Bull's-eye!" Caster cried. "I haven't lost my grasp of human anatomy, Brenna!"

Brenna took three long steps to Caster's wheelchair.

Caster's eyes widened, and she banged the Taser on the wall. "Vargas, Cornell, get in here!" she screamed.

Brenna snatched the Taser away from Caster and clouted her solidly across the face with it. Caster let out a raw shriek, and sagged in her chair. Brenna threw the Taser aside and raced to Jess.

"Jesstin!" Brenna could hear the quiver in her voice over

Caster's moans and Elise's frightened sobs. Jess had crumpled to the floor on her side, and Brenna turned her onto her back with effort. "Talk to me, Jess!"

She flinched as she saw the Taser's dead bolt embedded two inches below the hollow of Jess's throat. She grasped it and pulled it out, wincing at the burn and the holes inflicted by its two sharp darts. Jess's eyes were fluttering whitely, and she didn't respond to Brenna's voice or her desperate grip on her shoulders.

Brenna's heart thundered in her ears, and she struggled to think. There had been too much noise. Guards were bound to respond.

The Clinic's stunners carried heavy charges, nearly 70,000 volts. Even a woman with Jess's exquisite conditioning would be unconscious for long minutes after such a jolt. And Jess was already injured, and the plague was creeping through her blood.

Brenna couldn't carry her. Not Jess and Elise too.

She looked at the little girl crouching on the floor, still crying fretfully, gathering her scattered drawings around her feet.

Shann sounded in Brenna's mind again. "*Of these three queens, one will be blessed with great powers. The final destiny of Amazon Nation lies in her hands. She will prove Tristaine's salvation, or her destruction, for all time.*"

Brenna had to get Elise out of Caster's grasp. She knew it, firmly and at once, and part of her heart died. She bent over Jess, and whispered to her fiercely.

"I'll come back for you, Jesstin. You hear me? I won't leave you."

Caster was listing in her wheelchair, canted to one side from Brenna's ruthless strike across her face. She was conscious, and saliva and blood dribbled from her lips as she glared at Brenna.

Brenna got up and went to Caster, and something cold and cutting nestled around her spine. "I won't leave you either, old woman," she whispered.

She couldn't bear to look back at Jess. She ran to Elise, snatched her up and then bolted for the door.

❖

Brenna muffled the little girl's outraged protests against her breast as she ran hard down the carpeted hallway. Samantha's daughter was a fighter, and she registered her displeasure at this rude handling in no uncertain terms. She gave voice to the screaming in Brenna's heart as she widened the distance between her and Jess.

Shouts sounded behind Brenna, but far behind. Security must have reached Caster's unit. The security alarms would sound any second. She increased her speed.

Brenna ran through the silent hub of the Civilian Unit. The pharmacy was dark, the security desk manned only by the unconscious guard beneath it. Brenna prayed she'd find Kyla and Dana safely outside in the utility bay. She rounded the corner and flew down the small set of stairs, shifting Elise from one arm to the other.

"You're squishing me," the child complained.

"I'm sorry, baby. I'm getting you out of here."

The shouting was coming closer.

Brenna shook one hand free to find the key to the utility room and managed to pull the heavy door open. Crossing the vast length of the cavernous space was a nightmare of darting shadows and her own harsh breathing in her ears. Brenna heard the heavy clopping of boots on the concrete behind her and stretched for one last burst of speed.

Then a dark form rocketed out of the shadows and tackled her pursuer, and Brenna almost fell into Kyla's arms, gasping. Dana struggled with the flailing guard behind them, and finally silenced him by cracking the back of his head against the concrete floor.

"Brenna, where's Jess?" Kyla took the little girl from Brenna. "And who is *this*?"

"Sammy's daughter, Kyla." Brenna rested her hands on her knees, gasping. "I'll explain later."

"We've got to move, Bren." Dana limped to them. "If that armed chimp knows we're here, there's going to be others."

"I know." Brenna straightened, and every cell in her body strained back through the inner reaches of the Clinic toward Jess. "You two need to take the drugs and this child and head for the frontage road. Find Jenny and Eva and the truck. I'm going back for Jess."

"She's captured?" Kyla paled under the weak fluorescent light. "Sweet Gaia, Brenna."

"If we aren't back soon, you might have to leave us." Brenna sounded extraordinarily calm in her own ears, given the tympani of her pulse. "Your priority has to be getting this medicine and this little girl back to the village."

"Brenna, we're not about to sacrifice you. Or Jess." Kyla's rich voice shook. "Tristaine needs you both. You might be our next queen—"

"I'm giving Tristaine her most powerful queen." Brenna nodded at Elise, who had stopped crying long enough to look around the huge room in wonder. "Leave us if you have to, Kyla."

"I'm going with you, Bren." Dana lifted the straps of their two satchels and brought them to Kyla. "It's a lot to carry, Ky, but you can make it. You're short but you're strong."

"I can't ask you to do this, Dana." Brenna feared this sojourn to the City was rapidly becoming the suicide mission Dana had predicted.

"Well, you can't tell me I can't, either." Dana went to the fallen guard and took the pistol from his belt. "You're not the queen of me yet. And Jess is my captain, Bren. I'm not leaving her here."

"Find her, Dana." Kyla shifted to balance the satchel and Elise, and her heart was in her eyes. "Please. All of you come back safe."

"We will." Dana smiled crookedly, then planted a smacking kiss on Kyla's forehead. "Go on, Ky. Hurry now."

They saw Kyla out the back utility doors and watched her creep up the stairs to the Clinic grounds. Brenna hoped fervently that Jenny and Eva were waiting for her. If it was hard for her to watch Kyla disappear into those bright lights, it must have been doubly tough for Dana. She had to pull her back inside.

"Okay." Dana shook herself. "What happened to Jess, Bren?"

"Caster has her." Dana's jaw dropped, but Brenna didn't have time to explain. "We have to find her before she's transferred to the Prison, Dana." She took off for the doors leading back to the Clinic's Civilian Unit, and after a moment she heard Dana follow. Their running footsteps echoed crazily in the high-ceilinged room.

Then Brenna skidded to a halt and stopped Dana.

"What?" Dana looked around quickly. "You hear something?"

"No, I don't hear anything. And I should." Brenna stared at the heavy door to the Unit ahead of them. "The security sirens should be going full blast."

"You're right." Dana swallowed audibly. "What's up with that? Any guesses?"

Brenna shook her head, thinking hard. The guard who discovered Caster should have thrown the general alarm that signaled a security breach in either Unit. Caster...Brenna closed her eyes and shuddered.

"They're not taking Jess to the Prison." Brenna's lips were numb. "Do you still have the guard's keys?"

"Yeah, here." Dana handed over the bristling ring. "Why?"

"Because the keys Nell gave me won't access the Military Unit." Brenna grabbed Dana and pulled her toward the other set of doors, dread sinking into her blood. "Caster stopped the alarm, Dana. She's wanted Jess at her mercy for years, and she's not going to share her until she has to."

❖

The Clinic's Civilian Unit was stark and antiseptic and utilitarian. The Military Unit was all that, but more intensely so. A grim hopelessness permeated the air of its sterile corridors. Brenna could smell rank fear and despair in these halls as distinctly as their stinging chemical stench.

Part of her still refused to believe that she was walking into this horrific scientific charnel house again. The tortures and experiments performed on prisoners in the Civilian Unit paled to what happened here. Witnessing it had almost stripped Brenna's soul. *And Jess will open her eyes and find herself back in this place,* she thought. She groped for Dana's hand.

"Quiet, isn't it?" Dana whispered. They hadn't run into any security.

"Yes. Very." Brenna knew where they were. She paused, then led Dana down another dark wing, staying close to the wall. The overhead fluorescents were at their lowest setting, but Brenna couldn't have forgotten Military's layout if she tried—and she had. She still dreamed about these grim passages. "This way."

They passed a long series of iron doors, each heavily bolted. Jess had been imprisoned for weeks in one of these spartan cells. Brenna's viscera still remembered the icy chill of that bleak chamber.

"I wish we could spring every one of 'em." There was no guard in sight, but Dana still whispered. "Let out the whole damn block. These cells are for political prisoners, right?"

"Dissidents, protestors. Hard core criminals." Brenna peered down another deserted corridor. "I wish we could let them out, too."

She knew without question that there was only one place Caster would take Jess—the gymnasium that had been the site of her clinical trials. When Brenna worked at the Clinic, the large space had served as Caster's laboratory or her torture chamber, depending on the day's protocol. Jess had almost died there.

The doors to the gymnasium were around the next turn, and Brenna forced her legs to move faster. *Caster was disgraced*

and stripped of her title, she thought. *Does she still hold enough authority to order Clinic guards to break policy?* The better question was whether Brenna could summon the courage to find out.

"In here." Brenna keyed open a narrow door, and led Dana into a large storeroom, a warren of shelves containing bundled supplies. Except for the windowless double doors in the hallway, this room provided the only entrance to the gym. If Brenna remembered rightly, it opened onto its south wall.

She found the door and waited until she felt Dana's touch on her back. Then Brenna turned the cold steel knob, and light flooded her eyes as she cracked the door open. She stared, and then closed it again almost at once.

"She's there." It was all Brenna could get out past the gorge rising in her throat. She slumped against the wall and lowered her head.

"Brenna?" Dana whispered.

Brenna had absorbed Caster's tableau in one glance, and it still pulsed redly on the back of her eyelids. She registered Caster in her chair and a few guards, but then her attention was riveted by the large, standing wooden frame in the center of the gym floor. Jess was upright, strapped to it by her wrists. She had been beaten—her clothing was torn and there was blood on her face.

Brenna shifted so Dana could inch the door open. After a moment of appalled silence, she closed it again quietly.

"That fucking harpy," Dana snarled, bunching her fist against the door. "Damn the flood for not taking her."

"Dana, what should we do?" In that moment Brenna was desperately grateful for the young warrior beside her. The sight of Jess bleeding had shaken her so badly she couldn't think.

"Caster's in the wheelchair?"

Brenna nodded blindly.

"All right. Her back is to us." Dana sounded calm. "I saw three guards. Two to our left and one behind Jess against the far wall. Is that what you saw?"

"Yeah." Brenna was regaining her composure.

"We don't know if Caster has a weapon, but we know the guards are armed." Dana pulled the pistol out of her belt and checked it. "I've got six bullets. I'm a good shot, Bren, but I need three clear targets. We have to wait until the third guard moves out from behind Jess. Are you hearing this?"

"Yes, I hear." Brenna braced herself to crack open the door again. "I'll take Caster, then help you if I can."

"Jess is still alive, Bren."

"I know." Brenna drew a deep breath and reached for the knob.

❖

"Good morning, sweetheart!" Caster's cracked but cheerful greeting echoed across the gymnasium.

Jess saw fit not to respond. She lifted her throbbing head and screwed her eyes shut against the blinding lights overhead. The last thing she remembered was Caster's living room and seeing Brenna suddenly go still, as if she were hearing other voices.

Brenna. Alarm sluiced through Jess and she stiffened, fighting the painful pull the leather straps exerted on her wrists and shoulders. She twisted in the frame, gasping at a heavy pain in her side, but she couldn't see Brenna anywhere in the room.

"Our Brenna has been trundled off to Prison, Jesstin." Caster had rolled her electric chair a safe distance away from the frame. Her ruined face beamed up at Jess, her lower lip bloody and swollen. "Isn't that right, Mr. Cornell?"

"Yes'm." One of the two guards against the wall shifted, his arms crossed and his hat brim lowered. Jess knew that Caster wanted her to be aware of her backup.

"I've asked that Brenna be housed in the communal cell with the male predators for a few nights, until her sentencing." Caster stroked her paralyzed arm. "You won't see her again, dear."

Jess didn't give Caster's claim much credence. She couldn't bear to, that was certain, but she also knew her wife. Brenna was

strong and fast, and she might well have escaped the Clinic. She had to believe that Brenna and the child, and their adanin, were on their way to the hills with the medicine that would save their clan.

Jess decided to make good use of the blood welling in her mouth. She spat at Caster, but hit the polished floorboards a yard from her feet.

"Oh, Jesstin, that's just nasty." Caster plucked at her shawl. "You should know I'd never get close enough to be struck by your venomous Amazon spittle. Is that all you have to say to me, after our many years apart? Don't you even want to ask how I escaped that tacky flood?"

Jess stopped listening. She shuddered as the pain of a dozen blows and kicks reached her. Nothing felt broken, but her head pounded with a terrible ache, and she was dizzy and sick. But the sudden loneliness was worse. In the unnatural brightness of the gym, Jess longed for the green hills of Tristaine with a yearning so deep tears almost rose to her eyes.

"Oh, dear. You're really quite uncomfortable, aren't you?" Caster attempted sympathy. "Mr. Cornell, I told you and your boys to take it easy on this prisoner while bringing her here, didn't I? Pity, the working classes never listen. Not to worry, my delectable warrior. I'll have the pleasure of doctoring you myself when the night's over." Caster lifted her good hand and waggled her fingers in the air. "I still have the dexterity to wield a scalpel! Staunching your wounds might prove the very best part of the evening."

Jess waited, hoping Caster would tire of talking soon and just hurt her. She wanted this over.

"Tomorrow you belong to them, Jesstin." Caster's wheelchair creaked a few inches closer. "In the morning, I'll have to turn you over to those Military cretins who think they run the Clinic. But tonight, it's just the two of us. It took all the money in my sadly depleted coffers to buy these guards for a few hours, but hearing you scream up there will be worth every penny."

