

Straight Arrow

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It wasn't just life flashing before Lt. Kyria Mavricos' glassy eyes as she punched out of her crippled fighter, but a veritable mountain range of clouds. Below them was probably the nastiest part of what used to be Yugoslavia. And some very hostile hostiles. And it was all coming up to meet her way too fast.

One instant, her F-15 had been on a high, fast overflight; the next, every instrument had gone dead, she'd lost control, and she'd set off that damned explosion underneath her butt and prayed the canopy would blow before she blasted through it.

Air-to-air couldn't have taken out her F-15 before something registered on her screens. Surface to air? Here, where Serbs fought Croatians, Greeks fought Macedonians, and everyone hated Albanians and Turks and dreamed of terrorists, you had to be prepared for Scud-like flying objects, but, in the instants before power died, nothing had shown up.

EMP? She wouldn't have thought the locals had any technology left, let alone anything good enough to mess with an F-15's electronics.

What was left? Wind shear? Those gray critters with the big eyes? What about a Bosnian branch of the Bermuda Triangle that chowed down on F-15s?

She drew in arms and legs and plunged through the clouds. Maybe lower altitude would clear her head.

Her chute erupted with an impact like whiplash. *If this doesn't kill me, my CO will.* Any time a female pilot ejected—let alone bored a hole in the ground—the Air Force didn't just conduct an investigation, it threw a collective fit. And just let CNN sniff it out, or Rush . . .

It wasn't as if her squad had called her Little Ms. Congeniality before. Even if the fact that she'd grown up speaking Greek at home let her translate some of the menus and local papers. Some of the other NATO types were Greek, but they all spoke English. Regardless, some of the pilots—the other pilots—nursed attitudes that could charitably be described as Neanderthal studying to be Cro-Magnon without the blessings of Ayla and her posterity.

I don't want to be a poster child for Affirmative Action. I just want to fly.

Kyria jerked as something holed her chute not a meter from her helmet. Dammit, even if it didn't violate the rules of war to shoot down people who had to eject from planes, it still was lousy manners.

The ground was coming up fast now. She tried to peer through the mist at the spinning landscape, hoping to spot possible hiding places she could use, the nearest source of water, maybe an easy route out, though "easy" was a misnomer in these mountains.

The whine in her ear made her whip her head around. Another hole in the chute. And what had made it hadn't sounded like any bullet she'd ever heard.

Look out for that tree!

The last thing she saw before the tree clobbered her was two small figures standing in a clearing, bows slung over their backs.

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Why was some imbecile was singing "George of the Jungle" in a peculiar hoarse voice here on a Serbian mountainside? If one of those damn archers was the comedian, that was *two* reasons the bozo deserved to die.

That couldn't be right. Any locals would be singing in Serbo-Croatian or whatever. So she had to be the one trying to sing. *Trying*. She spat a mouthful of blood and one tooth.

Testing, she thought. One . . . two . . . three. Arms and legs ached but were otherwise in working order.

So was the rest of her, even if her helmet felt like she had the brain bloat that Boomer in her wing declared women got once a month, cancha take a joke, har har har.

He'd never made that joke around the CO or anywhere else he could be nailed for it. *So help me, I'm going to make it back and wipe his face with it.*

But the chain of command wouldn't help her now. What would?.

Her survival vest held drugs, a knife, a radio, maps, matches, a First Aid kit, tools, and a side arm. And face paint for camouflage. Really gorgeous with a bloody nose and probably shiners, but the regs said to apply it right away. Her hands were hardly shaking at all now.

Her parachute billowed overhead, caught by the tree that had braked her fall and damn near broken her.

First, secure her chute. Then, look around for a place she could hide out in while she sent a message. *Come on, God. You helped get Captain Scott O'Grady out of the soup and into a book contract. How about me?*

The folds of her parachute jerked. More arrows, dammit. No guns?

In that case, I've got the bastards outnumbered.

Sure.

She drew her side arm, then wriggled into some covering underbrush just as someone jerked the chute down from the tree.

Voices again. My God, they were speaking Greek. Not *demotika*, but something close, more old-fashioned sounding than even her grandfather, who'd liked to pretend they were still living in the age of Pericles, which also had been a lousy age for ambitious women.

A branch snapped, and she whirled round. Standing over her was a tall woman dressed in leather, if not much of it, a curved bow slung across her back, high-laced boots, and holding a very businesslike-looking hunting knife. If the woman hadn't stepped on that branch deliberately, she could have slit Kyria's throat before Kyria heard her coming.

"The mists have brought us another one!" she called.

A wordless, high-pitched shout of triumph answered as Archer Number 2 strode forward. Not as tall as the first woman, she was fair, as some Macedonians had been, time out of mind. She carried a long staff, not a sword. And, as she folded Kyria's parachute into a bundle, her hands lingered on the fabric as if she wondered at its smoothness.

