

The Exile
and
The Sorcerer

Lyremouth Chronicles
Book One

by
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CHAPTER ONE—A BAD JOKE

Pre-dawn light filtered through chinks in the stone walls, so faint it did little more than hint at the sleeping figures. Tevi lay awake on the earthen floor, staring bleakly at nothing, tormented by memories of a dozen miserable events over the past month. A hard day's work loomed ahead, yet sleep eluded her. She felt utterly alone despite being surrounded by her family. A grimace crossed Tevi's face at the thought. Her family. She was an enormous disappointment to them. How could she not be? She was an even greater disappointment to herself.

The light strengthened slowly. Then came the wailing of seagulls. Tevi rolled onto her back. There was no point trying to sleep now, and as if hearing her thought, several bodies stirred. A woman by the hearth sneezed and sat up. Whispered words rippled around the hall.

"Hey, who's taken my boots?" The first loud voice of the morning belonged to Laff. It always did. The question provoked several retorts; the wittiest were greeted by laughter.

Tevi closed her eyes. She did not for a moment think her sister's boots were missing. It was just Laff's excuse to be noisy and claim everyone's attention. What Tevi never understood was why people were so tolerant of her sister, and so irritated if she tried similar childish ploys herself.

A man stepped over Tevi's legs. She watched him weave towards the hearth, between shifting bodies. He knelt and began coaxing the fire back to life. All around, people were getting to their feet, brushing dust from their clothes, rolling up blankets and sleeping mats. Noise in the hall rose. The double doors were pushed open. A sudden shaft of daylight glittered on eddies of smoke rolling under the thatched roof.

At the centre of the hall, Laff was standing by the hearth, making a show of stretching her muscles while teasing the men preparing

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breakfast and exchanging boisterous good mornings with the women. Everyone seemed to like her. It was a trick Tevi had never been able to master, no matter how much she tried to emulate her sister.

The differences between them were not in their looks. Both were tall, with brown eyes and straight black hair, hacked short. They had small, oval faces, on the bland side of good-looking, with thin noses and wide, straight lips. But that was where the similarity ended. Laff was loud and assertive, quick to argue, quick to make friends. Tevi was unsure of herself, subdued in company, uncomfortable with the swaggering bravado that other women put so much effort into. “*Weak and soft*” were their mother’s words to describe Tevi. The comparisons with her sister made it worse. Maybe, if Laff had been the firstborn, it might not have mattered that she was the natural leader, but at nineteen, Tevi was the elder by two years.

Tevi sat up and looked around. She was not the last to rise; a few still slept at the edges of the hall. One couple lay nearby with their arms around each other. The man was sprawled lazily on his back. The woman, one of Tevi’s many aunts, was up on an elbow looking down on him. Tevi’s movement caught the aunt’s notice. For a moment, Tevi was subjected to a critical stare before the aunt bent to whisper something in her companion’s ear. The man’s eyes brushed over Tevi as he twisted to giggle into the aunt’s shoulder. Tevi felt a flush rise on her cheeks. She scrambled to her feet and hastened towards the hearth, but she knew she was being oversensitive. Judging by the noises last night, the couple had plenty of topics to laugh about.

Laff had her arm around the waist of the young man she had spent the night with. A selection of cousins were matching her in good-natured banter. Something Laff said made the man blush and raised a howl of laughter from the women. He smiled shyly at Laff, who hugged him closer.

Despite Tevi’s attempt to join the group unobtrusively, Laff noticed her approach and yelped, “Watch out! Don’t tread in the porridge!”

Tevi froze and looked down, but her feet were nowhere near the pot. It was a joke. Laff sniggered.

“You fall for it every time.”

Tevi met her sister’s eyes. “Yes, I know. It’s sad. I always forget that you still have a toddler’s sense of humour and haven’t grown up yet.”

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“Oh, I’m quite grown up.” Laff squeezed the young man and asked him playfully, “What do you think?”

“Everywhere except between your ears,” Tevi said.