"It suits you, Caster." Jess was hoarse, and she had to spit again to clear her mouth of blood. Caster moved her wheelchair back hastily. "The hideous wreck of your face. For the rest of your life, everyone who looks at you will see you truly, your cankered heart."

Caster had been a handsome woman before being mangled by the floodwaters, and now her scarred visage darkened. Jess turned her mind inward and called on Dyan's memory for courage. She pictured Shann's loving smile and promised her queen she would endure what was coming with the strength of an Amazon warrior. She saw Brenna's eyes, large and soft, and almost felt her light touch on her skin.

"The Military might believe your primitive tribe is no longer a threat, Jesstin." Caster's voice now held the icy calm that Jess remembered so well. "But I know better, and I'll convince them. You'll never see Tristaine again, proud savage—but I will, someday soon. From the front seat of the helicopter that drops napalm all over it."

Caster turned her chair sharply, its treads squeaking on the wooden floor. "Now, let's begin our intimate chat! You can start, dear, by telling me what's so important about Samantha's sullen little brat that you risked enduring all *this* for her. Mr. Wilson? Our big battery, please. I'm almost positive our prisoner will require some persuasion."

Jess heard a low creaking behind her, and a third guard pulled a large portable generator up to the right side of the wooden frame. A dozen paddles and clips were connected by wires to its bulky shape.

"Drat. I wish I'd brought that nice chilled sangria I've been saving." Caster smiled up at Jess brightly. "It's getting hot under these lights, Jess, yes? All right, gentlemen, hook her up. I want clips wherever I see blood or a bruise."

A small door in the wall behind Caster exploded outward. Two blurred figures hurtled into the gym, and Jess heard the crack of a pistol as Caster gasped and jerked her chair around. Breath

gushed out of Jess's lungs as Brenna came into focus, clubbing Caster so hard with her joined fists that she toppled out of her wheelchair and sprawled on the floor.

Three more shots rang out, and Jess twisted in the straps, blood stinging one eye. The guard by the generator had gotten off a bullet, but it ricocheted high off the wall. She could see Dana now, standing braced and balanced, the pistol gripped in both hands. She had taken down two of the guards with one shot each, and now she fired again, and the third man staggered back and fell.

Jess heard Dana fire one more time, but she didn't see which guard merited a finishing shot, as Brenna reached her.

"Jesstin. Look at me." Brenna struggled to unfasten the heavy buckles on the leather straps binding her wrists. "Say something."

"Good evening, querida." Jess smiled, though it hurt her split lip. "We never got around to saying that."

Brenna let out a breath that was part sob and part laugh. "How badly are you hurt?"

"I can get out of here."

"Jess!" Dana belted the pistol and attacked the buckles on the straps holding Jess's other arm. "Are you sure you can walk? You look pretty rocky."

"Aye, I'm sure. Kyla?"

"She's got the drugs and Elise, Jess, she's waiting for us outside." Brenna grunted as the strap finally gave, and a moment later Dana had Jess's other wrist free.

Jess fully expected her legs to support her and was dismayed when her knees buckled and she sagged into their arms. Cursing, she righted herself, shaking her aching head to clear it.

"Easy, Jess. Just stand here a moment." Brenna examined her quickly.

"Well done, adanin." Jess scanned the now silent gym and the three motionless guards, then looked at Dana. "My thanks to you both."

"Well, you're not exactly rescued yet." Dana wrapped a strong arm around Jess's waist and helped her step down from the frame. "We've got to make tracks fast, sisters."

"Wait." One hand still on Jess's chest, Brenna had turned to stare at Caster, who lay twisted on her side yards away. One of the wheels of her capsized chair, devoid of power, still spun slowly, like a metallic eye, under the glaring lights.

Jess heard Caster's dry sobbing, a ratcheting, gruesome sound. She looked at Brenna and saw that stillness take her and the sudden glaze in her eyes that signaled trance.

"She will never give up."

Brenna heard the adult Elise clearly in her mind and the heavy dread in her tone.

"This woman has made destroying Tristaine her life's mission, j'heika. She will do whatever she must to regain power. Her dark star will rise again. And she will find us."

And then Elise repeated the words she said to Brenna the first time she appeared, when she had thought they were talking about the epidemic.

"Hear me, Brenna. You have seen the face of our enemy. Now act."

"Brenna?" Dana looked down at her belt as Brenna slipped the pistol from it.

"Stay with Jess, Dana. This is mine to do."

Brenna crossed the floor to Caster, and a cool breeze swept her that smelled of fresh pine.

"Br-Brenna." Caster lifted herself, crab-like, on her good elbow. Her macabre face was drenched in tears. She pointed a shaking finger at Brenna as she came closer. "I could have had your sister's baby drowned at birth, Brenna. I spared—Br—*no*!"

Brenna aimed the pistol carefully, squeezed the trigger, and shot Caster between the eyes.

Chapter Twelve

Dana gave one of the double doors to the gym a solid kick, and it swung wide with a crash. After the echoing gun shots, Brenna knew they had to sacrifice stealth for speed. She and Dana half-carried Jess at first, but she regained her footing as they ran down the dark, still deserted corridors.

"Is there any chance in hell nobody heard that racket?" Dana panted.

"Not a chance," Jess answered through clenched teeth, and Brenna knew she was right when they rounded the cellblock. Apparently the battle in Caster's gymnasium had awakened every prisoner in the Unit. Fists were pounding steadily on cell doors in grim celebration of the chaos, and the muted thumping powered them faster toward the outer bay.

Brenna ran close to Jess, trying to assess her injuries in quick glances. There was a frightening amount of blood on her face, most of it from the blow to her head. Her normally graceful gait was mechanical and stiff, and she ran holding her right side.

The sirens hit before they were halfway across the utility room, a deafening wail that almost froze Brenna mid-stride. She grabbed Jess's arm and they hurtled toward the outer doors.

The baying klaxon only grew more strident as they burst out the doors into the utility bay and staggered up the concrete steps onto the light-drenched grounds. Both Units of the Clinic had gone into full lockdown, and the compound would soon be flooded with added security from the adjoining Prison.

"Fence," Jess gasped, and Dana gripped the collar of her torn chambray shirt and helped Brenna haul her toward the south wall of reinforced barbed wire.

Even over the siren Brenna heard the flat report of a rifle, and the bullet's whining trajectory passed perilously close on Dana's side. She started to shout a warning, but then was distracted by the blessed crash of a large green Army truck through the wire fence.

For Brenna, it was like seeing a wheeled goddess roar down from the heavens to snatch her daughters from a cobra's nest. By luck or inspiration, the driver—presumably Eva—executed a nearly perfect churning circle in the grass, and they raced for the truck. Brenna heard more shots now and orders shouted behind them.

The driver's door flew open and Eva leaped out of the cab. She darted to the back of the truck and unlatched its tailgate. Brenna had time to see Jenny inside on one of the steel benches, her arms wrapped around Elise, before she jumped into the bed and turned to help Jess. Eva pushed Jess over the metal lip of the bed and scrambled in after her.

"Kyla?" Brenna heard Dana's breathless voice as she threw herself behind the wheel.

"I'm fine, the satchels are fine, are you guys all right?" From the front seat, Kyla cast an anxious glance through the panel window, and then they all lunged as Dana kicked the accelerator hard. There was a sharp clang as a bullet hit the truck, and Brenna could only pray it struck nothing vital.

Dana plowed the truck back through the sagging fence.

"Turn left," Brenna cried, and tried to brace Jess on the bench as they swerved toward the small park that lay across the street from the Clinic.

"Brenna?" Jenny's teeth were chattering. "Didn't you say the frontage road was the—"

"We circle the park first," Brenna cut in. "I have a promise to keep."

The pagoda at the park's center was as empty as Brenna feared it would be. She lifted the edge of the plastic-sheet window

and tossed Nell's keys beneath the pagoda, and sent her friend a final, grateful blessing. "All right, Dana, get us out of here!"

Dana steered them skillfully onto the frontage road, dust roiling up in their wake.

She hit the headlights and the narrow road was illuminated as it sped under them. The ugly screech of the Clinic's sirens began to fade in the distance.

"This will take us around the downtown district." Brenna tried to speak calmly. Elise's eyes were huge, and she had to be terrified. "Dana, look for any street that might lead north, out of the City."

"Kyla, the drugs?" Jess asked.

Kyla was already checking the contents of the padded satchels on her lap. "Nothing's broken, adanin, it's all here! Vials, hypodermics, the lot."

"Bless you, Ky," Jess sighed. Brenna slid her arm around her to steady her as they bounced over an uneven rut in the dirt road.

Eva was looking at Jess closely. "Jess took a bad knock to the head, Brenna."

"Yes, I'm worried about concussion." There was no real light to see by in the rocking bed, but Brenna tried to check Jess's eyes. She slid her hand beneath her hair and cupped the back of her neck, and Brenna's pulse spiked unpleasantly. Jess's fever wasn't high, but she had one. The flu was moving through her blood.

Jess went still beneath her arm, and then she slid off the steel bench and rummaged beneath it.

"Hey, Jess, you need to..." Brenna trailed off as she heard the faint, two-note siren far behind them.

Jess lifted out the rifle and stepped toward the back of the truck. "Brenna, brace me."

Brenna went to her quickly, praying the truck's rocking wouldn't worsen. She gripped Jess's waist, and peered over her

shoulder through the opening in the canvas hood. There were two sets of flashing blue and red lights behind them, distant but moving fast.

"We need to get off this road," Jess barked. She slid the barrel of the rifle through the hole in the canvas.

Dana muttered an obscenity and spun the wheel, taking them off the frontage road and down a twisting, paved path that wound through a shabby neighborhood. "Good. We're good, I know where we are." Dana sounded relieved. "Some of my buddies grew up here, I know these streets."

"Take us north as fast as you can." Jess grasped the bunched canvas with one hand and held the rifle steady with the other. "We might see close fighting."

The oncoming sirens were louder now, the two-tone clang marking them as City Police cars. Brenna felt their speed increase.

"Man. This could get a little intense, guys," Dana called. "Hold on."

"Get?" Jenny gasped, holding Elise tightly.

Their Army transport was built more for strength than agility, but Dana guided it skillfully through a maze of ramshackle neighborhoods. She drove at an ungodly speed, but her hands on the wheel were steady and sure. They sped through twisting streets, emptied by the curfew, taking corners at a velocity Brenna wouldn't dare attempt, but Dana handled them with ease. Elise actually giggled at one such swerving jolt.

Brenna remembered this feeling. Twenty years ago, on one of the Youth Home's rare outings, she and Sammy had gone on a ride at a carnival. Their little motorized car had whizzed on tracks through a house of plastic horrors, careening around corners, terrifying them both. Brenna had been far more afraid that they would crash and burn than of any of the hokey phantoms stringed to the ceiling. She had held Sammy on her lap then as Jenny cradled her daughter now.

In spite of all Dana's efforts, the Police cruisers pursuing them edged inexorably closer, following their every turn, and the blue-red lights grew brighter. Then the splash of the leading car's headlights filled the bed.

"Guide my hand, Brenna." Jess was trying to site the rifle. She shook her head hard, and tried again. "Where's its heart?"

"Aim for the center of the front hood." Brenna grasped the rifle's barrel and adjusted it, then Jess fired, the stock hitting her shoulder. The Police car rocked slightly, but kept coming. Jess bolted another bullet in place and fired again, then a third time.

Steam erupted from the speeding cruiser's hood. It lurched, and then spun in a screeching arc before coming to a stop broadside, blocking the street. The second Police car swerved hard to avoid it, but the two heavy vehicles connected with a solid crash Brenna could hear from the truck.

"Excellent, Jess!" Dana pumped her fist.

"Okay, you're sitting down." Brenna took the rifle away from Jess and handed it to Eva, then pushed Jess gently back to the bench.

Moments later they cleared the dark buildings of the shabby subdivision. Dana cranked the wheel, and they rumbled down an incline and onto the wide, dry bed of a shallow ditch.

"Jesstin?" Kyla twisted on her seat. "Speak to me."

"Bumps and bruises, Ky. I'll live." Jess straightened on the bench next to Brenna, holding her right side. "Our path, Dana?"

"I think this old ditch peters out soon, but we're headed toward the hills." Dana kept their course steady on the rough trail, and Brenna felt the City begin to fall away behind them. Even the close, dank air in the covered truck bed seemed to hold more oxygen as they distanced themselves from the Clinic.

"We can pick up the north access road from this direction." Eva slid closer to Jenny and touched her leg. "Thank god those cops didn't hit our gas tank."

"That was a damn fine rescue, you guys." Brenna felt slightly

queasy after hours of adrenalin-charged terror. She tried to smile. "Elise? How are you, honey?"

The child just studied her curiously.

"Elise is one brave little girl." Obviously a natural with children, Jenny cradled the small girl easily on her lap. "She's having quite an adventure tonight."

"Whee," Brenna agreed faintly. Her vision had adjusted to the dim light Selene sent through the bed's small windows. She turned to Jess and stared at her for the sheer pleasure of it, soaking in the reality of her presence. Then she touched Jess's head, wincing. "This is going to need stitches, love."

Dana hit a rut in the ditch and they bounced a half foot in the air, coming down with a teeth-rattling thump.