Oh shit, Kyria thought, I've waked up in the Xenaverse.

Before she could even try playing Quick Draw, the tall woman's long staff slammed out at her head. The explosion of pain, followed by blackout, was almost a relief.

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Red light erupted, ejecting Kyria back into consciousness the way she had been hurled out of her cockpit. She flailed against whatever it was tied her down.

Blankets. Coarse wool blankets and fleeces.

Rainbows erupted in Kyria's field of vision. What had Doc Dworkin said about concussion? Keep awake. If you're dizzy or you vomit, get help. She glanced about. They'd settled her in some sort of shelter, but what passed for a door flap was open, and the noise in the camp made it unlikely she'd be getting any sleep. So did the idea of what a bunch of primitives could do with her gear.

I'm not doing very well, am I? she thought. *First I punch out. Then I black out. Now I'm a prisoner.*

"She's awake." Again, that curiously old-fashioned Greek. A woman's voice. Maybe she wasn't hallucinating. This region had a history of female guerrillas.

"See if she'll drink something."

The blond woman crouched at her side, holding a steaming cup. Good thing she'd had all her shots.

The cup pressed against her bitten lip. She swallowed so it would go away.

"I'd hate to take a urine test right now," she muttered to herself. "Where's my gear?"

The woman was wearing her belt knife, she observed. Damn. That Marine-issue Bowie knife had been a gift from one of the friendlier men in her outfit, who'd scrounged or traded for it.

"Until we got your clothes off, we thought you were male," said the blonde.

She sounded disappointed. *You, my drill instructor, and half my flight. You'd think women warriors, at least, would be half civil . . .*

"We know of no Amazons who wear such garments," the woman continued. "Or carry such gear."

Kyria blinked and took a quick look south. If this woman was any example, it was a myth that Amazons mutilated themselves so they could shoot better. This woman had the complete set . . . Encased in the proverbial bronze bra.

Okay, so this is the uplift war, not ethnic cleansing. I still want out.

I'm nuts, right? Maybe it was better than reality, considering that reality in this part of the world consisted of ethnic cleansing, which meant genocide, rape, and anarchy.

A child holding something olive-colored with trailing straps ran toward the central fire.

"No!"

Before Kyria realized what she was doing, she was on her feet, out of the tent, and heading unsteadily and quite bare-ass toward the blaze. If the kid threw that on the fire, they were all in trouble.

The blonde caught her round the ankle and brought her down. Someone else cuffed the child and whirled it—him—around before returning him to the circle of women and children.

"What can you expect of a boychild? He's almost old enough to be sent to his father's tribe, and if you ask me, he's enough trouble I say we set him loose before the mists arrive!" the blonde said.

"I am Demetria," her benefactor said. "And your name?"

"Kyria Mavricos," she rapped out. "Lieutenant, US Air Force . . ."

Demetria's voice interrupted the recitation of her serial number and birth date. "This 'air force' is your tribe? From your name, you would be of the ruling line?"

If "Kyrios" meant "lord," then "Kyria . . ."

Long-lost princess. Right. Kyria resisted the temptation to tug the goatskins, which didn't stink as badly as she'd expected, over her head until Demetria stopped asking questions.

Demetria held a second cup to her mouth. "Drink. This will steady you."

"My tribe, yes," Kyria agreed as soon as her head stopped spinning. "But I am not in line to rule." What Intel would say about any of this was another thing not to think about. Section 8 would be the least she could expect.

"You may feel better if you dress," said Demetria. "Certainly, you will feel warmer. The clothes I brought will do for now, but we must find you better before you meet the queen."

That bronze bra was cold! Kyria discovered as she wriggled into it. She pulled on the rest of the garments—a dark leather tunic, a skirt of those metal-tipped strips her military history prof had said were called *pteruges*. No boots. These women might be low-tech, but they weren't stupid.

"Can I have my stuff?" she asked again. If she could just get to her gun, her radio, her medical supplies, maybe she could make a break for it. *A prisoner's first duty is to escape.*

Demetria was six inches taller than she and had that staff. Right.

"The queen will decide when to return your possessions to you. Meanwhile, you will be well treated, as befits your rank."

Lieutenant? Or princess of the tribe "US Air Force"?

"When can I speak with her?" Kyria asked.

"Now that the mists have lifted, she is out hunting." Demetria emphasized the last word and smiled thinly. "She will not return until tomorrow. I know she will want to confer with you in the absence of your queen. For now, rest."

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Kyria emerged from her shelter the next morning to respect and curious whispers. She had the mother of all headaches, and if she didn't find a bathroom soon . . .

Well, she didn't have cramps. Thank heaven for small mercies.