Laff’s face twisted in a scowl, but their mother’s approach stopped the argument before it could escalate. Red was tall, a trait inherited by both her daughters. Her body had once been strong and agile, before an ill-fated skirmish four years previous. Now she hobbled across the hall, leaning heavily on a wooden crutch. Never again would Red lead the war band to victory. Her naturally stern face was creased in pain, but she managed to smile indulgently at Laff. If Red noticed her older daughter, she gave no sign.

A slight bustle announced the emergence of Tevi’s grandmother. As Queen of Storenseg, her status was marked by a wicker partition around her sleeping area. It was the nearest thing to a private room on the island. Two of Tevi’s cousins hovered in attendance while the Queen settled herself on a bench. People paused to nod respectfully in the Queen’s direction before picking up their conversations again. The hubbub flowed from group to group, the friendly family chaos binding everyone in the room from laughing grandmothers to squealing babies—everyone except Tevi.

The group around Laff had subtly closed ranks so that Tevi stood outside. Her mother and grandmother were in conversation. They glanced once in Tevi’s direction, but their expressions were not warm. Nobody else in the hall even looked in her direction. The whole family was happy to ignore her existence.

Tevi considered the porridge heating over the fire. It would be some minutes before it was boiling, but she had no wish to hang around. A nearby basket held several loaves of dark rye bread. She tore off a chunk, dipped its corner in a bowl of honey, and headed for the doorway.

At the entrance, Tevi paused and glanced back. The Queen’s eyes met hers briefly in shrewd appraisal. Once her grandmother had been an ally, but that had changed. Tevi was not sure when, or why, she had lost the Queen’s favour. Now, of the whole island, only Brec was ever on her side. Tevi ducked through the doorway and escaped.

The sky to the east was awash with pink. Sunlight hit obliquely on the surrounding hills. Seagulls overhead called raucously as they

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wheeled around the valley, and pitched below the sound of their squabbling, the hissing roar of surf carried cleanly on the crisp air.

Tevi rested her shoulder against the stone wall of the hall and breathed in deeply, tasting salt. The smell was comforting. Soon she would be on the water, with the solid timbers of her boat beneath her feet. Captaining a fishing boat was the only thing she was good at, and the women respected her ability even if they did not respect her.

Thinking about her boat eased the knot in Tevi's stomach. She lowered her gaze and began eating the bread. Abrak's chapel stood in the middle of Holric village square. An armed woman was posted at the door. Tevi allowed herself a cynical smile. Setting a guard after the chalice was gone served little purpose. Obviously, a sorcerer had wanted the artefact and had sent an enchanted bird to steal it. Nothing now remained in the chapel worth taking. In truth, even the chalice had been purely symbolic. Abrak's legacy lay in her potion, the magic brew that gave the women their strength. Without it, they would be even weaker than men.

Unconsciously, Tevi grimaced at the memory of being forced to take her daily dose throughout childhood. The potion tasted foul, but it had done its work. Her enhanced strength would stay with her forever. Typically, Laff claimed to like the taste, but Tevi was pleased she would never need to take it again. However, at that moment, it was the only thing in her life that Tevi could think of to be grateful for. Her situation was hopeless. The friends of her childhood had deserted her until only Brec remained. Even her family scorned her—not that anyone thought she was a bad person, just a bad joke.

The round chapel marked the spot where Abrak had been burnt many years before. Now the ancient sorcerer stood, in spirit, at the side of Rangir, goddess of the sea—or so the myths claimed. Tevi was sceptical, but she needed whatever help she could get. On impulse, her lips moved as she silently offered a prayer. *"Please, Abrak, speak on my behalf to Rangir. Give me the chance to prove myself, so people will speak of me with respect. Show me how to end the scorn."* Was it too much to ask?

Around the square, clusters of people stood by doorways, soaking in the spring sunlight before beginning their day's work. One group was looking in Tevi's direction, although it was unclear whether she, or her grandmother's hall, was the topic of conversation. Either way, Tevi felt

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self-conscious. She was about to walk away when the focus of attention shifted abruptly. Voices were raised in shouts, and heads turned.

Tevi moved away from the wall just as a running woman burst from a pathway between two buildings. It took a second for Tevi to recognise the runner: Anvil, a senior member of the war band. It took less than a second longer for the significance to dawn. Anvil was due to be on lookout duty on the Stormfast Cliffs that morning.

