

1. Home at Last

Taryn stared at the size of the reception as she stepped off the plane onto the tarmac of the airport. At the foot of her plane stood the broadly smiling faces of Sylvie's father and the Police Chief, as well as Josh's mother and father. Behind them, there was a cordon of eighteen police officers trying to keep back the crowd of newsmen, cameramen, thrill-seekers and townspeople. Shouted questions and calls for an interview juxtaposed over one another until it was a load roar. Taryn felt her ears trying to lay flat against her skull, and she tried to back up. She had not expected anything like this!

Sylvie stood on her left, the sound of her hooves hitting the pavement lost in the shouting. "What's going on?" she shouted to be heard, even though she was next to her. Unfortunately, the sight of the pair coming out of the cargo plane had quieted the crowd, and her words rang loudly in the silence. Smiles slipped off the faces of everyone and many paled at the fearsome sight of Sylvie standing there. She had elected to wear the cowboy hat that had been a part of her costume during her time as a virtual slave of Nightshade, saying it had grown on her. Behind her back in a soft buckskin sheath was the old-fashioned Winchester rifle that earned her the nickname of "Sure-Shot Sylvie". Taryn herself carried the Native-American spear that she had become proficient in using. In their bags they kept the authentic buck-skin clothing that had made their costumes for the show. Taryn was sure they looked rather intimidating, which no doubt had something to do with the silence.

Sylvie's father stepped forward to fill the silence. "What's going on here, is that I'm welcoming my daughter home!" his booming voice filled the square, making a couple of the reporters jump. Sylvie brushed past Taryn, heading for her father. "Daddy!" she shouted. A moment later she had picked him up in a fierce hug. Greg seemed surprised to be lifted off the ground for a moment, but he swiftly recovered and held his daughter tightly.

A lone cheer echoed in the crowd, and then the sluice gates opened and wild cheering could be heard everywhere. People waved madly and capered in the crowd. Taryn stared around her, wondering if the whole world had gone mad in her absence.

A touch on her flank turned out to be her mother placing a hand on her for a moment. Giving her a tight smile to show that she wasn't intimidated by her welcome home, Taryn gestured to her back. With a

nod of understanding, her mother swung up as easily as if she had been doing it her whole life. Only her face reflected the joy and wonder as she continued to do things that, a few months ago, she had been entirely unable to do. Once she was sure her mother was situated on her back, Taryn turned back to the crowd and walked forward.

"Mr. Mayor, thank you for welcoming us home!" Taryn spoke formally, not wanting to make a mistake on national television. Sylvie set her father back down on the pavement and Greg chuckled as he held his daughter's hand for an extra moment. Then he turned to Taryn. She expected a friendly greeting, or a more formal one because of the news people. What she *hadn't* expected was for Greg to throw his arms around her middle and give her a huge hug. She gasped slightly, he was strong for a human.

"Taryn, it's so good to see you again!" As if he hadn't just seen her walk out of the plane in front of Sylvie. "We've never given up hope that you would find your way back home. Never."

"Thank you sir." Taryn said politely. She was completely unsure what to do. Should she hug him back? Stay polite and formal? How did one act on national television? *You know what? Screw it. I'm tired of trying to please everyone!* Taryn bent over and hugged him, making the breath whoosh out of the big man. "Thanks, Mr. Mathison." She whispered. "Greg, please." He whispered back. "After all, your family."

Your Family. The words seemed to ring in her ears. Even during the first of endless interviews as they passed through the crowd. She turned them over in her mind, tasting them. *Family.* Before, it had only included her mother and Sylvie. Now, as she walked slowly through the crowds, she thought of what it meant to her now. Her mother sat on her back, holding around her waist gently as she waved and chatted easily with the crowd. On her left was Sylvie, eyes forward and trembling slightly as her mother and father rode on her back. Ben walked on the right of them, barking orders to the officers or taking an interview. Josh clopped up behind her, idly twirling the iron bar he had found during his trip on the railroad. He was an impressive sight with his magnificent black hide, broad shoulders and...gah! Taryn hurriedly shifted her eyes forward, feeling her cheeks flame. Cursed thoughts!

She forced her thoughts past him, thinking about Melody and Cindy, the mermaids that had come to Rio with them to help. They were being pulled in a special trailer behind Josh. They could survive out of

water, though it was rather unpleasant. They had made the trip down to Rio with Josh in the train, having buckets of water splashed over them whenever he could sneak out to find one. Taryn knew what misery it must have been for them. Were they family as well?

Perhaps not by blood, but certainly through their shared experiences, Taryn realized. The thought comforted her as she realized how close she was to these people.

Her musings were cut short by their arrival in the parking lot. The twelve-acre lot was jammed with vans, SUV's and smaller cars. In the back were the shadowy shapes of horse trailers. With a sigh, Taryn irrationally wished that they had the fully appointed tractor-trailer Nightshade had made for them. It had been exceedingly comfy and large enough for them to walk around in them. Oh, well. Can't have everything in life.

Taryn had to fight an urge to bolt as she walked up the ramp. The claustrophobic space and tight stalls were brought back old fears. *Flash. Taryn stared in horror at the twisted body of Mr. Brodrick as he lay on the floor. Move! Taryn urged him, wanting to see him get away while the assassins were busy with her and Sylvie, but the tight bonds and lack of movement told her the truth. The smaller figure of the handler filled her vision. In his hands he held bondage equipment, including ball gags and harness, plus rope. Taryn glanced back at the frightened and angry eyes of Mrs. Brodrick and slumped. Maybe if she did exactly as they said, they would spare her. The handler tightened the bonds and placed the blindfold over her eyes. Her mouth stretched painfully tight over the ball gag, effectively silencing her. Now blind, she relied on the handler to lead her into the horse trailer. A tug on her rope told her that she was being secured to the wall. A few minute passed and then she could feel the vibrations in her hooves. Sylvie was being led in. A heart-stopping pop sounded, followed by a horribly familiar sound of a body hitting the floor. NO! Taryn's mind screamed in anguish. She couldn't understand why, they had followed their instructions exactly! Why had they killed her? The sound of doors slammed and the trailer swayed as they rumbled away from the terribly silent farm.*

Taryn yanked herself back, sweating. Behind her, she could hear Sylvie murmur uneasily as the door to the trailer closed. Taryn *hated* remembering their kidnapping. The familiar feeling of guilt flooded her body. Her research had called it "survivor's guilt", commonly affecting those that had seen friends and family die. Intellectually, Taryn knew there had been nothing she could have done to save them, their fates were sealed the moment Big John had seen them. But that didn't change the way she felt.

“You too, huh?” Sylvie’s words broke through her bleak thoughts.

“Yeah.” Taryn’s words reflected her mood.

“There was nothing we could have done.” Sylvie’s words sounded more directed at herself than at Taryn. “We couldn’t have stopped it.”

“I know, Sylvie. I know.” Taryn’s voice came out in a whisper. There didn’t seem anything more to say to that, and their voices died as the truck started up and began pulling out of the lot.