She gestured urgently, and a hand pointed the way to a Bronze Age equivalent of a latrine. Two very young women leaned on trees nearby, pointedly allowing her privacy, while letting her know she was under guard. They carried businesslike knives and staffs like the one that had put Kyria out of action the day before. Two against one, even if they weren't much more than kids. Better not, she told herself.

At least, not till after breakfast.

"I don't suppose you have a shower nearby," she asked, as she readjusted the leather garments Demetria had handed her. *Don't even think about asking if there's coffee.*

"There is a hot spring, Kyria, if you wish to bathe." The way they spoke her name, it sounded like a title. "We will alert the guards."

"After breakfast," she decided. "You do have breakfast around here, don't you?"

Demetria hailed her on her return and gestured her to a seat by the fire. Suspended from a tripod was a heavy pot in which bubbled what looked like oatmeal or some sort of boiled grains with dried fruit mixed in. She ladled out two bowls and handed one to Kyria, who took it with as much grace as she could, considering how hot it was and how hungry she suddenly found herself.

Demetria clapped her hands. Kyria's guards of earlier that morning disappeared into one of the shelters, then emerged.

"My gear!" Kyria got the words out despite hot porridge that damned near scalded her mouth. She had more attention for the sage-green and gray vest with its many pockets, pouches, and straps than she did for the pain.

One of the young guards had parked Kyria's helmet on top of her mop of hair and was trying hard to swagger. The other carried her vest and was trying just as hard to peek into it without being caught.

Demetria barked laughter. "Quite the warriors, now that they have passed their women's trials. Patience, cousins. The queen should return this evening, and I will wager you a dozen arrows that she does not return alone."

The girls blushed identically.

"Are they twins?" Kyria asked. "They look a lot alike."

Unobtrusively, she checked the nylon holster in its innermost pocket: yes, the automatic was still there. Her headache lightened. She sorted through her First Aid kit to make certain no one had mistaken pills for the coffee candy that her survival gear also contained, popped two painkillers anyway, along with a broad-spectrum antibiotic, and waited for the headache to subside.

She offered some of the hard candy to the twins. Nice-looking kids. Come to think of it, they had a marked resemblance to Demetria. Who looked a lot like the other women who emerged from various huts, from the woods, and from the bank of a nearby stream to watch Kyria. *I may be the first person some of these women have ever seen who doesn't resemble them.*

Demetria snapped something in Greek too fast for her to follow.

"Your pardon. We do not see many strangers here."

That returned her to the question that dogged her all day, persistent as her young guards. Where was here?

Bosnia? Macedonia? Some time in the past? Maybe this was a sort of branch office of the Bermuda Triangle, and they were all stuck. What were these mists that seemed to determine when they could hunt and when they could leave?

If they were all stuck here, maybe the ethnic cleansing that had been going on since the breakup of Yugoslavia had accounted for some of the locals . . . the locals . . .

. . . from whom these Amazons had drawn their breeding stock. *Maybe the gene pool's getting a little shallow.*

The girls had flushed when Demetria had assured her the queen would not return alone. "I've bagged another one!" Demetria had called when she'd found Kyria. So that was what the queen was hunting.

Kyria suppressed a grin. *Guess who's coming for dinner?*

If she'd just wandered into an Amazonian version of the Dating Game . . .

My God, talk about fraternization.

* * *

Light was glinting off the mountains when a brighter light erupted into the center of the camp. A heliograph?

"The queen's coming." One of the younger women started smoothing her hair. Another bit her lips to redden them.

Kyria raised an eyebrow at Demetria. "Do we dress for dinner around here?" she asked. Her project for the day had been washing out her flight suit. She'd had to shoo away a number of eager helpers, all with that same family resemblance. If she had to meet a foreign dignitary, she preferred to do so in some semblance of uniform.

"Five . . . six . . . seven . . ." came a cry from the outskirts of the camp. "The guards are bringing up the rear."

"Only seven?" asked a girl slightly taller and darker than the others.

Demetria shrugged. "We take what the fates send, little sister," she said. "Now, run along." The girl

wavered visibly. "Go on! They won't bite . . . I think . . ."

She made shooping motions. Finally, the girl ran off, laughter trailing after her like a bright scarf.

A child ran to Demetria and whispered in her ear.

"The queen has summoned you."

No time to change, then. She followed Demetria past the campfire, where only children and older—meaning more than twenty—women sat efficiently butchering something—a deer? A sheep? A goat while another roast sizzled on a spit. Her nose wrinkled at the scent of rough wine. A feast, Amazon-style. Might be fun. She heard a skirl of flute music, a clash of chords and drumbeats interrupted by a shout that sounded like a bawling-out.

She'd hoped to get a look at the queen's . . . trophy males? She managed not to grin. If, as she suspected, these mists let the warrior women reach through time, they'd probably be drawn from a number of times and places. Genetic diversity, after a fashion, but judging from the look-alikes, the system was breaking down, had been breaking down for generations.