“Rathshorn,” Tevi whispered. It had to be the explanation. The season was early for raiding, but Anvil would not be running so frantically just to bring a report on the weather.

Tevi spun back through the doorway. People looked up, startled, from their breakfasts. “Anvil, from the lookout...she’s coming.”

While most leapt to their feet, the Queen remained impassive, looking at the doorway. Tevi stepped aside as the drumming of running feet grew louder. Anvil charged in and skidded to a stop before the Queen, gasping for breath.

A cacophony of questions greeted the sentry. “What have you seen?”

“Is it Rathshorn?”

“What’s wrong?”

The Queen waved her hands for silence. “Let her catch her breath.”

The questions stopped, although the noise did not. Feeling strangely detached, Tevi leaned against the doorpost and surveyed the hall, taking in the fear on the faces of the old and the excitement of the young. Laff looked happy, as if she had received a gift. Tevi watched with something between irritation and sorrow. *Maybe not a gift, but a prize*, the thought came to Tevi. *Just one more game for Laff to win.*

Anvil had a hand pressed to her side, but the heaving of her shoulders had eased enough for speech. “There’s a boat...it must have... come close...during the night.”

“Just one?” the Queen asked.

“That’s all I could see. There might be more around the headland.”

“Anything else?”

“There’s a green pennant on the mast.” Anvil’s words drew a sigh of relief from some corners. The green flag was a sign of parley.

“They want to talk,” the Queen said thoughtfully.

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“They’ve got shields on display.”

“They want to talk while reminding us what they back their words with.” The Queen’s face twisted in irony as she amended her words. “Did you recognise the shields?”

“It’s Rathshorn.” Anvil confirmed everyone’s guess.

“It might be a diversion while they attack elsewhere,” Red said from her position at the Queen’s shoulder.

“True,” the Queen agreed. “Send scouts to Hanken Ridge and the Skregin to see if any other boats are lurking. And for this parley, we can play their game. Muster the war band on the beach.”

“The whole band?” Red questioned.

“Oh, yes. It never hurts to bargain from a position of strength.”

Laff was at the weapon rack even before the Queen finished speaking. The family broke into groups. Men herded children to the back of the hall, old women stood in the centre talking in low voices, councillors gathered around the Queen, and the young women of the war band assembled by the weapons.

Tevi joined them, her heart thumping. All her life, there had been relative peace—only a few minor raids, such as the one in which her mother had been hurt. However, word was that the new Queen of Rathshorn was looking for trouble.

Swords hung in scabbards under the shields. Tevi slipped the strap over her head and evened out a kink in the leather so it would not dig into her neck. The weight of the sword against her leg was familiar, but not at all reassuring. Around her, women were putting on helmets and greaves. It was all so serious, deadly serious, yet the mood was like children playing on the beach.

“Tevi, what do you think? Is it war?”

Tevi glanced over her shoulder. In the enthusiasm, Laff’s hostility was forgotten. It was the first time in months she had addressed Tevi without a sneer.

“Hopefully not,” Tevi said quietly.

“*Nof?*”

“I don’t want to see women killed for no good reason.”

“You’re frightened.” Laff’s voice returned to its usual contempt.

Tevi cursed herself; she should have held her tongue. “It isn’t that—”

Her words were cut off. “I’m sure it is. And in your place, I’d

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be frightened. It's only because the handle sticks out of the scabbard that you know which end of your sword to grab hold of. And you're supposed to lead the war band. It's going to be embarrassing following you. You're the worst fighter we have. You'll be dead within minutes."

"Then you won't have the embarrassment of following me for long," Tevi snapped back. She rammed the helmet onto her head and left the hall.

Of course, Laff was right. If it was war, then Tevi knew she would be dead within days. Her incompetence at fighting was a running joke. The sight of Abrak's chapel made Tevi remember her prayer. *Give me the chance to prove myself, so people will speak of me with respect.* Another bad joke. No one would talk ill of a woman who died in battle, no matter how quickly or incompetently.