"Sorry," Dana called back hastily.

"Perhaps stitching should wait," Jess suggested. She lifted her arm, and Brenna slid beneath it. She rested her palm on Jess's chest and measured her heartbeat, and gradually her own slowed to a more bearable rhythm.

Caster will never hurt you again. Brenna closed her eyes. *Tristaine is free of her forever.*

Her mind replayed Caster begging for her life, crippled and helpless on the gymnasium floor. Brenna had fought in Tristaine's past battles. She had poisoned a dying soldier and lamed a young policewoman. She had never before looked at a defenseless human being and deliberately taken their life. But she knew if she faced the decision again, her bullet would still shatter Caster's skull. Brenna was a healer capable of killing, and that was part of the humanity Shann said she must accept.

They found the north access road, and Dana maintained a steady speed. Brenna knew they were well out of the City when stars began to emerge in the sky above them, and Tristaine's Seven Sisters glittered again in the heavens. Brenna craned her neck to see them through the small window, and a tight muscle in her chest relaxed for the first time in days.

Then she saw the adult Elise appear there, in the midst of the stars. Her glowing figure stood quietly, her arms at her sides, the basin gone. Her beautiful eyes were clear, loving, and tearless. Elise lifted a hand in benediction, and the truck trundled on through the night, carrying them higher into the hills.

❖

The first rays of dawn ignited the eastern peaks before they made it to the ridge where Vicar and Hakan waited.

"Thank the Goddess, Jesstin." Hakan jumped down off the high boulder where she'd been keeping watch. "Did you find—"

"We have what we came for, adanin, and more." Jess tried not to lean so heavily on Brenna's shoulder. She was grateful when her old friend asked no questions and just herded their party back to their camp.

They made for a bedraggled group. Brenna walked beside her, her arm around her waist, so weary she stumbled every third step. Elise was a rumpled lump sagging in Eva's arms, wan and exhausted.

"You all need rest." Hakan took the satchels from Dana. "I'll find you some breakfast before you bed down."

"We all have more ground to cover before we sleep." Jess drank in the sight of their horses, grazing peacefully in the small pasture next to their holdings. She saw Vicar, wrapped in blankets near the embers of a campfire, sitting up against a fallen log. She limped to her, and lowered herself with a stifled groan to one knee.

"Home from the hunt, Stumpy. Well met." Vicar was pale and her voice rasped, but she clasped Jess's hand tightly. "You look as dainty and pampered as ever."

"We have the Clinic's remedy, Vic." Jess was dismayed by the dark circles beneath her cousin's eyes. "You'll be strong again soon. How are your spirits?"

"I miss my wife." A vulnerable wave softened Vicar's strong features and then faded. "But your ugly mug gives me hope again. Sit down, Jesstin, before you fall on me."

"You're both getting injections, right now." Brenna went to Hakan and unzipped one of the bags.

"Aye, but then we move on." Jess settled onto the ground beside Vicar and accepted the canteen she handed her. "We have to assume they're after us, adanin. Our escape from the Clinic wasn't as blithe as we'd hoped."

"Jenny can ride with me, and Eva with Vicar." Hakan hunkered down on her haunches and stared at Elise. "And I'm sure one of us can carry this wee lass."

"Hakan, Vicar, meet Elise." Kyla's weariness vanished as she smiled at the little girl. "Samantha's daughter."

Hakan grinned, her white teeth flashing against her ebony skin. "Cybele be praised!" She extended a large, gentle finger toward Elise, who grasped it in her small hand and shook it solemnly. "Our queen's granddaughter. Jesstin, it's a miracle."

"Aye, Hakan. One of many." Jess swirled cool water in her mouth, then winced as she swallowed. Her sisters had gathered in a close circle. "Hear me, adanin. We'll be traveling with injured, and a small child. We can't possibly ride at full speed. Hakan." The big warrior was a dark blur to Jess, but when she squinted she was able to focus on her intent gaze.

"I'm sending you ahead, sister, with half the medicine in these bags. Tristaine's master of horse can travel much faster alone. Our clan needs this remedy badly, and as fast as Gaia allows."

Hakan's big hand smoothed across one of the carrying cases. "My Valkyrie's fresh, Jesstin, and so am I. We'll bring these to our lady with the speed of winged Pegasus."

"Watch me, Hakan. You'll need to show Shann." Brenna knelt beside Jess, uncapping one of the hypos and inserting its tip in a vial. "This is one dose." She showed Hakan the amount, and then injected Jess's arm smoothly, the tiny sting melding with her

myriad other aches. Brenna's soft sigh stirred Jess's hair before she turned to prepare an injection for Vicar.

Hakan was watching Brenna carefully. "And should some disaster fell me, Jesstin, you'll still carry enough to save us?"

"Aye, we will." Jess shifted against the rough log bracing her back. "Your portion of our stock will cure those already sick. We'll bring enough to prevent anyone else from falling ill. But I warn you, Hakan, Tristaine is in turmoil. I send you not only as courier, but for your strong arm to defend our queen."

"Shann is ill, adanin." Brenna had been checking Vicar's wounded shoulder, but now she looked up to meet Hakan's stricken look. "And there's a rebellion in Tristaine, a faction of women who want to take their children off the mesa to escape the plague. Shann is doing all she can, but she's getting weaker. I'm afraid it might come to bloodshed if we don't get home soon."

Hakan had obviously heard enough. She inserted two fingers between her lips and unleashed a curling whistle. Moments later her large stallion came loping out of the small pasture toward them. "I'll make ready, Jess."

Vicar kicked off her blankets and extended her hand to Dana, and Jess curbed the urge to stop her. Vic looked worse than Jess felt, and that was going some. "Get me up, youngster."

Dana pulled Vicar slowly to her feet. "We'll get the horses, Jess. Let Brenna take a look at you."

"What a fine idea." Brenna sat beside Jess and opened the small bag containing her medical supplies. "I vote for Dana to be queen."

"We have a camp to pack," Jess pointed out.

"Yes, and Jenny and Eva are seeing to that nicely. And Kyla's looking after Elise." Brenna nodded at Kyla, who was fitting Elise with one of her smaller tunics. "We're going to take time for this now, Jesstin, unless you want me stitching you on Hippo's back. What a lovely scar that would make. Let me see your side first."

Jess let her unsnap what was left of her tattered shirt. She heard Brenna draw in a quick breath, and felt her cool fingers touch the heated ache high on her right side.

"This has to be killing you, honey." Brenna palpated the area carefully.

"I can draw even breath, so no ribs are broken."

"I'll wrap them anyway." Brenna brushed Jess's hair off her forehead, a faint line of worry between her brows. "You have a concussion, Jess, you know you shouldn't ride."

Jess smiled down at her. "Not much choice, lass."

Light was flooding their small clearing as morning dawned in full. The distant stench of the City still reached Jess, but at least the disinfectant stink of the Clinic itself was a bad memory again. She rested against the log and tried to ease the tightness in her shoulders.

"Jesstin."

The bleak note in Brenna's voice coaxed Jess's eyes open.

"You wouldn't have taken that blow to the head, if I'd made it to the Clinic in time." Brenna touched the burn below Jess's throat lightly. "You probably wouldn't have this, either."

"Bren, it could have played out a hundred different ways." Jess knew she couldn't absolve her lover with empty words, but she had to try to ease her sadness. "What matters is we're together as the sun rises."

"I'm trying to tell you I'm sorry." Brenna lifted Jess's hand. "Just hear that, okay?"

Jess raised Brenna's fingers to her lips and kissed them. "Aye, Bren. I hear."

They looked up as Hakan's braided head, high over her towering Valkyrie, was outlined by the rising sun.

"I ride for Tristaine, Jesstin." Hakan's touch on her stallion's neck calmed his prancing impatience. One of the canvas bags was lashed securely across the horse's withers. "I'll guard our lady's life as my own."

"Safe travel, adanin." Jess sketched a blessing in the air. "We follow fast."

Hakan spun Valkyrie in a tight circle then raised her hand in farewell to the others as she cantered out of the clearing.

Elise stumbled over to them, watching the retreating horse with wonder. The big beast was a marvel to her, and Jess studied the child with equal fascination. Samantha's lost bairn, alive and safe. Jess loved Brenna's younger blood-sister well, and she would give much to be with her when she returned the child to her mother.

"Go get my pickers." Elise stood in front of them, looking uncertainly from Brenna to Jess. She didn't seem to expect her command would be obeyed. She clenched the soft fabric of Kyla's tunic, which fell almost to her ankles. She turned and pointed back toward the City. "I left them there."

"What are pickers, sweetheart?" Brenna asked.

"Of my real mom. That I drawed of her down there. I hid 'em from *her*." Elise turned from side to side. "*She* wasn't my real mom."

Jess looked at Brenna. They both knew whom the child was referring to.

"No, she wasn't your real mom, honey." Brenna brushed the dust off Elise's forehead gently. "But you're going to meet her real soon. She's going to be so happy to see you."

"Me too!" And Elise smiled for the first time, a dazzling sight. Then she turned and trotted back to Kyla.

"Hakan's right. It's a miracle." Brenna leaned against Jess, as they watched Elise help Kyla pack their food supplies. "I can't believe we're bringing her home. Even when I let myself hope she was alive, I thought it would take years to find her."

"I thank my Mothers for such miracles." Jess pressed Brenna's knuckles to her lips, remembering those sick moments last night when she feared she'd lost her to the City.

Jess shifted against the log and cradled Brenna's face. Her

blond hair lay across her brow in matted clumps, her cheeks were streaked with dust, and she was more beautiful than Jess had ever seen her. She drew her closer and brushed her lips with her own, savoring their warmth.

"Now, lass," Jess murmured, "stitch me and wrap me, and then we ride."

Chapter Thirteen

Their campfire had burned down to embers, but even this high into the hills the night air was mild. They needed only their lightest furs and blankets to sleep warmly.

Brenna rested against Jess, pleased to know that her training in anatomy was sound, and there were, indeed, six hundred and fifty muscles in the human body. She could confirm this personally now because every individual one of hers ached like hell. Jess's heartbeat was slow and steady against her ear. She lifted her head with an effort and checked Vicar, who slept deeply nearby.

"Well, I have it on the highest authority that Samantha's daughter was placed with a farming family outside the West Borough over a year ago." Jenny slapped shut the pages of a computer printout in disgust, then tossed them into the glowing coals of the fire. The flaring red light illuminated the dirty, exhausted faces around their circle. "My sister is an idiot."

"Not necessarily." Sitting across the fire, Eva smiled at Jenny. "I mean, yes, Gina's an idiot, but that database did tell us something. Elise spent her first two years in a Youth Home. This Caster only had her the last year or so."

The child was curled on a blanket beside Jenny, dead to the world. Brenna looked at her, troubled. She had suffered four full seasons under the care of that twisted psyche. Elise was well nourished and the right size for her age, and there were no signs of physical abuse, but Brenna feared for her emotionally. She didn't know as much about child development as Jenny, but she knew Elise had been mothered by a monster during her most tender and formative stage of inner growth. They could only pray Tristaine's nurturing would heal her.

"This is one tuckered out little girl." Jenny tucked the blanket around Elise's feet. "Kids this age have only two speed settings, full and off. This is off."

"Man, I hope she holds on to that gorgeous hair." Eva smiled down at Elise. "Isn't it beautiful, that shade of honey-red?"

It'll get darker, as she grows up, Brenna thought. *Elise will have chestnut curls like her father.* She contemplated the night sky and the glorious starfield above her.

She had told only Jess about her harrowing encounter with Matthew. Was there any way she could protect Sammy from knowing the devastating reality of his fate?

The mere fact that Matthew was alive was rendered nightmarish by the horror his life had become. Must Sammy learn about his betrayal, and the torture that compelled it, how Caster had maimed the man she loved? That the depths of her young husband's self-hatred had plunged him into drugs, whiskey, anything that would keep Matthew from remembering her face?

Brenna focused on the Seven Sisters and drew comfort from Jess's fingers drifting down her arm. It would do no earthly good for Sammy to know, and she would never have to. Jess would keep her counsel. Neither Dana nor Kyla had asked her yet about the liquor she had consumed, but they would. They had every right. But they would accept Brenna's heartfelt remorse, and her word that, for good reason, she simply could not tell them what happened.

And then I won't have to tell Sammy what happened. Brenna heard her own inner voice again, calm, but firm. *I won't have to tell my little sister how my actions led to even more grievous pain than she knew. Who am I trying to protect?*

Brenna yearned for Shann's counsel as painfully as she craved a soft bed after nights on stony ground. Shann and Jess would help her with this decision.

"Hey, Brenna?" Dana was carefully arranging the supplies in their second case. "Sorry, but you have to explain this to me

again. The woman you kept seeing in your vision, that was our little Elise? Some future version of her?"

"I think the Elise I saw in my vision is kind of timeless, no particular age." Brenna turned her head stiffly on Jess's shoulder. "She's Elise's essence, for lack of a better word."

Kyla stretched out beside the fire. "Do you think you'll see her again, Bren?"

Brenna was quiet for a moment. "I think the Elise I saw on the spiritual plane needed our help desperately. Now that Tristaine is free from Caster in our world, I really doubt she'll appear to me again. The purpose of the vision was fulfilled."