She glanced around, but Demetria led her and her guards walked past a number of shelters, their doors already firmly tied shut (Demetria chuckled), and toward a cave. Stuck into the earth outside it was a spear, a helmet and plumes swaying on its point. *The equivalent of a flag over Buckingham Palace. Her Majesty is At Home*, Kyria determined. A red fire—one of her flares burned outside it in a brazier. So they'd seen flares before.

Demetria and the wannabes—great name for a rock band—led her into the cave toward another fire. A tall figure, her head covered in a huge mask, reclined on a pile of furs that would have given PETA spasms. Half-covering them was some of the fabric from Kyria's parachute. Fastened to the rock walls, glinting with crystals, were—an M-16, a Lee-Enfield, a scimitar that had to be four hundred years old, and a collection of helmets and other trophies she couldn't identify.

The mists had obviously been going on for a long time.

Demetria came to what clearly passed for *tenn-HUT* among the Amazons.

If this woman says her name is Gabrielle, I'm dead. No way I won't crack up.

The queen removed her heavy mask. She was taller than Demetria. Her hair, before the gray streaked it, had been as black as Kyria's own. "Greetings, sister," said the queen. "I am Hippolyta."

You are not going to say you are Lieutenant Diana Prince, Kyria told herself. This isn't a comic book. And you'd better come up with a matronymic damn fast.

She drew herself up and inclined her head formally like British soldiers did in all the movies. Field-grades got charm school; lieutenants made do with movies and TV.

"I am Kyria," she said. "Daughter of Eleni." Her mother had preferred to call herself Elly, but that didn't sound Greek. Or regal.

The queen gestured Kyria to another pile of furs. She gestured, and one of the girls poured wine into . . . that wasn't a beaker, Kyria's mind gabbled. A rhyton. Did that mean these Amazons had trade with Scythia or the equivalent at some point in the past? The cups that the girls handed her and Demetria were heavy silver; she would have bet that Hippolyta's was gold.

Kyria sank down onto the furs, which felt surprisingly comfortable after a day of goatskins, stumps, and rocks, and took a cautious sip of a *charming little wine with overtones of violence and delusions of grandeur*.

"We saw you," said the queen. "You leapt in fire from a chariot that flew across the sky. You grew wings, easing your fall. And then your chariot fell with a noise like unto Hephaestus' anvil . . . One of my huntresses found me and brought me—this!"

She handed Kyria a scorched, torn metal shard to which fragments of paint still clung. What had ever possessed their squad leader to pick a sea lion as insignia anyhow? Scott always had had a weird sense of humor. Maybe she could say she was under Poseidon's protection or something and they'd take her to the sea. Right.

The woman leaned forward, expectantly.

"Yes, this is from my . . . my chariot."

"I would learn more of it," the queen said, as if the idea that information would be withheld was unthinkable.

Sorry, I can't violate the Prime Directive, Kyria's mind gabbled.

"I have equipment in my ship," was what she actually said. "Metal you could work into useful tools." *Not to mention the radio and the black box that I need . . .*

The queen raised her winecup and sipped. "We saw where your . . . your 'ship' landed," she said. "A good thing the snows had melted, or we would have had fire."

"Can you take me there?" Kyria asked.

Uh-oh, never rush in a bargaining session, she warned herself.

"We could," said the queen. "But the land is tricky if you do not know it, and we have enemies who would not be as gentle captors as we."

Outside the music skirled up. Kyria heard raucous singing. *Must be some party.*

"My daughters are trained from birth in the ways of this land. You . . ."

Better pay attention. This woman wants something of me, or she wouldn't have led with the news about my plane.

The second attendant brought in a steaming platter.

"From the feast," she said.

"For luck!" Demetria threw a piece of meat into the queen's hearthfire. "My queen, you will excuse me? I

must make sure order—such order as may be—is kept." The queen nodded.

It was impolite to talk business while eating. Kyria noted the presence of bread and salt with relief and went light on the unfamiliar meat.

"Our garments look well on you," Hippolyta complimented Kyria once the food had been taken away by the two attendants. "Now, you look like a proper woman warrior . . ."

"Your Majesty is too kind." *God, I didn't know people ever said things like that, even in the movies.* She stifled a grin. "Demetria told me they thought I was a man until they got my flight suit off."

Sounded disappointed about it too. Guess I know why, now.

"Demetria longs for a daughter," said Hippolyta. "She has had three sons, all of whom have been sent to their fathers, except for the last one, who was malformed and whom she decided not to rear." The woman took a sip of her wine. Attempting protocol, Kyria reached for the pitcher and poured, first for the queen, then for herself.

Hippolyta nodded approval.

Exposure of the unfit. Disappointment when the queen came in accompanied by so few men. And that family resemblance—*there's more inbreeding around here than in Boomer's family*, Kyria thought.