The Queen's retinue marched towards the beach, gathering the war band from their family halls as they went. The women were in high spirits and laughing, but only Brec had a smile for Tevi.

"I hear we have visitors," Brec said as she joined the line.

"Just one boatload, from Rathshorn."

"So we're all going to pose prettily on the beach for them." Brec's laughter rang out.

"I think that's about it." Despite her bleak mood, Tevi found herself smiling.

Unfailing good humour was possibly Brec's most valuable trait—that and the simple, uncritical friendship she offered. Tevi was aware that her own feelings for Brec were far more complicated. Everyone liked Brec. She was witty and good looking, skilled with both sword and fishing net, easygoing but not weak willed. *So why is she eager to be my friend, when anyone in Holric would welcome her company?* The thought sprang from Tevi's bitter mood.

The war band formed an untidy phalanx on the dunes. Tevi, her mother, and the matriarchs of the families stood detached from the warriors, behind the Queen. They had barely reached position when the boat rounded the Stormfast Cliffs. The figures of several women were visible, taking in the sail as the small craft cut across the blue waters of the bay.

Behind her, Tevi heard the excited exchanges between members of the war band.

"What do you think they want?"

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“Might be some sort of ultimatum.”

“As a pretext for war?”

“Could be.”

“Perhaps Queen Fearful wants her brother back.”

“I say we should let her take him. He’s useless.”

“You’ve had him?”

“Only once.” The exaggerated exasperation in the woman’s voice brought yelps of laughter that were quickly stifled by glares from the matriarchs.

The boat ran aground in the shallows. Seven women jumped out, up to their thighs in the waves. Together, they hauled the boat up beyond reach of the tide. An older woman then disembarked and splashed through ankle-high water. The green pennant from the boat was tied to a long spear in her hand. A dozen yards from the Queen, she stopped and planted the butt of her spear in the sand.

The two groups studied each other in silence. Tevi looked at the leader, taking in her spiky white hair and the twin scars across her left cheek. Seeing a face you could not recognise was so strange; months, even years, could pass without it happening. When it did, the temptation was always to try mentally forcing the features into familiar contours.

At last, the stranger spoke. “I am First-in-battle, cousin and envoy to Queen Fearless-warrior of Rathshorn.” Her clear voice was loud over the waves.

“I am Fists-of-thunder, Queen of Storenseg,” Tevi’s grandmother replied, at her most austere.

The envoy’s gaze raked over the Queen. “My companions and I have travelled far to speak with you. We bring an offer that will aid both our islands.”

“Then we will be pleased to hear to it.” Despite the conciliatory words, there was an icy edge in the Queen’s voice.

The envoy was unflustered. “May I introduce my companions? This is Raging-shark, foremost in victories, whose courage is famed in song throughout the isles.” A tall, redheaded woman nodded. “This is Steadfast-shield-wall, the despair of all who stand against her, fearless and invincible. This is...”

Tevi stopped listening to the meaningless formality. Custom demanded that the women be identified before the parley could commence, but the ascribed feats were fictitious and the warlike birth

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names were always abandoned in favour of abbreviations, puns, or (as in Tevi's case) acquired nicknames.

Once the envoy finished, the Queen continued the ritual, naming the small group between her and the war band. Brec's grandmother, Lizard, was introduced as Dragon-heart; Miam, ancient, half blind and deaf, as Mighty-sword-arm. All were credited with feats of valour. Tevi would have found it funny if she had not been dreading her own introduction.

The Queen was nearing the end, with only Red and Tevi to go. "This is my daughter, Blood-of-my-foes, a warrior whose name is spoken with awe, who has triumphed in countless battles." For once, the acclamation was completely true. The envoy looked with interest, but her attention was fixed on the crutch under Red's arm. "And this is my granddaughter, Strikes-like-lightning, who boldly leads the war band."

Tevi tried not to wince. It was decidedly weak praise, but anything stronger might have drawn sniggers from the women behind her. Now, at last, they could return to the royal hall in Holric and learn the nature of the envoy's mission.