"The spirits of Dyan and Camryn returned to us when Tristaine needed them most." Jess's voice was a low rumble in Brenna's ear. She was resting comfortably on the furs, and if her fever hadn't diminished, at least it was no higher. "Once our clan was safe, we said our last goodbyes. We won't see those adanin again in this life."

"Can I just say again that I can't *wait* to see Tristaine?" Eva's kind eyes sparkled behind her glasses. "Vision quests, ghosts popping in and out. Most of it scares the holy crap out of me, but I can't wait."

Soft laughter rippled around their circle.

Brenna returned Jess's drowsy smile, and then looked at Dana with some consternation. "Dana? What are you doing with—whatever it is you have there?"

"Just keeping this cold." Dana lay another slender pack inside the satchel in her lap. "These chemical ice packs last longer than I thought."

"What are you keeping cold?" Brenna sat up with a wince. "Kestadine doesn't need refrigeration." She saw Dana and Kyla exchange smug looks. "Dana? What else, pray tell, did you and Kyla take from the pharmacy?"

"Sperm," they chorused, and grinned at each other happily.

"You stole *sperm?*" Brenna sputtered.

"Well, the Clinic only collects it from prisoners for their stupid genetic experiments, right?" Kyla nudged Brenna eagerly. "This is Shann's policy of incremental change at its best, Bren! We're going to convert the sperm of a hundred Citizens into little baby Amazons."

"And it's not really criminal sperm," Dana added quickly. "You said the Civilian Unit only locks up renegade artists and rabble rousers. We figure these spermies are halfway Amazons already."

Jess laughed, a small, pleasant quake against Brenna's back. "Well done, adanin."

"Okay. I can work with this." Brenna lay down next to Jess again. "Come spring, Tristaine will have a baby boom. Excuse me, a bairn boom."

"I can't *wait,*" Eva said again.

"I'll take first watch, Jess," Dana volunteered. "There's a good lookout..."

Brenna drifted off before Dana finished the sentence.

❖

The glowing orb of Selene had passed her apex when Brenna woke abruptly.

She sat up and looked around in a minor panic. Their campsite was peaceful and still, her sisters curled beneath their furs, the fire crackling again in the center of their circle. Dana had apparently decided to call Kyla to take the next watch. She was crouching beside Brenna, tapping her foot, and the firelight revealed the concern in her expression.

Brenna felt it then, the irregularity of Jess's breathing, the quivering in the long muscles of her arms and legs. She turned quickly and saw the tension in her sleeping lover's bruised face and clenched jaw. Kyla touched Brenna's knee, then rose silently to return to her watch.

"Jesstin." Brenna breathed the name softly and then cupped

the back of her neck to measure her temperature. Relief filled her when she felt no fever. "Honey? Open your eyes, Jess."

Jess came to slowly, a deep breath shuddering through gritted teeth. It took her a moment to focus on Brenna, and that scared her a little.

"Hey." She stroked Jess's waist. "Talk to me, dearest. What's happening to you?"

"Just a dream." Jess swallowed hard.

"Damn," Brenna whispered. She closed her eyes briefly, cursing herself for forgetting the horrible nightmares Jess suffered after escaping from the Clinic the first time. "It must have been terrible, Jess. What did you dream?"

"I'd rather not go back there, Bren. Not right now." Jess let out a long sigh, her aching body relaxing again against the fur beneath them. "Be patient, lass. We both know I'll be fine. I just need to work the poison out of my head for a while."

"I want to help you." Brenna let Jess ease her head back down on her shoulder, and she sagged bonelessly against her. "Please, tell me how."

Jess's hold tightened around her, keeping her safe. "Be right here, querida." Her lips moved in Brenna's hair. "Be here every time I wake up."

"Ah, Jess." Tears rose behind Brenna's closed lids. "Of course I will."

She was cherished by this remarkable, amazing woman. And Brenna didn't know which Goddess to thank for that miracle, so she thanked all of them for the dark warrior in her arms as they both drifted back to sleep.

❖

"Brenna?"

Brenna rubbed her eyes, surprised to find herself upright and awake. Or apparently awake. She blinked and realized she was standing in one of Tristaine's most beautiful gardens, a lavish

feast of flowers with origins from a dozen different lands. The air was sunny and quiet, and she sensed no hint of danger.

Then she turned and saw Elise walking toward her and felt a thrill of surprise. This was not the child Elise, but it wasn't her idealized essence, either. This young woman was fully human. There was no spectral white robe, no marble basin. She wore the simple longshirt and leggings of any Amazon. But here, again, in this peaceful garden, Elise wept.

Brenna stepped carefully toward her through the flowers. Elise stumbled slightly, and Brenna took her cold hands in her own. Her niece's green eyes were still achingly beautiful, but they held none of the serene remoteness of her spirit form. They were bloodshot and desolate.

"Brenna," Elise said again, and then lowered her head, unable to go on.

"Take your time, honey. I'm here, I'm listening." Sweet Gaia, Brenna thought*, she does look like a little girl. Like a child who knows she'll never see her mother again.*

And Brenna knew Samantha was dead.

Chapter Fourteen

Elise's small, fragile body roused a powerful tenderness in Jess, a maternity that was all but foreign to her. She had never felt drawn toward mothering a child, and doubted she ever would, but the forlorn misery of the little girl riding in front of her on Bracken's back tore Jess's heart.

Elise had awakened in tears that morning. She didn't sob; she made no sound at all. Her lower lip pushed out, and her large eyes welled and overflowed. She didn't answer Brenna's gentle questions and didn't respond when she finally heard the terrible words. Brenna hadn't had to say them. It was obvious to everyone watching that Elise already knew her mother was gone.

Jess wanted to have Brenna riding astride Bracken with them. One look at her adonai's stunned features told her how badly she needed physical comfort. Brenna rode stiffly and alone on her bay, her first horse, whose name she had chosen to please her little sister.

But necessity must rule, with Tristaine still in danger. Brenna couldn't carry a child safely on an unseasoned horse, not at the pace they traveled. Eva, a nurse, rode with Vicar, who was still dazed and aching from the bullet wound and the flu. Jenny's arms were clasped around Kyla's waist, her eyes squeezed shut as they cantered through a broad field. Dana's horse carried more of their supplies to free the others to ride double.

Crossing the pass had been nerve shredding and cruelly slow, but they had made it over the narrow passage without disaster. Jess spotted a bright cloth tied to a low branch as they emerged from the cliffs, and she went weak with relief. Hakan had left them assurance that she, too, had crossed safely.

Twilight was falling as they reached the meadow's end, and Jess signaled a halt. Their lathered horses snorted to a stop.

"Our big friends have done well, they've earned their feed." Jess clapped Bracken's damp neck. "I call for a brief rest before we put more leagues behind us."

Soft groans of relief convinced Jess that her adanin needed this respite as much as their horses. They couldn't spare a full night here, but Selene would rise in an hour and light their path toward Tristaine.

"Uh, Jess, someone?" Eva, seated behind Vicar on her roan, was struggling to hold the sagging warrior erect. "We need some help here."

"Jeeze, Vic!" Dana jumped off her horse and ran to help Eva lower Vicar to the ground.

Jess lifted Elise off Bracken's back, wincing at the pain in her side as she handed her down to Kyla. She joined Brenna next to her cousin, her heart thumping queasily in her chest.

Vicar was conscious, pushing weakly against Dana's supporting arms. "Stop, this is bloody embarrassin'."

"Hush, Vic." Brenna checked the wound on the back of her shoulder. It looked to Jess to be healing well.

"She was fine until we pulled up," Eva said quietly. "I think she's just beat."

Dana, who had had more than one nasty brawl with Vicar when she first joined Tristaine, held her now with solicitous care. "When did you give her and Jess our magic juice, Brenna, two days ago? How long does it take to kick in?"

"It's already kicking." Brenna sat back on her heels and appraised Vicar. "It'll be a few days before the kestadine takes full effect, Vic, but your fever's broken. With food and some decent sleep, you'll live to ride again."

Vicar grumbled a petulant war cry that loosened the band of worry around Jess's chest. She felt Brenna's cool hand on her face.

"What about you?" Brenna's expression was oddly wooden,

but the love in her touch was unmistakable. "Your fever's gone too, but you still have to be feeling pretty rotten, Jesstin."

"Aye," Jess admitted easily. "But I'll eat and rest, too."

"Aye, you will." Brenna glanced past Jess, and got to her feet. "I'll be back," she said quietly, and walked away from them, toward a small hill nearby covered with wildflowers.

Jess turned and saw Kyla behind her, holding Elise on her hip. She watched Brenna compassionately. Kyla, too, had loved Samantha deeply.

"Lay camp, adanin." Jess leaned an elbow on her knee and got stiffly to her feet. Jenny patted her arm sympathetically as Jess walked past her, keeping sight of Brenna as she disappeared over the hill.

❖

Some instinct told Jess to allow Brenna her distance until the first storm of weeping had passed.

Jess waited at the top of the hill, her hands clasped tightly behind her, aching with the need to hold her young wife. Brenna sat halfway down the gentle slope, her head buried in crossed arms, her shoulders shaking violently. Finally, after interminable minutes, Jess walked quietly down to join her.

Brenna lifted a trembling hand when Jess settled beside her, not quite ready for touch. Jess filled her lungs with clean mountain air, and asked her Mothers for the wisdom to comfort this woman she loved more than sunlight. She had never doubted her intuition where Brenna was concerned, but then Brenna's heart had never been this cruelly devastated.

"I'm s-sorry." Brenna cleared her throat. "I just couldn't see Elise's face, back there. Sh—she looks so much like Sammy."

"Aye, she does. It's all right, Bren. Take all the time you need."

Brenna nodded dully. For all the life in her features, they could have been seated before the City Clinic gates instead of this beautiful expanse of cliffs and meadows.

"Is it because she wasn't Amazon?" Brenna sounded honestly bewildered. "Is that why Sammy didn't rate Artemis's protection?"

Jess was silent for a moment. She reached for a scarlet wildflower and plucked it, and fingered its tender leaves thoughtfully. "Samantha is well-loved in Tristaine, Brenna. Our Mothers know her kindness, the sweetness of her spirit." She laid the wildflower in Brenna's lap. "Amazon or not, I believe They hold our little sister precious in Their hearts, just as we do."

"She was twenty-four years old, Jess." Brenna showed her the flower, fresh, vibrant with color, but dying even now. She tossed it aside and stood up gracelessly. "Samantha was healthy. She had no chronic medical conditions. If the Goddess who guides Tristaine is picking and choosing the sisters we lose, She had to stretch hard to take Sammy."

Jess made herself stay seated in the high grass as Brenna stumbled away from her.

"Three fucking days?" Brenna searched the craggy mountain peaks, and Jess knew she was addressing invisible Listeners. "She couldn't have lived three days longer to see her daughter? To hold Elise, just once?" She scrubbed her arm across her eyes and put one hand on her hip, fighting for composure, then turned to Jess.

"We put Samantha through hell, Jesstin. She had a family, she had work she loved, and then Amazon Nation fell on her life. Like an axe. And she gave us..." Brenna had to pause again. "Sammy gave us Elise. She gave Tristaine a queen. Don't you think that should merit one tiny, bloody shred of Gaia's mercy?"

"Aye, I do." Jess got to her feet and closed the distance between them. Brenna let her come, but the heartbreak evident in every line of her body almost winded Jess. "I don't know why Sammy was taken from us, Bren. The injustice of her suffering galls my spirit, too. We can't change her sad fate, but one thing we can do for Sam. And we will."

Jess took Brenna's hands. "We'll see that her baby is raised

cherished and free, in the heart of a loving clan. You risked your life to give your Sammy a wonderful gift, lass. You saved her child from prison, and delivered her to sisters who will nurture and guide her, all her days. Samantha's joy in this must be immense."

Tears welled in Brenna's eyes again, and she let Jess take her in her arms at last. Jess cradled her, and then held her up as she sobbed, her own tears blending with Brenna's.

It gradually occurred to Jess that a light rain had begun to fall. She heard it, but she didn't feel it, and she scanned the cloudless skies, puzzled. Then she realized the hillside beyond their private embrace was dry. The fresh rain fell in a small, perfect ring around her and Brenna, not touching them, just gently encircling their grief.

She turned Brenna's head on her shoulder, so she could see the bright drops showering around them. "We're not alone in weeping for Samantha, adonai."

They held each other until the rain stopped, and stars began to appear in the darkening heavens.

❖

"Jesstin! Elise is gone!"

Dana's shout galvanized Jess, and she grabbed Brenna's hand and powered up the hill, ignoring the ache in her side.

"What happened, Dana?" Fear sharpened Brenna's tone.

"We were laying camp." Dana spoke rapidly. "She was there, and then she wasn't."

Jess's mind sorted quickly through what she remembered of the surrounding terrain. "How long gone?"

"No more than ten minutes, Jess." Dana nodded back toward their camp. "Eva's staying with Vicar. Jenny and Kyla are searching the meadow."

"Then we'll take the forest beyond the pasture," Jess said. "Spread out, but stay in each other's sight."

They moved quickly through the deepening twilight, the stars emerging in isolated pinpricks overhead. It was dim and treacherous light to search by, and Jess called on her other senses to detect any sign of Elise. She cursed the lingering fogginess that afflicted her thinking and slowed her reflexes. Soon the trees surrounded them, still sparse this close to the cliffs.

"Call her, Bren."