Outside, the music rose. She heard laughter—men's voices as well as women's.

"How many daughters do you have?" asked the queen suddenly.

Oops! That one came right out of left field.

"None," she replied. "None yet," she corrected herself fast.

The queen raised an eyebrow. "Is it prudent to wait so long?" she asked. "I mean no discourtesy, but

even with the mists' blessing, we have found fewer tribes who will be willing to . . . exchange with us each year . . . As Demetria knows, the opportunities must go to younger women, best able to give the tribe healthy daughters."

Just what she didn't need: a wake-up call from a Bronze Age biological clock!

Kyria looked down, a merchant hoarding her bargaining chips. Inbreeding. Declining fertility. Fewer available mates. "There are many healthy people where I come from. Many men. Many healthy men."

This time, the queen leaned over to pour wine for both of them.

Kyria toasted her, then drank cautiously. This was going to be a *long* bargaining session.

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"You realize your people may have abandoned their search for you." Hippolyta stifled a yawn. My God, she had staying power!

Outside the cave, the sky was pale. In a little while, the women who'd feasted that night would be going about their morning chores with Amazon-size hangovers. *I bet seven of them are praying for morning sickness in the near future.*

"What of the men you caught in your hunt?" she asked the queen.

"Once the mists return, we shall blindfold them, take them away from here, and release them, together with the boys who are old enough to leave us, and let them return to their tribes."

"Will they be expected?"

Hippolyta laughed. "They are not the first we have taken since the Goddess brought us here to protect us after Troy. The mist is the veil she cast down to protect us."

So that was the story? Well, some Afghans claimed to be descended from Alexander the Great's warriors. And it was as convenient an explanation for the mist as she was going to get right now.

She nodded respect at this alleged goddess, and Hippolyta proceeded. "These new prizes will not be the last. Their tribes will be glad of them and of new sons. Perhaps they too wait for the mists. Perhaps they will come looking for them—or for us, to punish us. They have tried before and failed, but now our numbers grow less."

"My tribe will be looking for me," Kyria insisted. "At least, they will mount a search for the plane."

"For your equipment, but not for you?" asked the queen. "This is no way to treat a warrior and a princess of your tribe. Is it because you are a woman? In that case, why not stay with us?"

One more woman's genes aren't going to solve your problem, queen.

Kyria shook her head, wishing for strong black coffee. She'd tried to be moderate, but she had had a lot of wine. "I can't. That would be desertion. No, let me get to my plane, and I can radio . . . I can call . . . for help. They will come pick me up and drop off whatever supplies we agree on."

Knives, warm clothing, simple tools, probably MREs to help them get through the winter. *Hell, if we could fly in Pampers and Tampax, we'd make a killing. And I'd love to see how Amazons with PMS react to chocolate.*

Queen Hippolyta had sat, gazing into the fire. "You have said that we—my sisters and I—are a story out of legend. Will you be believed when you tell them of us or how we found you?"

"Probably not," Kyria said. *If they don't throw me out, I'll be flying a desk from now on. At worst, well, they say counseling isn't all that bad. Kind of like root canal.*

"Will this bring you trouble?"

Lady, you can't begin to imagine.

"But you plan to tell them."

Kyria sighed, leaned forward, and threw a stick on the fire. "You are an archer, Majesty. Among my people, we call a person who behaves with honor a 'straight arrow.' I will tell my people the truth though

they would more easily believe a lie because an officer does not lie nor tolerate those who do."

"Those who come for you, will they be men or women?" Hippolyta asked.

"More men than women, I should think," Kyria answered with the straight truth.

"Could they be persuaded, do you think, to stay for awhile? We would gladly entertain them."

Kyria's eyes met the queen's. She tried to keep her face straight, but failed.

That would be the mother of all shore leaves! Think of it, she imagined some morale officer saying, as diplomatic relations. Applied diplomatic relations. Close your eyes and think of USAF?

"You could always ask," she said.

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Kyria paused, leaning against a tree, and tried not to think of how quickly an F-15—always assuming the mists didn't materialize and bring it down—could overfly the ground that had taken them days to cover, always with scouts out and an eye to the weather.

Apparently, those damn mists were picky about when they appeared. If you were in the right place at the right time, you lucked out. The Amazons' collection of trophies drawn from across centuries showed they had been consistently lucky. If not, you waited around for the next attack of the mists and hoped your local enemies didn't pick you off first.

I still don't know what we're up against.

Did it matter? Waving aside the offer of a filled wineskin—*unpurified water, wine, and badly tanned goatskin's not my drink of choice*, she had a sip from her canteen. For her, the mists had acted like an electromagnetic field, sufficiently powerful to bring down a high-performance, high-altitude jet. How did the men snatched out of time see it? As a flying carpet? A pillar of cloud?

With luck, I won't have to stick around long enough to find out. At least, the past few days, she hadn't been useless. Her survival vest carried snares as well as weapons and medical supplies: she'd earned her keep.