Thick brown wax sealed the stopper of the terra-cotta flask. Tevi's hands shook as she picked at it with her knife, aware that everyone was watching. Not that there were crowds; in fact, Tevi had never seen the royal hall so empty. Apart from herself and the Queen, the only ones present were the women from Rathshorn, the matriarchs, and three veteran captains of Storenseg's war band, including Red. Everyone else had been ejected. Guards outside the doorway were keeping the curious at a distance, but undeterred, folk had gathered around the square and were peering in as best they could. Shouts drifted on the morning air, but no one inside was yet talking.

The Queen was the only one seated. Tevi stood before her, struggling with the stubborn cork. She could feel eyes burning into her back, imagining the shame should it be said that the leader of the Storenseg war band could not fight her way into a wine flask, but soon the sealing wax was gone, and the stopper was loose enough to be pulled.

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Tevi balanced the flask in the crook of her arm and poured the yellow wine into a drinking bowl. The sweet, sickly smell seemed too heavy for the early hour, yet custom had to be observed. She offered the drink to the Queen, who accepted with a nod and took the smallest possible taste. No one with her grandmother's experience would risk negotiating when drunk. Tevi moved to the envoy and again offered the bowl. The woman from Rathshorn also swallowed a sip, barely wetting her lips, but enough. The tension in Tevi's neck eased. Whatever else the envoy might say, by all rules of honour, she had shared their hospitality and could not declare war.

Brec's grandmother, Lizard, was the next to be offered the wine. Thereafter, it passed in order of seniority. Some accepted with exaggerated formality; others knocked back the wine as if throwing down a challenge. Last of all, Tevi herself took a draft. The sweet liquid rolled over her tongue like waves over sand. She had not realised how dry her mouth was.

With the wine ritual over, benches were pulled from the sides and arranged about the hearth. The drinking bowl was refilled and commenced a second, less formal circuit. Tevi found herself seated at the end of a bench next to her mother. Her eyes flicked from person to person. The older women sat in postures of rigid authority, their backs as straight as swords. The younger ones were more blatantly aggressive, with bodies tensed as if ready to leap up and hit someone, and with fierce expressions as if watching for an excuse to do so. Tevi tried to imitate the pose, but she felt ridiculous, a poor burlesque of her sister. She prayed the women from Rathshorn did not realise.

It was hard not to flinch as she met Blaze's eyes. Blaze had been the one charged with the impossible task of training Tevi in the arts of war—impossible not because Tevi lacked strength or enthusiasm, but rather due to her inability to put what she knew into effect. The set exercises were easy—the feint, parry, thrust, and advance. But as soon as she was pitted against a living opponent, Tevi's defence crumbled so completely that she might as well have been blindfolded. “Watch her feet out of the corner of your eye. Don't just follow her sword!” Blaze had screamed over the years until even she had given up in disgust. Her caustic remarks about Tevi's incompetence were common knowledge. Blaze swore that Tevi was the worst excuse for a warrior she had ever attempted to train.

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The voice of the Queen broke the silence, pulling Tevi back from her brooding. “And now, may we ask the reason for your visit?”

The envoy got to her feet. Her gaze travelled over the assembled women. “I speak on behalf of Queen Fearless-warrior, head of the families of Rathshorn, rightful ruler of all the Western Isles—” She got no further.

“You must be aware I would also claim that last title.” The Queen’s voice was firm.

“As would several others.”

“Not all have history or law on their side.”

“True. However, the rival claims of Rathshorn and Storenseg are not the subject I wish to discuss.”

“Then perhaps you should leave the titles until such time as you do.” Steel underlay the Queen’s voice.

After long seconds of silence, the envoy continued. “I have come to speak concerning the island of Argenseg. This island is subject to the crown of Rathshorn. But as you know, twenty years ago, traitors overthrew their lawful rulers. They have not honoured the oaths of their mothers. They have not sent tribute; instead they have sent bands of pirates to harry our villages. The insult can go unpunished no longer. Our Queen intends to reclaim her rightful property.”

“Why do you come to tell us? Surely she is not seeking our assistance.”

“We do not ask you to fight beside us. But Storenseg is blessed with mines that yield ores of the highest quality. Your swords are the envy of the islands. It sometimes happens that these blades find their way into rebel hands. Queen Fearless-warrior would take it as a sign of goodwill if you would stop this trade.”