"Elise!" Brenna's cry was strident, and Jess knew she was imagining the child confronting a bear or toppling into a swift stream. She shared those visions. Jess shuddered at the thought of telling Shann, mere days after she lost her younger daughter, that she had let harm come to this little girl.

"Elise, honey, sing out!" Brenna managed to project a less anxious tone, and Jess listened intently for a response. She heard nothing but the faint song of a nightbird on a high branch.

Jess could see Dana weaving through the trees several yards ahead, and Brenna turning in place off to her right. Then she realized she could see Brenna more clearly with every passing second, and she came to a startled halt. Jess held out her palms, and they filled with silver light. A luminous glow washed down from the sky on all three of them, growing steadily brighter.

Brenna turned and pointed to the northern heavens, and Jess sighted the source of the eerie illumination. The Seven Sisters pulsed overhead with a fierce intensity, like sparking pinwheels in the blue-gray sky. Even as Jess watched, their light gathered and narrowed, and became a pure beam pointing above their heads. The beam disappeared behind a thick bank of trees just ahead.

Jess whistled sharply, and they broke into a run.

She heard a high-pitched yapping sound before she broke through the trees and saw the child. Elise was sitting in a large patch of wildflowers, brightly illuminated by the silver light, her small hand extended to a prancing wolf pup. Jess read the danger in a heartbeat and kept running, forcing more speed from her aching legs.

The pup was young, perhaps not even weaned. Its mother would be close by, with the rest of its pack. Elise was obviously enchanted by the dancing little creature and ignored Brenna's breathless call.

A ferocious growling prickled the nape of Jess's neck, and a large, full-chested gray wolf streaked into the far side of the clearing. Elise saw it, and her small body froze, hand still outstretched.

The charging she-wolf was targeting directly on Elise, and Jess realized it would come down to a simple footrace. Running flat-out, she despaired of reaching the child in time, but Dana was racing ahead of her, already drawing her dagger from her belt.

Half-crazed for the safety of her pup, the wolf never hesitated. It launched toward Elise's throat, and Dana smacked solidly into its body in mid-flight. Warrior and beast crashed into the grass only two feet from the child.

"Brenna!" Jess snapped. "There'll be others! Get the girl!"

Dana's scream chilled Jess, and she saw the wolf's powerful jaws clamped on her upper arm. The animal's churning hindquarters almost knocked Jess off her feet, but she was able to twist and swipe her dagger over its haunch. The wolf released Dana, snarling, and backed a few feet to face both its prey.

"Jesstin!" Brenna had swept Elise into her arms. She pointed toward two more gray wolves loping in on their left.

"Hold!" Jess reached out to stop Dana. The she-wolf was still crouching, set to leap, but it hadn't moved. Its silver hackles were raised, and it growled gutturally through bared, pointed teeth. Its pup was several yards behind it, cowering in the grass.

"Jess?" Dana gasped.

"Hold, Dana." Jess risked a glance at Brenna, who stood behind them, carrying Elise. The two new wolves had stopped several yards away, bathed in the constellation's strange light. Wolves on the hunt were known to attack a lone child, but they rarely confronted humans unless cornered. For a long moment,

the only sounds in the clearing were the she-wolf's low growl and Elise's sobbing, and then both faded to silence.

The strange tableau held an eerie quality that resonated in the part of Jess's mind that harbored portents and prophecies. She couldn't guess the pup's gender, but all of the adult wolves were female, unusual in itself. Their gold eyes seemed locked on Brenna and Elise, even the crouching she-wolf, who slowly rose from its aggressive stance.

Her eyes on the wolves, Jess put a hand on Dana's arm, and touched sticky blood. "Back away," she said quietly.

They moved slowly and as one through the high grass, distancing themselves gradually from the motionless pack. The she-wolves watched them silently, and a shiver moved up Jess's back. The beasts' gazes remained centered on Brenna and Elise. As they reached the thick bank of alders and pines, the wolves turned and trotted back into the forest.

The ghostly illumination of Tristaine's starfield faded and left them deep in shadows.

❖

Jess raised her fingers to sound an all-clear whistle, and Brenna shielded Elise's ear with one hand. The child had stopped crying and sat in her arms listlessly, her head on Brenna's breast. She talked softly to her niece as they trudged back to camp.

Brenna remembered Samantha at this age vividly, though she had been only a few years older. When they were taken to the Youth Home, Sammy had clung to her the way her daughter did now. She slept for months curled next to her big sister. Brenna kissed the top of Elise's head, then forced Samantha out of her mind. "Dana? You've got some nasty bites on that arm."

"You're telling me." Dana examined her shoulder, frowning darkly. "Dang, another inch and that flea-infested cur would have chomped right into my glyph."

"She's able to lift it, Bren." Jess was still breathing hard after the brief climb, and her forehead gleamed with sweat. "How's Sammy's lass?"

"Good question. Hey, little girl." Brenna nudged Elise gently, and she lifted her head. "Did you get hurt, honey?"

Elise shook her head, and snuck two fingers into her mouth. "Go get the puppy."

Brenna had to smile. "There are lots of dogs in Tristaine, sweetheart. Lots of puppies to play with."

"They were my friends," Elise said. "The wolfs."

Brenna looked at Jess, startled. She wouldn't have expected Elise to even recognize the animals as wolves.

"I've never seen a pack focus like that, Bren." Jess was catching her breath as they entered the camp. "Dana and I attacked them, but they never took their eyes off the two of you."

"Somehow," Brenna murmured, gazing at Elise, "I don't think they were looking at me."

"Oh, hallelujah!" Eva was grinning broadly, her hands on her hips. "Vicar was right about that whistle, our escaped waif looks fine."

"She is. Just a bit shaken." Brenna smiled wanly at Eva, and let her take Elise. "Vic, how are you?"

"I've rallied, Brenna." Vicar lifted herself on one elbow.

Kyla and Jenny ran out of the meadow, their faces flushed with color.

"Great catch, you guys!" Kyla went to Eva and Elise and stroked the little girl's head. "Where did you go, wee one?"

"Is everybody okay?" Jenny panted. "What was that crazy light in the sky?"

"A guiding signal from our Mothers." Jess was lowering herself stiffly onto a folded blanket. "We wouldn't have found Elise in time without it."

"Dana, let's take care of your arm." Brenna went to her pack to take out her satchel of medical supplies and almost walked

into Kyla as she pushed past her to reach Dana.

"Demon's bile. What happened?" Kyla lifted Dana's arm gingerly and stared at the two sets of bloody bite marks.

"Our Elise ran into a wolf pack," Jess said. "Dana tackled a charging she-wolf in full flight. It was an amazing feat, adanin."

Brenna smiled at Jess, knowing she had deliberately voiced this praise when others could hear it.

"Well done, youngster." Vicar gave Dana a gruff nod of approval.

"Shucks." Dana shivered visibly. "I'm still spooked by how close it was."

"Look, you did a wonderful thing, and that's great." Kyla was still examining Dana's arm. "But these bites are still bleeding, Dana." She flicked Brenna a glance that held real fear. "Is there any chance these wolves were rabid?"

"Nah, Jess said they were normal." Dana smiled. "Just looking after their young, like us."

"Kyla?" Brenna got one of their canteens and brought it to Kyla. "I want to get Elise settled. Would you wash out those punctures? I'll be right there."

"Sure, of course." Kyla tugged Dana gently to the campfire and sat cross-legged on the grass beside her.

Eva and Jenny had gotten Elise seated on a fur, but she was fretful and whining and looked far from ready for sleep. Brenna went to Dana's pack and pulled out their rolled map of the City. She selected a slim chunk of cold charcoal near their fire, and brought them to the little girl. She spread out the blank side of the parchment in front of her.

"Here, honey. Could you draw us a picture of the wolf puppy?"

"Okay." Elise accepted the charcoal and peered at it curiously. "He had blue eyes."

Coming down off their latest adrenaline-fueled escape, the Amazons prepared efficiently for sleep. Brenna checked Vicar and

Jess, then doctored Dana's arm and let Kyla take over bandaging it. Selene was fully visible above the trees by the time Brenna lay down beside Jess.

Elise had switched off halfway through her drawing and lay curled on the fur, still clenching the charcoal stick. Eva and Jenny had settled near her, both of them yawning widely. Jenny lifted herself on her elbows and sought out Brenna. There was a question in her eyes, and Brenna read the friendly compassion in Jenny's gaze as if she'd known the woman for years. Brenna smiled assurance that she was all right.

Kyla and Dana were talking quietly together beside the fire. Their tones were hushed, but their words still carried in the still night air.

"Just don't let these get infected." Kyla was tying off the last bandage around Dana's arm, the strips gleaming white against her tanned skin. "I really hate it when you're hurt, Dana. You need to take better care of yourself. See? You're still shivering."

Brenna lifted her head from Jess's shoulder and saw Dana seated next to Kyla, counting slowly on her fingers.

"Nah, I'm all right. I've just been sitting still too long." There was a hollow note in Dana's voice. "When I'm not moving, I start to count them up again."

"Count who, honey?" Kyla slid closer to Dana and slipped her arm around her waist.

"The people I killed on this mission. Four or five, maybe. I don't know if the men I shot in the Clinic are dead. I may have killed one of those guards before we got in." Dana was watching the flames. "I keep remembering knifing that kid in the gut."

"Oh, baby." Kyla stroked Dana's back. "That must be so hard."

"It's weird not knowing the exact number." In the firelight, Dana looked years younger, open and unguarded as she gazed at Kyla. "This shouldn't bug me, right? I mean, they were all clean kills."

"It's probably going to bug you all your life, Dana. And I thank Gaia you have the conscience for that." Kyla touched Dana's face. "Our Grandmothers honor your bravery in defending Tristaine, sweetie, but they cherish your noble heart even more, and so do I."

The wonder rising in Dana's eyes was intended for Kyla alone, and Brenna lowered her head to Jess's shoulder again and tried to relax. She listened to Jess's steady breathing. She wanted her home and safely bedded in their cabin, now, tonight.

"Sixteen." Jess's voice was a low rumble in her ear.

"Sixteen?" Brenna murmured. "And you're supposed to be asleep, Jess."

"The number of Tristaine's enemies I'd killed, when I was Dana's age." Jess sounded drowsy. "I used to shake sometimes, too."

You still shake sometimes, love, after a battle. Brenna kissed Jess's shoulder. *You're our clan's perfect warrior, Jesstin, with all the burdens that honor entails.* "You'll never take joy in killing, Jess. The Army didn't teach Dana that a true warrior must revere life. She's learned that from you."

"As I learned it from Dyan." Jess shifted beneath her. "We're almost home, lass. Sleep, now."

Across the campfire, Brenna saw Dana and Kyla draw closer to each other. They hesitated, their lips inches apart, and then Dana kissed her. Their first kiss was tentative, and then their mouths melded again, soft and lingering. Brenna smiled, and closed her eyes.

She prayed she'd find a vision of Tristaine in her sleep. She needed to know how Shann fared, and how serious the rebellion in the village had grown. But Brenna knew while her psyche was out searching the heavens, she would listen desperately for one loved voice.

Sammy? Are you out there? Tears welled behind Brenna's closed lids. *Come and tell me you're all right. Please.*

Chapter Fifteen

The yearning for home grew stronger in Jess as they neared the mesa, and she knew the sisters riding with her shared that pull. Even their horses sensed the welcome of Tristaine's stables, and they broke into a weary lope after they crested the last forested rise that led to the mesa. Twilight had faded to full dark, but they needed no illumination to follow this well-loved path.

"Jess!" Brenna urged her horse alongside Bracken. "There's trouble."

Jess took in the distant sheen in Brenna's eyes. She reined in and signaled the others to stop. "What do you see, Bren?"

"It's what I'm hearing." Brenna turned her head slightly, with a look of intense listening. "Women's voices. Shouting. Lots of anger and fear."

Jess began to signal formation, but then a distant sound reached her, too. Not the cries of women, but the faint clapping of horses' hooves through the underbrush.

"Jesstin?" Vicar called from the rear of their pack.

"Aye, Vic, I hear."

"They're running, Jess." Brenna's eyes were filled with dread. "They've left the mesa."

Jess whistled sharply, and Bracken exploded into a full gallop with one nudge of her knees.

The trees were still dense this side of the mesa, and Jess gave Bracken his head to weave through them. She ducked to avoid low-slung branches, part of her focus trained on the adanin riding in quick formation behind her. Jess heard a metallic creaking ahead, around a closely studded stand of maples.

The Amazons fleeing the mesa had taken a wagon, drawn by two horses. Its wooden bed held half a dozen children of various ages, their frightened faces flashing by Jess as she urged Bracken faster. Besides the two women driving the wagon, Jess saw three mounted warriors riding escort, and a low rage kindled in her gut. She whistled complex instructions to her cadre to surround their targets, and to fight without harm.

Startled faces turned toward them as they broke through the trees. One of the drivers lashed the horses and the wagon lurched, careening through the thick brush. Jess feared the cretins would dump their fragile cargo if they hit a rut. The warriors rode close by the wagon, and Jess pointed Bracken toward the one in the lead.

Cries of alarm rang out, and the high, fearful screams of the children, and she knew this had to end quickly. Jess drew aside the lead warrior, gathered herself, and leaped off Bracken's back. She knocked the woman sideways off her horse, and they smacked the ground with a teeth-rattling impact. Jess dismissed the pain coursing through her and twisted on top of the warrior's flailing body.