I could make a place for myself here, I know it. But it would be desertion. My first duty is to get home.

"Hurry!" Demetria urged them on. "The mists are coming. Can't you smell them?"

All I can smell is me. Hope any hostiles out there have stuffed noses.

From the youngest girls to pass their warrior trials to the gray-haired, scarred veterans, these women made Special Forces look like the Junior League. She'd like to have turned them loose on Special Forces, let alone the pilots in her wing. Now, if they only remembered what she'd told them a radio looked like.

Two of the Amazons gestured, *Come on!*

"We climb up to that spur next." A gray-haired veteran pointed to a rock spur that looked to be a thousand meters away, most of it straight up. "There's a clearing beyond it."

* * *

Kyria crouched in the cover of the rock spur, hearing searchers crunch through debris. The ground was blackened here. In some places, the rock was fused, glassy. She drew in a gulp of air that burned. They had climbed high enough that she could see clouds floating below her. Clouds that, with any luck, would form the mists she needed to get herself out of this.

Hope the radio survived impact, she thought. Hippolyta's hunting party had brought in sizable chunks of fuselage and said that the rain had prevented a total burnoff. It didn't make sense, but what around here did?

Past the rock spur, the ground flattened out to form the "clearing" she had been promised. She didn't think much of it. Granted, the helo pilots she knew bragged they could set down on a dime, but . . .

What's the difference between a fairy tale and a pilot tale?

A fairy tale begins "Once upon a time." A pilot tale begins "And there I was at 20,000."

They weren't at 20,000, thank God. Kyria thought she'd heard a story once of some Nepalese maniac in a chopper evacuating people off Everest at that kind of altitude, but she wouldn't want to try it herself.

She thought of taking something for her headache, then thought again. She had face to maintain. And supplies to conserve, in case the mist took its sweet time about showing up.

Damn. She didn't remember having altitude problems at the Academy.

We didn't have to worry about drill instructors with swords in Colorado Springs, she remembered.

"Alexa brought this in. Is it what you need?" Demetria, with her usual soundlessness, had come up around the rocks—what's a traverse of a hundred meters or so among friends?—and dropped down beside Kyria. She reached around and unstrapped the Amazonian equivalent of a backpack. What emerged from the swathings of scarred hide was . . .

Her radio.

Grabbing was rude. More than that: grabbing might antagonize Demetria, and that was counterproductive. Not to mention potentially suicidal.

"Two of the scouts brought this in," Demetria said. "Is it the talisman you wanted?"

"Point them out to me this evening," Kyria asked. "I'd like to thank them myself."

There must be something in her equipment she could spare: a knife, maybe, or maybe the penlight.

Or—the idea struck her the way the sunset struck the valley below, with the force of revelation: if I'm picked up, there's no end to the things I can give these people!

Unless, of course, her rescue party had heard of the Prime Directive. Which, considering the number of Trekkies in the Air Force, was all too likely.

She bent over the restored equipment, testing it out. Once she got it working, maybe she could lay out a landing field—or some kind of X-marks-the-spot—for a rescue helo.

And then, it would be time to hurry up and wait. For the mists.

Or for anyone else dependent on the mists to arrive.

It could be rescuers for her.

But it could also be hostiles. Bosnians. Croatians. Albanians. Or, seeing that the mist respected time as little as it respected persons, they might have to watch for anything from stray soldiers from Alexander the Great's time to crusaders to Ottoman Turks.

The more the merrier, or the more genetically diverse.

As long as the Amazons could continue to take them.

In, of course, a manner of speaking.

* * *

The fire had died to a memory of smoke. Frost had formed on her sleeping bag. By the time the Amazons emerged, appallingly alert, from their sleeping pelts, dampness in the air had wakened Kyria. You never did get much sleep at altitude, she recalled. Just as well. It would keep the guards awake and slow any potential attackers.

She gazed out over the rock lip. The sky was lighter, but if she was expecting a spectacular sunrise, she could forget it.

Already, the bowl that was the valley had filled.

With mist, ruddy from the sunrise.

Was this the condition they'd been waiting for?

She heard Demetria whisper a prayer. Odd to find that, at this end of time, the Amazon was as big a straight arrow as she.

How long would the mist last? The best Kyria had been able to get was: it lasts as long as it lasts.

Apparently, the weather-wise—mist-wise?—among the Amazons could sense when the mist was due to arrive.

Demetria lifted her head and nodded. *Go*. The Amazon gathered her own gear and soundlessly dressed.

She reached over and tested the radio one last time. It had survived impact. Would it survive this too? She checked and loaded the flare gun.

Last night, she'd marked the clearing herself for a helo landing. She was running on a lot of assumptions here: assuming the mists held long enough to call in a recovery mission. Assuming it could see the landing field, such as it was.