“Swords may get from Storenseg to Argenseg by many routes. What benefit do I get from interfering in the concerns of traders?”

The envoy paused, as if weighing her next words. “There are some who say Storenseg has given aid to the rebels. Some, no doubt misguided, even say Storenseg first encouraged the treasonous revolt. A friendly gesture would silence the calls for retaliation. Otherwise, Queen Fearless-warrior might be hard put to ignore the council of war.”

“Thank you. I think you have made yourself clear. Is this all you wish to say?” By her tone, the Queen might have been bored.

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“It is.”

“An interesting offer, and one I must consider further. While I prepare my answer, you will be our guests.”

“My crew and I are willing to camp on the beach.”

“Lodgings will be found for you. And so that none of your misguided councillors may say I slighted the envoy of Queen Fearless-warrior, tonight we will hold a feast in your honour.”

The Queen stood, signalling the end of the debate. The meeting broke into small groups. The matriarchs huddled together, clearly waiting for the envoy to go before expressing their opinions. However, the envoy had other business before she was led from the hall. She made her way around the hearth and intercepted Red.

“Blood-of-my-foes, it has been some years since we met, and the last time I saw you was over the rim of a shield. I’m sorry we did not have time to talk on that day.”

“It was a brief visit to Rathshorn.” Red spoke so calmly that it took Tevi a second to realise they were talking about her mother’s last, ill-fated raid.

The envoy went on. “But you went away with such valuable souvenirs. The Queen greatly misses her brother, not to mention the fine jewellery and weapons.”

“And no doubt she complains I scorched the roof of her hall.”

“She was none too pleased.” The envoy’s tone was also light-hearted. “But I heard you were wounded returning to your boat. Now I see you with a crutch. Has your leg not healed?” There was no mistaking her interest in the state of Red’s health.

“One souvenir of Rathshorn I would rather not have taken.”

“It has been a bad time for Storenseg, losing both you and Abrak’s chalice.”

“Neither loss is unbearable.”

“Of course.” The envoy’s eyes shifted abruptly to Tevi. “Now your daughter leads the war band. She must be a great comfort to you.”

The urge to shuffle out of view swamped Tevi, but somehow, she managed to meet the envoy’s gaze. Before anything else could be said, they were joined by Blaze, who addressed the envoy.

“My name is Blazing-sword. If you are ready, I have been appointed to lead you to your lodgings.”

“Ah, yes. Thank you. I was just commending Strikes-like-lightning.

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Although young, the child of such an illustrious mother must surely be a warrior to be reckoned with. Doubtless the defence of Storenseg rests safe on her shoulders.”

“Her skill with a sword is the talk of all the island. I’ve trained many warriors, but never before have I met her like,” Blaze said, deadpan.

The crowd outside moved apart as Blaze led the women from Rathshorn to a hall with sleeping space to spare. After a short discussion, two of the visitors trotted to the beach to collect their things. Several young girls tagged along, whooping in excitement. The rest of the population, eager to learn what had happened, surrounded the matriarchs as they emerged from the royal hall.

Tevi stood by the doorway, watching until the envoy disappeared. As quietly as possible, she slipped around the edge of the square. Few would choose her as a source of information, but she had no wish to get involved in the overblown and facile arguments that she knew would take place.

Brec jogged over. Her habitual grin was replaced by an anxious frown.

“Tevi, what’s happening? What did they say?”

“They’re playing some sort of game; the goddess knows what the point is. Our grandmothers will have a better idea than me.”

“Someone said they’ve given an ultimatum about selling swords to Argenseg.”

“I’m sure there’s more to it. Come on, let’s get away from all this, and I’ll tell you everything they said.” Tevi gestured for Brec to follow.

The pair started down a narrow passage between two halls, leaving the noise of the square behind, but before they had taken a dozen steps, another voice assailed them.

“Tell me, did the women of Rathshorn tremble in their boots at the sight of our mighty war leader?”

Tevi turned around. Laff stood at the end of the passage with her arms crossed and a sour expression on her face.

“I’m sure you won’t be surprised to learn they hardly noticed me.”