She knew this Amazon's face, and her smell. Perry's adonai considered fresh mint a protective charm, and she always wore a sachet of crushed leaves around her neck. Jess swiveled and pinned her to the ground, but not easily. Her strength was flagging, and it would be a close match if this came to blows.

Seeing their escort fall had broken the nerve of the wagon's drivers, and they let Kyla and Brenna grab their horses' bridles and slow them to a stop. Jess saw, with some relief, that the other two warriors had not so flagrantly forsaken their vows that they drew arms on their guild's leaders at first sight. They sat rigidly on their horses, under Dana's close watch and Vicar's notched bow. Jenny held Elise while Eva climbed into the wagon's bed to check the young.

Jess sensed a flurry of movement beneath her and reacted, answering Perry's jabbing knee by pounding her own into her

gut. Breath gushed out of Perry's lungs and she tried to bend double, but Jess straight-armed her flat again.

"Don't vex me, Amazon," Jess hissed. "You disgrace your glyph by defying our queen's law."

"Jesstin, the sickness is everywhere!" One of the warriors was Kadisha, the mother of twin daughters. "The City remedy Hakan brought us doesn't work!"

"I'm breathing proof it works, you witless dunce!" Vicar spat, still sighting her arrow carefully on the warrior's leg.

"Hear me, Perry." Jess had seen the furtive glances the other women sent Perry's way, and knew she was the leader of this ill-advised plot. "We will do what we must to turn this wagon back toward Tristaine. If you insist on letting these little ones see their mothers injured or killed, let's have it done."

"Jesstin." Perry was still gasping from the blow to her gut. "I tried to reason with Shann—"

"Silence, woman." Jess shoved Perry down again and drew her dagger in one swift motion. "You can argue this betrayal to your guild and the Council. Your only choice now is to fight us or sur—"

"Please, Jesstin." The third warrior, Kaden, broke in. "You know we honor you—"

Jess whipped her dagger into whistling flight, and its tip thudded deep into a branch just inches from Kaden's wide left eye. Jess realized she should have considered the possibility that her concussed aim would be off, but she was too angry now for regrets.

"Don't talk to me about honor, warrior. You abandoned our queen at Tristaine's darkest hour. You shame Dyan's memory." Jess got to her feet and hauled Perry up with her, suppressing any hint of the grinding effort involved. The night air was quiet except for the harsh breathing of their horses. Even the children were silent as Perry and Jess faced each other.

Jess eyed her evenly. "Will you stand down, adanin?"

Perry was struggling to compose her features. She glanced

over her shoulder toward the wagon, and then met Jess's gaze. "We'll go back with you, Jess."

"Wise decision." Jess couldn't look at her anymore. She liked Perry, and respected her, and that made the sting personal. That warriors under Jess's guidance had joined this rebellion galled her deeply. "You warriors, into the wagon. Dana, gather their horses."

"You heard her, bait." Vicar nudged Kadisha none too gently with her foot. "Move."

Jess rested her hands on her knees and pulled in a deep breath. She felt Brenna's light touch on her back.

"That fall did me absolutely no good," Jess complained, before Brenna could say it. She straightened stiffly. "The bairns are all right?"

"Yes, they're fine." Brenna looked her over quickly. "You sure you're okay?"

"Aye, Bren."

"Jess, I'm still hearing them."

Jess saw that Brenna's shoulders had lost none of their tension. "The screams in the village, lass?"

"I need to be there, Jesstin." The dreamy cast had left Brenna's features, and her gaze was direct and sharp. "I'm riding ahead."

Jess realized Brenna was not asking her permission. She spoke with a sure certainty that brought Shann strongly to mind. Jess gave the hand signal that acknowledged an order from an Amazon queen. "Aye, Brenna, I hear. We'll follow you fast."

❖

Brenna pulled herself onto Hippo's back and urged her to a gallop. The little bay seemed startled that her gentle rider's touch suddenly held such command, but she obeyed gamely. They cantered up the rising path that led to the top of the mesa only minutes later.

After one stunned look at Tristaine's village square, Brenna just kept riding. It seemed half the clan had gathered there, carrying blazing torches, an angry mob incarnate. She nudged her horse into the midst of the roiling women, trying to pick out individual voices from the shouts cutting the air.

"Let us see Shann!" An invisible cry sounded behind Brenna. "If this City drug can save us, why hasn't it cured our lady?"

Small pockets of Amazons clustered together, arguing furiously. Brenna saw Bethany and Martine in one such group, their faces flushed with anger.

"My grandmother took that potion two days ago, and she's no better!" Jaisa, one of the weaver's guild, stood on a log bench, tears streaming down her face. "Let our mothers take their children out, it's their only chance!"

"Our lady's rule is clear, sisters!" Oisin jumped onto another bench and raised her hands for silence. "No one leaves the mesa. Hakan tells us that Shann will address us in the morning. Our lady must rest tonight—"

"Our lady is too weak to leave her bed!" Bethany spun on Oisin. "Shann might be dying, warrior! This miracle drug she promised us is worthless." Someone cried in agreement, and Bethany lifted her fist. "We've lost seventy Amazons, sisters! How many more must die before you let us take our young out of this pestilence!"

"Brenna!" Sarah was making her way toward her, brandishing a cane to clear her path. She slapped her gnarled hand over Brenna's. "Thanks kindly for finally getting your lily-white butt back here, girl."

Brenna saw the genuine relief and affection in her elder's eyes. "It's good to see you, grandmother. But this is an ugly welcome."

"Isn't this the snotrag-sorriest mess you ever saw?" Sarah spat on the ground as shouting rose around them again. Brenna leaned down to hear her. "Hakan got here yesterday morning with the City's brew. She's with Shann in her lodge."

Brenna's chest tightened. "How's our lady, Sarah?"

"Knocked flat off her feet with grief, youngster." Sarah's wrinkled face softened. "Brenna. Have you heard?"

"Yes, I know Sammy's gone."

The old warrior nodded and patted Brenna's hand again. "Shanendra took a bad turn for the worse, but she's got that drug in her now. Seeing your face will do her a damn good turn. But first..."

"First we have butts to kick, lily-white and otherwise." Brenna smiled grimly. "Stay close, Sarah."

"I'll be right here, lady." Sarah stepped back and smacked her cane in her palm smartly, and Brenna turned Hippo toward the center of the village square.

Other voices called her name now, as more women sighted her. Brenna clicked Hippo to a trot, and she didn't pull up when she reached a snarl of arguing Amazons. They scattered from her path with yelps of alarm, and Brenna kept riding.

The rugged stone block that rested in the center of the village marked holy ground in the eyes of every Amazon who dwelled there. It sanctified the spot where once rested the diabolic altar of a deranged and demonic queen. The sculpted rock now served as a monument to the warriors lost in the battle that vanquished her. Brenna lifted one leg over Hippo's back and stepped nimbly onto its flat, chiseled surface.

She heard more than one gasp break out among the milling women as she faced them, and heads turned her way from every corner of the square. Touching the altar was no sacrilege—many women in the clan had draped themselves on its rough length, prostrate in grief, more than once. But something in the easy command of Brenna's stance on the stone claimed it as her royal pulpit.

The noise and clamor abated slowly, but then Brenna was in no hurry to speak. She saw that Jess had arrived and was riding Bracken around the outskirts of the crowd, studying it with

diamond-sharp eyes. Sarah and Aria were watching Brenna, their postures tense and ready.

Brenna's breathing was even, her pulse slow and measured. She waited for silence with the same certainty that filled her when she tended Tristaine's wounded. Jess had sensed it, the strange confidence that filled her now, and so had Sarah. Whoever Brenna might be tomorrow morning, tonight she was an Amazon queen.

The warrior Jackson, holding a blazing torch, stood in the inner ring of women around the stone. Brenna extended her hand, and Jackson stepped forward and tossed her the torch. She caught it easily and lifted it, bathing the monument in a red-gold light.

"Adanin, hear me!" Brenna shouted the words—not in anger, but to reach every ear. "I stand on a shrine raised to honor our Amazon dead. The warriors remembered here died defending Tristaine, and their courage and sacrifice are sacred to us. Now we face another battle, no less deadly than the one that killed our valiant sisters. And we must attack our enemy with equal courage."

"We hear, Brenna!"

Brenna heard Shasa's cry, and continued. "We've asked for your patience as our healers fight this plague, but patience isn't enough. We must draw upon all the courage that courses through Amazon blood to hold faith with each other now. We *must* fight this battle as a united clan."

"Brenna!" Bethany stepped between two women. "We've lost enough dear blood to this nightmare. The youngest in our clan are—"

"The children of Amazons," Brenna finished. "And just as worthy of respect as all our adanin, Bethany. Their bravery is needed as well, to preserve our family." She stared at Bethany, and found compassion for her. "I've lost dear blood in this battle too, sister. I understand your fears, and share them. But listen well."

Brenna turned in a slow circle on the stone, taking in the faces around her. "The remedy we brought from the City *will*

work. We're seeing it happen. But this drug does not bring an instant cure. The ill among us will regain strength slowly, over several days. And it will not save all. We may still lose those most gravely sick before we wake from this shared nightmare."

An uneasy rustling moved through the crowd. Brenna sought out Jess among the shifting figures, keeping watch near the edge of the throng. Jess looked at her with simple pride, affirming Brenna's faith in their clan. She was following Shann's teaching—tell Amazons the whole truth, and trust them to follow their Mothers' lights.

The mob was loosening, groups of women separating, all focused on one face.

"Our healers now have enough medicine to protect all our sisters, including our young, from falling ill with this flu. Aria?" Brenna lifted the torch, and saw the voluptuous Councilor move into its light, her smile as welcome as a warm bath. "Help our adanin move in shifts to the healing lodge. See that all who still need this remedy receive it before they sleep."

"It'll be done, Brenna." Aria winked at her, a signal of approval and thanks.

"We have ill who need tending." Brenna addressed the quiet crowd, her tone gentle now. "And the caretakers who have nursed them for days are exhausted. Those of you who are strong, offer our sisters respite, and care for their charges while they rest. Oisin, Jackson. Build a storyfire here, so the rest of our clan can gather and share comfort and hope."

Brenna waited, and heard no more murmurs of protest. She released a long breath. "We meet here again in the morning to hear our queen's address. May the Goddess protect your sleep, adanin."

"And yours, lady." The traditional response was called by several voices.

Brenna tossed the torch back to Jackson and stepped lightly and without ceremony off the stone block. Several women drifted

nearer to speak to her, but Brenna moved past them with a quick touch and whispered apologies.

"Well done, lass." Jess's warm hands enfolded her own.

"Where's Elise, Jess?"

"She's with Kyla." Jess slipped her arm around Brenna's waist and led her toward the lodges that surrounded the village square.

"Dyan smiles proud on you tonight, Jesstin." Siirah, one of Jess's warriors, clapped Jess on the back as they passed. "You and your adanin rode true for Tristaine."

"Aye, Jess," another voice called, "our thanks to you all!"

A small but warming chorus followed them as they walked down the tree-lined trail that led to Shann's personal dwelling. Kyla waited at its steps, holding a sleeping Elise, and her eyes glowed when she saw Brenna.

"I heard every word, honey, and you were wonderful. You spoke as our lady, Bren."

"And now I need to speak *to* our lady." Brenna smiled at Kyla, and held out her arms for Elise. The child didn't wake as she was eased into Brenna's embrace. Jess put a steadying hand to her back as they went up the steps and entered the lodge that housed Tristaine's queen.

For a royal palace, its two rooms were remarkably simple and tidy. The log walls were all but covered with childish drawings from the clan's young. The only lavish appointments were the small, beautiful sculptures and paintings given to Shann by her sisters, not in tribute, but out of affection. The larger outer room held a fieldstone fireplace, a thick bear pelt rug, and several cushioned benches and chairs for the comfort of guests.

Brenna could already hear Shann, frighteningly hoarse, from the smaller room that served as her sleeping chamber.

"Hakan, Dana, stand down. Please remember I outrank you both."

Brenna stood in the doorway, and for a moment she was

unable to move, shocked by her mother's appearance. Shann looked as though she had lost ten pounds she couldn't afford, and her skin was dry and sallow. She stood shakily upright by her bed, clothed in a simple robe, pulling a shawl around her shoulders.

"I'm going to the square to tell them all to go the bloody hell to bed," Shann insisted, "and then I'll return here to my own. It will take all of five minutes."

Shann turned and saw them, then, Brenna and Jess and Elise. Her shaking stopped, and she stood very still.

"This is your granddaughter, lady." Brenna stroked the girl's soft hair. "Her name is Elise."

Shann's red-rimmed eyes flew to Brenna and then fastened on the sleeping child.

"You need to sit down, Shann." Hakan's large hand was both deferential and firm on Shann's elbow, and this time the queen didn't protest. She sat very carefully on her bed, then leaned back against the thick sheaf of furs that bolstered its head.

In the few steps it took Brenna to reach her side, a myriad of expressions fled across Shann's pale features. Brenna lowered Elise into her waiting arms.

Shann stared down at the child's face in open wonder. Brenna felt Kyla squeeze her hand as she joined her and Jess. With Hakan and Dana hovering near the bed, the small chamber should have felt crowded, but there seemed a vast and warm expanse surrounding the reclining queen and the child she cradled on her lap.

Elise stirred and rubbed her eyes with her fist. She blinked up at Shann.

"Hello, little one." Shann's whisper was tender and calm. "I'm your grandmother. My name is Shann."