Assuming it was an Air Force helo.

Hippolyta had taken one hell of a risk sending her up here. A risk she'd been glad to take in the hope that Kyria would be able to do something for the tribe that had taken her in.

And that might be the rashest assumption of all.

"Let's do it," she muttered to herself and began transmitting.

She sensed when the number of women at her back began to diminish. There'd be hunting parties out today for certain. Amazons hunting men; men hunting Amazons.

Over the centuries, they'd had to have built up a certain amount of blood feuds that made twentieth-century backlash look like a love-in.

From the corner of her eye she could see Demetria slipping from point to point, talking to the various scouts. Which ones were set to watch her?

Possibly none, Kyria thought. Hippolyta trusts me, after her fashion. And I gave my word.

And I'm just going to go off and leave these people, aren't I? Hardly seems right.

Neither did involving the Air Force in their survival strategies—or the Amazons in twentieth-century style ethnic cleansing.

I'll think of this tomorrow. Tomorrow is another day. And possibly, another century.

She bent over the radio, searching from frequency to frequency. From time to time, she picked up noise . . . chatter . . . something . . . but nothing that told her that this clearing on a desolate mountain peak in ex-Yugoslavia had any connection to her own time and place. The mist thickened below them, reaching up to lap about them. Damn! How could a chopper spot her in this kind of limited visibility, let alone make pickup?

It would have to wait until the mist started to dispel. Assuming she could raise an Air Force unit. Assuming they hadn't called off the search. Assuming . . . oh damn.

What was that?

Electricity crackled across the miles, accompanied by crisp words, made almost incomprehensible with static. She could take those words, take them and twist them into a rope, a lifeline.

Swiftly, she bent, whispered her own message in answer to the demand she heard.

"They're coming!" she hissed at Demetria, who had returned from briefing her scouts. She nodded. And checked the positions of her staff, her bow, and her arrows. At least the sword was sheathed. For now.

A scout, scarcely more than a girl, rushed up to them, crouched over. Demetria hissed something that

brought the scout's eyebrows up in surprise.

"We've got visitors," the warrior said.

"How're they armed?"

Demetria shrugged. "The usual. Bows. Arrows."

Kyria supposed that was better than, say, a detachment of Serbs.

Still, arrows had been known to pierce plate armor. A lucky arrow—and a particularly strong archer—might be able to puncture a helicopter's fuel tank. She could hear an icon out of her childhood intoning in the familiar deep voice, "I would calculate the odds against that at . . ."

How do you like those odds, Kyria?

Not one bit.

She glanced down at the valley. The mist was thinning. Ominous sign, really. If she could see out, people could see in.

Could see her, and attack.

She had a few spare clips for her side arm. After that, she was down to the local weapons—bows and arrows, knives and swords.

And after an endless time of waiting, of eating whatever was put into her hand, preferably without looking at it, of nature calls, and watching the mist evaporate as the sun climbed toward noon, she heard the *thwock-thwock-thwock* of a helicopter. What was that painted on the fuselage? A sea lion? It wasn't just rescue, then, but some of her own come to bring her home.

She fired the flare gun before Demetria could grab her wrist. Fire launched into the sky, signaling her

presence.

Demetria pushed her down. Maybe Hippolyta hadn't been that trusting after all.

"Those are my people!" Kyria protested. There was no way she could reach her revolver.

"That doesn't look like your chariot," Demetria observed.

How could she tell, from a crash site?

"It's mine. Same emblem, see?" Right now, that helicopter couldn't have been any more beautiful if it had carried the Angel Gabriel.

Click your jump boots together three times and say: There's no place like home. There's no place like home. There's no place like home.

"It flies lower, yes. And can land here."

Now came the part that was really risky.

She stood, dressed again in her flight suit rather than something out of a sword and sorcery epic, scurried into the center of the improvised landing strip, and waved her arms. Her instructors at the academy would kill her—if the archers didn't. She suspected the Amazons gave points for bravado. Or, if the phrase applied, sheer ballsiness.

An arrow whizzed by her, damn near bouncing off her helmet.

Just the way I came in. Damn!

Now, she could hear more arrows—the bronze age version of covering fire—and battlecries. She drew, dropped, and set off the smoke end of another flare to confuse things thoroughly, and wriggled back to the rock spur the way she'd learned—knees, elbows, chin (ouch!) in basic training. Granted, there was

no barbed wire and no one was using live ammo.

But you could get just as dead from an arrow, and the idea of one hitting her in the . . .

By the time she got back under cover, the radio was squawking hysterically.

"Yes, that was me. And we've got ground action," she said. "I don't think they've got guns."

The squawk rose in pitch.

"Bows and arrows!" she cried. "No, I'm not seeing things. And I don't inhale."