“What? You managed to avoid drawing attention by walking into a bench? You must be having a good day.” Laff moved closer until she was less than an arm’s length away.

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The two sisters glared at each other until Tevi sighed in exasperation and dropped her head. She was not in the mood to deal with her sister's hostility. "Look, I know you're angry that I was at the meeting and you weren't. Honestly, I'd much rather you'd been there instead of me, but I wasn't given the option."

"I couldn't care less about the meeting." Judging by her tone, Laff's words were blatantly untrue.

"Then what are you so wound up about?"

"You, and the way you're going to bring shame upon our family." Laff spat out the words.

"I'll try my best not to."

"Your best is pathetic. Strikes-like-lightning. They named you well. You couldn't hit the same spot twice for trying." Laff rephrased one of Blaze's jokes.

"And you could do so much better?"

"Of course I could! I should lead the war band, not you."

"Then perhaps you should go to Mother and suggest she reschedule our births." Over Laff's shoulder, Tevi saw women gathering at the passage entrance, attracted by the raised voices. It was time to cut the argument short, but Laff was not about to let it drop.

"How do you have the nerve to bring Mother into this? She was a great warrior. She must be so ashamed to have you as a daughter."

"Oh, she is. She makes that quite clear." Tevi spun about and began to walk away.

"You aren't fit to follow her. You should have been a boy. You go out of your way to act like one. How far do you take the act?"

Tevi knew she should have kept walking, but there was an edge to Laff's voice that could not be ignored. She turned back and snarled, "At least I don't act like a girl who has to think with her sword since she keeps her brain between her legs."

Laff grinned in satisfaction at provoking a reaction. She looked her sister slowly up and down before saying, "Oh, no. No one would ever accuse you of that. I don't know about being a real warrior; you're not even a real woman."

Tevi could feel herself shaking. Getting into a game of trading insults with Laff had been a bad move, but she could not back off now, not with the audience. "I'm enough of a woman to ram that stupid remark back down your throat."

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“You think you want to try?” Laff was getting louder. “Where were you and Brec going? Off to hold hands and stare into each other’s eyes? But I’m being unfair to Brec. She probably doesn’t realise you’d like to play the man for her—on your back, with your pants down.”

Laff had gone much too far. Tevi leapt forward, fist swinging for her sister’s face. The sudden attack took Laff by surprise, but she managed to raise an arm to parry. Even so, the punch clipped the side of her head and knocked her back against the wall. Tevi moved in for a second blow, but her sister kicked at her legs, causing her to stumble and miss.

The fight was short and predictable. Tevi attempted to take the offensive, knowing that she was better in attack than defence. Unfortunately, Laff was equally well aware of this. They traded a few easily blocked punches. Then Laff connected with a hard kick to the knee. Tevi did not see the unexpected low strike coming. She never did. The first she knew was pain exploding in her leg. She crumpled forward, straight into another vicious punch to the stomach that sent her crashing to the ground.

Laff stood over her fallen sister. “You should have been a man. Even our brothers can fight better. You’re—”

“What do you think you’re doing?” Blaze pushed her way through the spectators.

“Tevi and I had a disagreement.”

“This isn’t the time to pick fights with her.”

“Tevi started it.”

“Then she’s a bigger fool than I thought. And you’re no better.” Blaze’s voice was low but biting. “Supposing the women from Rathshorn had seen this.”

“So what if they had?”

Blaze pulled Laff around and glared into her eyes. “We all know Tevi is as much use to the war band as a straw dummy—in fact, slightly less. We could burn the dummy to cook our dinner over. But she’s your mother’s eldest daughter, and she has to lead us. How would they react in Rathshorn if they learnt the truth? Have you considered the boost it would give them? Because when you’re as old as me, you’ll know how confidence can win a battle against the odds.” Blaze paused while the defiance faded from Laff’s face. “Try to act like adults, at least until the envoy leaves.”

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Blaze stalked away. Laff gave a last angry glare at her sister and followed. The crowd dispersed. Tevi managed to haul herself to her feet, flexing her knee.

“You should have let me tackle Laff. I was only half a second behind you,” Brec said.