"Oh..." Brenna could barely hear Elise. She seemed to study Shann for a moment, and then patted her face with her small hand. "Oh, good." Elise laid her head on Shann's breast with a tired sigh and burst into tears.

The child's sisters stood around her, sharing her grief. Shann rocked Elise as she sobbed, letting her tears flow as long as they would. Brenna's own eyes welled, but she saw the love and gratitude in Shann's expression clearly enough to imprint on her heart.

Three blood-bonded queens wept together that night, for the loss of a woman they would always hold dear. But Elise's spirit had shed her fill of tears, and another day was coming—a dawn all their clan could greet with renewed hope.

"My dear Elise." Shann rested her face in the child's hair and closed her eyes. "Welcome to Tristaine."

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Hours later, Brenna lay beside Jess and stared at the low fire that flickered in the hearth of their small cabin.

Sammy had always needed some kind of nightlight when she was little. The dormitories of the Youth Home were notoriously dark and ominous after lights-out, and Brenna had to be creative about arranging a little forbidden illumination. A small flashlight beneath their blankets worked for years once Brenna learned where she could filch batteries. Now the flames in the hearth bathed the bed she shared with Jess in a soft glow and offered the same comfort.

Jess was dozing, finally. Brenna lifted her head and stared down at her still profile, outlined by the moonlight that fell through the window. Jess's rugged features were relaxed in sleep, her brow was smooth, and her firm breasts lifted in deep, even cadence.

The mild weather allowed them to sleep without wraps, but this night they would have curled naked together had Tristaine been buried beneath blizzard snows. Brenna brushed the tips of her fingers down the side of Jess's face. She lay close against her, one leg slung across her thighs.

She lifted herself on one elbow and tried to see the bruises

on Jess's ribs, but the red shadows cast by the flames were too deep. She drew her finger across the colorful glyph that capped the smooth swell of Jess's shoulder, and then over the faint scar on her collarbone, a remnant of the clash with Botesh. Her lover's powerful body was a living history of Tristaine's battles. So many scars, faded now against Jess's bronzed skin, so many times she had spilled blood for her clan.

Jess stirred beneath her touch, not in response, but in the first grip of dark dreams. Her forehead creased, and Brenna felt the long muscles in her legs begin to tighten. She nearly shook her awake, but then hesitated and continued her ministrations. Her lips moved across the darkness on Jess's side, and then coasted down to a thunderhead bruise emerging on her hip. Her breath warmed Jess's skin as she traveled, and the shivering in her long form began to ease.

"Gaia grant me a thousand awakenings like this." She could hear Jess's smile in her drowsy alto.

Brenna kissed her way up Jess's side, ending with a light brushing of her lips across her cool brow.

"Why are you awake?" Jess mumbled.

"Just hanging out with our Mothers." Brenna rested her head on Jess's chest. "Thanking them for answering my prayer, again."

"Ah, please give them my best." Jess stretched beneath her, cautiously. "We all owe our Mothers thanks for preserving Tristaine."

"I pray they'll preserve you, Jesstin. Every time." Brenna stroked Jess's muscled arm. "I watched you fight City soldiers and street punks and Clinic guards, and you're still here. You caught a killing flu, and you're still here. Being able to sleep beside you, whole and healing, at the end of the day is all I really ask of the Universe."

"And my Brenna is back."

Brenna could see Jess's smile this time. "What do you mean? Where have I been?"

"Claiming your rightful throne as a ruler of Amazons. It was amazing, Bren. You changed before my eyes tonight."

"Did I get any taller?" Brenna asked hopefully.

"I'm serious, querida." Jess kissed the top of her head. "Shann is right, you have it—the blessing of royalty our Mothers grant the queens who guide Tristaine. You've shown flashes of it before. I saw it in full flower tonight. We all did."

"The blessing of royalty?" Brenna wondered if she could ever see it that way.

"And the strength to bear its burdens." Jess wound her arms around Brenna, and a pleasant, creeping warmth filled her. "And we'll always have nights like this, adonai, to lay those burdens down."

Brenna melted against Jess and let out a sigh, a small wind that blew the lingering mists of battle and fear and loss from her mind. She watched the scarlet firelight flicker over the sculpted planes of Jess's body. She looked weary beyond measure, but a gleaming heat was rising in her eyes. She lifted her head and brushed her lips against Brenna's.

Their kiss deepened, and grew long and rich. The tips of Jess's fingers tickled over Brenna's bare breasts, finding her nipples and stroking them to taut peaks, so suddenly sensitive a hard shiver coursed through her.

Brenna closed her hand over Jess's. "Lie still." Jess growled some reply, but Brenna insisted, pressing her back against the furs. "No, Jesstin. You lie still now. You were right, I am back, and we're going to get acquainted again."

Their lips met, slow and sweet, and Brenna's fingers tangled in the wildness of Jess's dark hair.

"You've taken care of all of us since this plague started," Brenna whispered. "It's time you let someone look after you."

Jess rested her head against the folded fur and closed her eyes in acceptance, and Brenna began to strum her strong body like a breathing harp. Her fingers played over Jess's firm breasts,

coaxing her dark nipples erect as she sucked lightly on the smooth skin of her throat.

She heard Jess's guttural moan of pleasure and moved lower, stroking the flat planes of her lover's belly. She lipped each nipple wetly, taking her time, drawing on her intimate knowledge of the best ways to pleasure this body she loved so much.

I guess I can't really claim I despise power, can I, Brenna thought, *because I'm powerful now, and I relish every moment of it.*

Jess's arms, strong enough to chop kindling from dawn to dusk when she was healthy, lay still at her sides, thrumming with a fine tension inspired by Brenna's skillful caresses. Her fingers drifted down to Jess's powerful legs, and delved into the soft folds between them. Jess hissed with pleasure, and Brenna had to lay her hand at the base of her throat again to keep her lying flat.

Her fingers moved with exquisite care, circling Jess's wetness, exploring deeper. This was the simplest of the many ways one woman made love to another, and Brenna's favorite way of loving Jess. She was able to track her rising passion by watching that sweet tension tighten her austere features.

"If I never command another Amazon in my life," Brenna whispered, "I'll still rule here, Jesstin." Jess's breathing hitched as Brenna stroked her relentlessly higher. "You've given me lasting reign over one warrior's heart...and you will submit to your queen."

Jess arched hard, and rode Brenna's churning fingers to a long and shuddering climax. Brenna caught her breath, awed as always by the wild, feral quality of Jess's rugged beauty when pleasure took her. She held her as her trembling began to ease, and she relaxed in stages, finally sagging back against the furs in sated exhaustion.

Brenna smoothed Jess's hair off her forehead. "Sleep, adonai," she whispered.

"My love." The corner of Jess's mouth lifted as she began to sink into sleep. "My j'heika."

Chapter Sixteen

Several days passed before Shann was strong enough to see her younger daughter laid to rest.

Her Council stepped in as the proficient backup to the throne they were intended to be. As the queen's second, Jess held traditional authority over all aspects of clan life until Shann could rule again. Given the nature of their enemy, Jess chose to defer many decisions to Brenna. Had Tristaine been under physical attack, Jess would have commanded their response, but she knew a healer's wisdom was needed to raise arms against this invisible foe.

The kestadine was administered quickly and efficiently, and few of their sisters suffered adverse reactions. Brenna organized shifts of healers to visit each lodge and monitor the recovery of the ill. The plague began to turn its last corner. There were no more reports of new cases, and fevers that had burned frighteningly high finally broke, allowing sufferers cool and restorative sleep.

Jess permitted no one but herself to handle the painful arrangements of funeral rites. Tristaine lost nearly eighty souls to the flu, twelve of them infants and young children. There were heartbreaking losses of the strong and vital as well—nineteen of Jess's warriors died, slain in their prime by an unseen and implacable enemy. Every guild in the clan lost women they loved.

The morning they were to say goodbye to Samantha had not yet dawned when Shann's Council gathered in the lush green park at the center of the village. The stars were still visible overhead, but they had begun to fade. Amazon funerals tended to be held at sunrise or sunset, those two periods of celestial transition when the curtains between worlds were most translucent.

Aria passed mugs brimming with a fragrant, potent tea that chased the last of the mist from Jess's mind. She had recovered rapidly from her illness, at least physically. Her stamina wasn't back to par yet, but Jess's body made sense to her again. The urge to move was returning to her, the itch to race through the pastures below their mesa for the simple pleasure of it.

Jess sat cross-legged in the grass, close to Brenna, who was leaning back on her hands, scanning the pale stars overhead. Shann had not yet called her Council to order, and the seven women sat in a close circle around the small, crackling fire, talking quietly. They had shared each other's company like this only weeks ago, but Jess took as much comfort in this reunion as if a full season had passed.

Shann and Kyla were deep in hushed conversation, their hands joined on Shann's lap. Their lady looked a decade older, and while her vitality was returning slowly, the new strands of gray in Shann's hair would remain, testament to her grief for her lost sisters.

Dana kept her voice low, as befit the predawn stillness, but her gestures were sweeping and elaborate. She sat between Aria and Sarah, who listened avidly to her report of their escape from the City. Sarah rocked back and snorted appreciative laughter, and tousled Dana's shaggy hair.

"I think Shann's strong enough now, Jess." Brenna leaned gently against Jess. "She can take Elise tonight."

"Good." Jess smiled. "That'll speed our lady's healing like no remedy on earth."

"Yes, and her granddaughter's, too."

Like all the clan's young, Elise would be nurtured by a whole tribe of mothers. One lodge, usually the biological parent's, served as an infant's primary home, providing the secure foundation all young ones needed. But many Amazons clamored to share child-raising duties, and Elise would grow and thrive under the loving watch of several of her elder sisters.

As Brenna and Jess had had to focus all their waking hours

since their return on serving Tristaine's needs, Elise had stayed a few nights with Dana and Kyla, and the rest in the affectionate care of Eva and Jenny. Their two new sisters were sheltered in a comfortable cabin kept ready for the clan's guests until they could help in the construction of their private lodge.

"Shann was robbed of the chance to mother us, Sammy and me." Brenna folded her arms around her knees. "She was intended to raise this child, Jess, this special young girl. Shann will teach Elise to cherish her clan, and to serve it in every way she can. She'll raise her to be a wise queen, and Tristaine will flourish under Elise's guidance."

Jess stared at her. "Is this prophecy, Bren?"

"Nope." Brenna had not smiled often in recent days, but she did then. "This is common sense, honey. I know my mom."

"And so we're met." Shann's warm voice drew them, still slightly hoarse, but rich again with both affection and assurance. Shann smiled at her women, letting the silence linger, and a collective sigh moved through them. "Our clan has traveled a dark and perilous path since I last looked on your dear faces, adanin. My thanks to our Mothers that you're all safely home again."

"And a few kudos to our grand dames up there for bringing you through your illness, Shanendra." Aria rested her hand on Shann's hair. "This clan is in deep grief, but we have our queen strong and steady at the helm again."

"So many," Brenna murmured. "Seventy-nine sisters gone."

"Yes." Shann cupped her hands around her mug of tea as if to warm them. "But we could have lost four times that number, Brenna. The plan you and Jesstin devised was courageous and sound, and it worked. You and the sisters who rode with you saved hundreds of lives."

"And you brought us Samantha's beautiful little daughter." Aria's large eyes were warm with compassion.

"And sperm," Dana added proudly.

Sarah cackled and slapped Dana's leg.

"Ah, yes, the sperm." Shann smiled sweetly at the heavens. "Brenna, meet with me soon to devise some way of storing our stolen specimens long-term. Everyone will want to claim their shot at motherhood at once, and I refuse to have two hundred Amazons going into labor in the same week."

"Wow. You're right, lady." Kyla grinned, and Jess's heart lifted at the fresh happiness in her eyes, a welcome glimpse of Kyla's younger self. It had livened all of them, the thought of welcoming new souls to Tristaine. "We'll have to have at least a zillion meetings to plan for all this, you guys. Our mothers' guild is going to triple in size!"

"Now, there's a grim notion." Sarah lit her pipe, scowling, the firelight gleaming off her bald head. "Those cretins were a hotbed of maternal stupidity through this siege, lady. What should we do with Bethany and her ilk?"

Shann refilled Aria's mug and her own before she replied. "Bethany and Perry and several others galvanized the dissent in our clan. They were following their own lights, but they were dangerously blind to reason."

"In the City, they'd be locked away for life," Dana said soberly. "Any kind of political rebellion means a Prison sentence down there."

"Hell," Sarah grumbled, "even a moral sewer like the City has good ideas now and again."

"Oh hush, you old crank." Aria tossed a pinecone at Sarah's foot. "Lady, what are you pondering in that judicious mind of yours? You look troubled."

"Just thoughtful, sweet girl." Shann searched the gradually lightening sky. "Tristaine follows the system of government Lady Artemis bequeathed to us centuries ago, but our monarchy is a difficult legacy, adanin—rife with risk of abuse. Bethany's crime was defying her queen—refusing to obey my sovereign command. We must never condemn an Amazon for challenging authority without careful consideration."

"But Shann, do you really doubt the wisdom of your decision?" Brenna looked puzzled. "Because medically, practically, ethically—every way I can imagine, forbidding anyone to leave our mesa was the right call."

"It was," Shann nodded, "and my heart rests easy there. But I rely on my Council to hold the frightening power of my crown in check, in this and all things. Are we in agreement in this matter?"