She spared a look into the valley. The air was clearing fast now; she could make out individual trees. Yes, and individual fighters emerging from the forest to engage each other. Ugly. Even as she watched, four Amazons tackled what looked like a warband and brought them down. She threw another flare, gushing orange smoke, to break things up.

Unfortunately, up above the treeline, far too close for her comfort, someone wearing what looked like boiled leather, had an Amazon down on the ground, was raising a sword overhead . . .

Kyria snapped off a shot. Lucky! The man fell with a howl, clutching his leg.

The *thwock-thwock-thwock* grew louder. The air darkened as the helo broke through what remained of the cloud cover and loomed overhead.

God, it made one gorgeous shadow! Kyria thought—then flinched as arrows ricocheted off.

Some of the women had broken cover, were standing looking up in amazement. The idea of vulnerable people, approaching before that chopper's rotors had come to a full stop . . .

"Get back!" she screamed. "Demetria, tell your people to get back."

She ran forward, knowing the chopper would hover, and she'd have a matter of minutes, if that, to race toward it and in.

Demetria screamed something and gestured. Away from the chopper, the land began to glow. The sun grew brighter.

The mist was fading fast now.

Thwock . . . thwock . . . thwock . . .

Coming in for a landing.

Unfortunately, it looked as if the infantry had arrived too. Good God, what had the mist dragged in this time? Were those actually hoplites?

Men were gesturing, urging her forward, shouting just as if she was making an eighty-yard run for a touchdown at the Superbowl . . . she was throwing herself at the hatch . . . someone had grabbed her arms . . . the chopper started to lift . . .

A gust of wind blew a patch of the mist right at them, enveloping the chopper.

Damn. The chopper's engines choked, then stalled. Its rotors ground slowly to a stop.

"Now what?" demanded the man who had boosted her into the chopper. She recognized him from base: Lieutenant Tony "Mad Anthony" Wayne.

"I told you," she said. "There's a local condition. Works like EMP—oh, I don't know, call it an obscure application of Clarke's Law."

"You got brain bloat but good this time?" Why in hell had Boomer come along on this one? She had a moment's vision of him, surrounded by Amazons, and managed, just in time, not to grin.

"Haven't got time to explain. I suggest . . . allies over here . . . let's GO!"

She turned in time to watch the Amazons sweep past the chopper and intercept the remaining archers and a stray hoplite or two.

Oh, there'd be a hot time in the old town tonight.

She waved at Demetria, who emerged from around a rock, cleaning her sword. She sheathed it, put her hands to her throat, and shrieked a victory cry, throbbing up and down on two shrill notes.

"I see you brought us guests!" she hailed Kyria.

"These are my friends," she said. "Men of my unit." Yes, and there was Kathy Banks, too, the other female pilot in her wing. Under her helmet, Banks was all eyes—and a smile that gradually expanded into a seriously evil grin.

"This is a joke, right?" Banks asked.

"You'd better tell me what's going on," Wayne snapped at Kyria. In a minute, he'd draw, and she'd really be up the proverbial creek.

"You won't be able to take off in these weather conditions. It's like EMP. Shorts out everything. But these are friendlies . . ."

Very friendly.

She leapt from the chopper—no one was going anywhere, at least not till the mists came up again—and ran toward the Amazons. Now, she could grin. Demetria met her halfway.

"When do you think we can expect the mists to come again?"

Demetria raised her head and sniffed the air.

"A couple of weeks," she said.

So. They'd think the chopper had broken off radio contact, had crashed in the mountains. She wondered if they'd send in a search party, much good it would do them until the mists arrived. And meanwhile . . .

She turned to the helo pilot. A captain. Humph. She rated. Well, F-15 pilots were expensive to train. And female F-15 pilots were a PR nightmare, his sour expression seemed to indicate. And thank you very much, sir, only "thanks" isn't quite the word I had in mind. I suspect the Amazons will express their gratitude too.

Everyone into the gene pool!

"Sir," she said, "I suggest we get this craft under cover. Camouflage. The local friendlies say it'll be at least two weeks before we can fly out."

"How the hell do they know?"

Kyria shrugged. "They know local conditions, sir."

"And what do they expect us to do until then?" the man demanded.

His eyes rounded as Demetria and several of the scouts came up, bows, swords, bronze bras, and all. Not an ounce of cellulite on them anywhere. Banks and Kyria covered their mouths at the same time to conceal smiles. *I believe the technical term is "relax and enjoy it,"* Kyria thought.

"They're very friendly, sir," Kyria said. "I'm sure they'll think of something."

There was some satisfaction in knowing that she wouldn't be leaving the Amazons in the lurch. And at least as much in watching Boomer's face as the Amazons gave him the once-over. Maybe he'd stop preening soon.

And best of all, since all of them were in it, there wouldn't be any scapegoating. Talk about unit cohesion.

Or maybe the best thing to say would be: Don't ask. Don't tell.