“I lost my temper.”

“I don’t blame you. I don’t know what gets into Laff sometimes. She can have a nasty mind. What made her say that?”

Tevi kept her eyes fixed on her knee. Brec was a good friend, but Tevi wondered how she could be so naive. Not that Tevi would complain. Of all the women on Storenseg, Brec was the only one Tevi could rely on for support, the only one she could talk to. But even so, there was no way she could admit to Brec that Laff’s accusation was true.



The Queen’s sleeping area had its own hearth, though the fire was unlit on the warm spring morning. A bed of straw took up a third of the space. Two low stools were the only furniture. The Queen sat on one; her chief adviser, Lizard, on the other. Their heads were close as they spoke in low voices, discussing the envoy’s message.

War had taken both of the Queen’s sisters long ago, depriving her of close family support. Lizard had filled the gap. Together, the two women had dominated island politics for decades. The current situation was the latest in a series of crises they had averted or overcome.

Lizard was scathing in her appraisal of the Queen of Rathshorn. “Silly young fool.”

“She’ll learn—if she lives long enough.”

“Do you think she’ll attack Storenseg?”

“I think she’d like to. Control of the two biggest islands is a logical first step in conquering all the Western Isles.” The Queen sighed. “She won’t be able to take Storenseg, but a lot of women will die while she finds that out.”

“The traditional claims to rule all the islands create a lot of wild dreams.”

“I know. I’d drop my own claim if I could do it without losing face. I worry about Red trying once I’m gone.”

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“She won’t,” Lizard said confidently.

“Can you be sure?”

“I agree she lacks political sense, but she knows enough about war to spot a lost cause.”

“And Fearless doesn’t,” the Queen said firmly. “We need her to learn, and quickly. If I read things right, she’s heading for war but can’t make her mind up on the target. We need Fearless to go for Argenseg. She’ll take it—it’s a lot smaller than Storenseg, but she’ll still lose a fifth of her war band in the fighting. It’ll give her a better grasp of the practicalities of war, and she certainly won’t be in a fit state to bother us afterwards.”

“I’m worried about this nonsense over the swords. It sounds as if she’s trying to create a pretext for war with us. There was nothing subtle about the threat at the end.”

“I noticed. But I don’t think it’s reached that point. This parley is just an excuse to scout things out. You saw the envoy’s eyes light up at the sight of Red limping.”

Lizard pursed her lips. “So what will you do about selling swords to Argenseg?”

“That’s a hard one. To agree might be taken as a sign of weakness. To refuse would give an excuse to attack. But if I’m right, she’s not serious about the swords, and she can always find another excuse.” The Queen looked thoughtful. “Perhaps I could send Fearless’s brother back as a meaningless gesture.”

“That won’t please Hilo. She’s taken rather a liking to him.”

“There’s no shortage of men.”

“We can’t afford bickering among our families.”

The two women sat in silence for a while with identical frowns on their faces.

Lizard was the first to speak. “We might be able to manoeuvre Argenseg into provoking Fearless—suggest to some of their hotheads that it might be funny to take another of her brothers captive.”

The Queen nodded. “That would be good if it worked, and I think I know the right hothead to suggest it to. We could also send Red to visit folk on Varseg.”

“With what purpose?”

“We’d say she merely wants to see the site of her greatest victory again.”

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“Who’s going to believe that?”

“No one, probably.”

“So what’s the real reason?”

“To make Fearless wonder why I sent Red to Varseg.”

Lizard froze for a second and then yelped with laughter. “Her spies and councillors will tie themselves in knots looking for a reason that doesn’t exist. With your reputation for being a conniving old fox, they’ll end up convincing themselves that you’re hatching a plot so clever it’s beyond them.”

“And if Red goes to Varseg, it will remind people of all her victories with the invincible Storenseg war band. A good reputation can be the best weapon of all. My family has a lot of prestige, and I’ll use it to bluff a way through this. I want to make sure everyone remembers that the royal family of Storenseg is a very dangerous enemy.”

“I do see one potential problem,” Lizard said after a moment’s pause.

The Queen’s face was grim. “I know...Tevi.”