Jess studied each face in their circle. Brenna was watching Shann with a thoughtful expression, and it occurred to Jess that Elise was not the only queen Shann was preparing for Tristaine's crown. "We are, lady. Those who violated your rule endangered our clan, and they must answer for it."

Shann folded her hands in her lap. "All right, we're in accord. The leaders of the dissent will be required to serve Tristaine's guilds to atone for their choices. The physically strong will put in extra hours cleaning Hakan's stables after their regular day's work is finished. The others will toil for our weavers and healers. They must perform these added labors daily until Tristaine's first snowfall in the coming season."

"Old Bethany is tough and stringy as a mountain goat, she can handle mucking out the stables." Sarah looked cheered at the prospect. "Lady, order Hakan to load our horses' feed with extra bran!"

They heard it then, the unique swirl of birdsong that signaled the rising of the sun. Moments later the first rays of dawn bathed their circle in gold light, and Jess took Brenna's hand.

"It's time to say our farewells to Samantha, dear ones." Shann held Brenna's gaze for a long, private moment. "Our Mothers have chosen a beautiful morning to welcome our little sister to the stars."

❖

Amazons chose different paths to the spirit realm, according to their natures.

Warriors were often cremated, to launch their spirits heavenward with the same fiery passion that infused their spirits. Many in the artists' guild rested on pallets in the limbs of high trees, returning to the elements in the free open air and the rustling music of wind through leaves.

Samantha had not chosen a guild, but she had taken great pleasure in the restful beauty of Tristaine's gardens and orchards. She would be laid to rest as many of their growers preferred, nestled in the fertile earth that sustained their clan.

Her body had been lovingly prepared and wrapped in a shroud of white linen, barely visible beneath the thick carpet of wildflowers strewn over the pallet on which it lay. Samantha would be buried near their most lush and brilliant flowerbed, a short distance away up a gently sloping hill.

Women were gathering around the bier now, and more were joining them. This farewell would have been well attended even if Samantha had not been the daughter of a queen. Brenna clasped hands with one Amazon after another to hear their condolences and realized her younger sister had touched even more hearts than she knew.

"Brenna?" Jenny patted her arm, and Brenna turned to embrace her with a grateful sigh.

"Hello, Jen. It's good to see you."

"Eva's on her—ah, Eva's here." Jenny smiled as her partner joined them, balancing Elise on one hip.

"Good morning, Elise." Brenna's throat tightened as she kissed her niece's cheek. "How are you, sweetie?"

"Morning, fine," Elise replied. She found a smile for Brenna, but her little face was wan.

"She didn't feel like breakfast this morning," Eva said. Then she gulped and stepped back as Shann approached them. "Oh. Hello, your—highness."

"Good morning, Eva, Jenny. Thank you for being here."

Shann smiled at them warmly, and touched Elise's face. "Adanin, I believe we're ready."

"Shann, Oisin and Jackson can carry your chair." Brenna was still a little concerned about Shann's pallor. "There's no need for you to walk up there."

"It's not far, Brenna." Shann gazed at the bier. "I don't need carrying. I want to walk my daughter home."

Elise patted Eva's breast. "Put me down."

Eva threw a questioning look at Brenna, then lowered Elise to the ground. The little girl looked up at Shann solemnly, ready to walk her mother home. Shann and Brenna took her hands.

Samantha's last journey began. She was lifted to the shoulders of the four Amazons selected for that honor, including Dana and Jess. Kyla stood immediately behind her cortege. She turned and waited for Shann's nod, and then looked at Brenna, and sketched a sign of love and comfort in the air with her fingers.

Sammy had been mesmerized the first time she heard Kyla sing. Beautiful even when she was a girl, Kyla's voice was full-throated and glorious now. The melody she sang as they began their walk to the gardens was one of Tristaine's oldest dirges, a song so moving its first notes invited the natural release of tears.

Brenna made no effort to restrain her own. She was blinded, but she didn't need to see clearly to follow this familiar path, holding Elise's small hand. The crowd made its way up the grassy hill, Kyla's mournful song giving poignant voice to their grief.

When its last notes dwindled, an expectant hush fell over the women following Samantha's bier. Brenna brushed her hand across her eyes and saw a few smiles break out on the faces around her. Amazon funerals began in sorrow, but they also celebrated the woman lost to the clan.

"Do you remember when Sammy learned to ride?" Dana's call sounded first. She threw a glance back at the throng, grinning. "It took her about five seconds. Hell, she taught *me* how to stay on a horse! Remember when we raced to the canyon, lady? Sammy out rode some of our best!"

There was laughter, and several shouts of agreement.

"Our little sister helped me spin my yarn, many a time." An older voice rose somewhere off to Brenna's left. "She sat at my feet and listened to my stories by the hour. Her sweet face is before me still, lady, and always will be."

Someone else called out praise for Samantha's bravery during their battle with the demon queen, and Brenna smiled through her tears. Sammy would be the first to admit that through the battle with the demon queen, she was either throwing up or trying not to faint with terror. But she'd stayed beside Brenna through those long, terrible nights, and it warmed her to hear her sister's courage praised. Another Amazon drew more soft laughter by recalling Sammy's lavish love for the clan's many dogs.

Kyla began singing again as they crested the hill, and a dazzling carpet of colorful flowers opened before them. This time her song held no grief, just a melodic appreciation for the gift Samantha's life had been to her friends. The fond stories continued as the women gathered at the south end of the flower field, and the towering oak tree that would keep watch over the new grave.

"Here." Elise let go of Shann's and Brenna's hands, and rummaged in her shirt. She withdrew a neatly folded sheet of parchment, and opened it carefully.

Brenna crouched beside Elise. "What is it, honey?"

"It's for my mom." Elise handed her the sheet. "See?"

Elise would probably never grow to be one of Tristaine's great artists. Hardly the work of a prodigy, her drawing held all the crudity of a three-year-old's scrawl. But it was Sammy's face. She was there, in the primitive quirk of line and curve, and the very roughness of the sketch brought her smile to life. Elise had never laid eyes on her mother, but somehow she had rendered her image with loving faithfulness.

Brenna couldn't speak. She handed Shann the parchment, and the queen studied it for a long moment. Her fingers trembled slightly.

"Do you like it?" Elise's brows puckered with worry.

"Oh, Elise. Sweet girl." Shann released a long breath. "It's beautiful. Just like our Sammy."

"It's for my mom," Elise said again. She sounded apologetic. "But I can drawer you one if you want. So we won't forget."

"I would like that very much," Shann told her. She gave the drawing back to Elise.

The gathering around the oak tree stood quietly now. They watched the small girl go to her mother's bier, the parchment balanced in her hands. She laid it carefully on the wildflowers covering the pallet and placed stems on its edges to hold it in place.

"Here," Elise whispered. She spoke a few more words too softly for Brenna to hear, a private message intended only for her mother.

A light breeze stirred the high grass, and the field of bright blossoms bowed in gentle waves. Brenna closed her eyes and opened her senses, hoping again for any faint sign of Samantha in the mystic ethers beyond this world. She waited, but all she heard was the scattered birdsong of Tristaine's gardens.

When she opened her eyes, Shann was standing before the bier, her hands resting on Elise's shoulders. She was, in the same heartbeat, an Amazon queen and a mother whose child died in her arms. Her fingers sifted through Elise's fine auburn hair, the same shade as Samantha's at that age.

"I named her Joanna." Shann's voice was as low and intimate as a lullaby. "She graced my life for less than a year before the City took her. Before I lost her to the terrible system her father and I, and many others, were trying to fight."

A murmur ran through the women, honoring their queen's memory of that long-ago devastation.

"I couldn't protect my baby from the horrors of a Youth Home," Shann continued. "I wasn't there to teach her to look beyond the oppressive fear of the City, to better and kinder ways of seeing the world. But someone was there." She sought out

Brenna. “My eldest, my Rebecca. She watched over her little sister through the bleakest childhood imaginable, and helped her grow into an honorable and loving young woman.”

Brenna’s vision blurred again. She felt Jess’s strong hands cup her shoulders, and she leaned back against her gratefully.

“All our blessings on your journey, Samantha.” Shann’s gaze moved to the jagged peaks beyond their mesa. Elise peered up at her grandmother’s face, then looked toward the mountains too. “Wherever your spirit travels, Tristaine will always shelter you. You will find an eternal and loving family waiting for you here. And as surely as I know Gaia lives, I know Her kindness will allow our reunion one day.” Shann lowered her head. “Sleep well, my Sammy. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Jess’s arms enfolded Brenna’s waist. Brenna closed her eyes and prepared herself to say her own private goodbye.

Find happiness, little sister. It’s there for you, somewhere out there, and you so richly deserve it. Find friendship. Find love. And, Sammy, please, find me again. I’ll search for you forever.

Kyla’s last song, an ethereal aria, enveloped them in a beauty that held melancholy and solace in equal measures. Above them, high in the limbs of the oak, a solitary wren sang its own benediction, and Brenna turned into Jess’s waiting arms.

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“It’s good to feel your strength returning, Jesstin.” Shann walked arm in arm with Jess through the gold light of late afternoon. The weather had been sweetly mild in the three days since Samantha’s funeral, but there was a bare hint of crispness in the air, a harbinger of the turning season. “Brenna had to threaten to tie you to your bed to get you to rest, but it seems your uncanny resilience has won out at last.”

Jess murmured agreement, searching the wide pasture of waving grass for Brenna and Elise.

"Of course, I'm assuming Brenna ties you to the bed with some regularity, in any case."

"*Lady.*" Jess stopped abruptly.

"Just seeing if you were listening, adanin." Shann pressed Jess's arm, obviously pleased with herself. "Forgive me if I offended your chivalrous sensibilities."

"Forgive any scandalous reference to your daughter, lady." Jess lowered her voice. "But I do tie better knots."

"Well, that's fine," Shann said quickly. "Have our two little sisters deserted us again?"

Jess grinned and turned to look back down their path. Kyla and Dana had fallen some distance behind. They were trying to walk with their faces cemented together. Dana was quite a bit taller than Kyla, so keeping their lips locked made for rather stumbling progress.

"You'd think they were trying to best the sperm," Jess sighed.

Shann glanced behind her and laughed softly. "They're not alone, dear one. Tristaine is seeing the dawn of a great surge of romantic energy, and we're all the better for it. It's the irresistible call of life after so much loss. You've felt it, Jess."

"Aye, I have." Jess spotted Brenna and Elise down at the bottom of the pasture, small figures at this distance. "I do."

Shann looked at Jess appraisingly. "You're stronger now in many ways, Jesstin. The City demons that haunted you were vicious, and you faced them with great courage. You led your adanin through terrible dangers bravely and well, and proved again that my Dyan's faith in you was wisdom itself."

"Thank you, lady." Jess smiled at her queen. "You were right. An Amazon's terrors are better borne with her sisters at her back."

Jess reached behind her in time to plant a hand on Dana's chest and prevent her and Kyla from walking into them.

"Whoops! Sorry." Dana didn't look particularly contrite.

Kyla adjusted her hair quickly. "Are they here, lady?"

"Yes, we've found them." Shann nodded toward the lower end of the pasture. "They look quite content and I'm sorry to disturb them, but it's time Elise had her nap."

And Brenna hers, Jess thought, with pleased anticipation. Shann was right. She and Brenna had both been touched by the rising desire that swept so many in their clan in recent nights.

Brenna's hair was a gold gleam in the distance. She sat gracefully and still in the high grass, Elise in her lap. Neither of them had seen their sisters watching them from the small rise. They were focused on the prancing antics of a small speckled puppy that danced in circles around them.

"Animals will always befriend Elise, just as they did her mother." Shann's smile was wistful. "I don't need to share my kin's second sight to know she has that blessing."

"This child has many blessings." Jess slipped her arm around Kyla's shoulders, and kissed the top of her head.

"Yeah, in her teachers alone." Dana shaded her eyes. "Shann will show Elise how to be a queen, and Brenna will let her in on all the mysteries of the spirit world."

"That teaching has already started." Kyla leaned against Jess. "Look at them, down there. Elise is listening to our seer like she's revealing the marvels of the universe. I wonder what sacred secrets of the mystic realms Brenna's telling her?"

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"What did she call the toy?" Elise asked.

"She named him Hippo."

"Like your horse!"

"Just like my horse." Brenna brushed a strand of grass from Elise's hair.

"I won't name you Hippo." Elise scratched the upturned belly of the blissful puppy sprawled by her foot. "You're too little."

"You'll think of a good name." Brenna glanced up and saw the far-off women watching them. "Look, our sisters are here. You about ready for your nap, honey?"

"Tell me the story about the can…the canrival, again? With you and my mom and the scary cars?"

"I sure will, once you're tucked in." A languid warmth filled Brenna. She could feel Jess's gaze on her face like the soft brushing of her lips across her skin. She kissed the top of Elise's head. "Come on, little one. Let's go home."

About the Author

Cate Culpepper is a 2005 Golden Crown Literary Award winner in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy category. She is the author of the *Tristaine* series, which includes *Tristaine: The Clinic, Battle for Tristaine, Tristaine Rises,* and *Queens of Tristaine.*

Cate lives in the Pacific Northwest, where she supervises a transitional living program for homeless young gay adults. She's currently at work on a new novel, *Fireside*, set in present day, but peopled by Amazons nonetheless.

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