

The Traitor and The Chalice

Lyremouth Chronicles
Book Two

by
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FOREWORD—THE COVEN AT LYREMOUTH

Magic changes everything

The rare individuals who could directly access the higher dimensions had dictated the history of the world. These workers of magic perceived more than the four normal dimensions of time and space known by the ungifted majority, and thus could manipulate their surroundings in ways that seemed as mystical and unstoppable to the rest of the population as a sighted archer might seem in the world of the blind.

A witch was someone who was aware of just one or two paranormal dimensions. Maybe one person in every hundred might claim this title. A sorcerer was far more uncommon. They could perceive all three, including the paradoxical second aspect of time—the realm of soothsayers and oracles.

Nobody knew why some were born with these gifts. Whatever the cause, it did not lie in heredity. Children of the most powerful sorcerer were no more likely to be gifted with magic than those of a common shepherd. And therein lay the source of the chaos that sorcerers had inflicted on the world.

Their powers were vast. One sorcerer acting alone could carve out an empire, sweeping aside whatever small culture the ungifted had painstakingly built. Cities and civilisations were created by their paranormal abilities, and all fell back to anarchy on their deaths. Only another sorcerer could hope to seize such an empire, and countless conscripted soldiers had died in the resulting wars.

The acolytes of the great philosopher sorcerer Keovan of Lyremouth were the ones who broke the cycle of short-lived empires. Keovan's teachings had espoused knowledge as the greatest virtue. On his death, his magic-wielding acolytes joined together to form the Coven, with an elected leader—the Guardian. To the ungifted villagers

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of Lyremouth they offered protection in return for a modest tithe of their goods, thus freeing the acolytes for a life of meditation.

In the following years, the Protectorate expanded rapidly, by consent rather than invasion. Surrounding villages were eager for the security the Coven offered. More sorcerers and witches joined, attracted by the chance to study with others who saw the world in all its multi-dimensional complexity.

In time, Lyremouth grew from a village to a great city. Stability allowed the advancement of commerce and industry. The ungifted tradesmen formed guilds, modelled on the Coven, with elected leaders.

This growth made for changes in the nature of the Protectorate. The old tithe system was transformed into taxes. The guild masters came to swear allegiance to the Guardian on behalf of their members. Rather than remain remote with their esoteric studies, the sorcerers took their place at the head of the social ladder—unquestioned rulers of the Protectorate.

Yet the spirit of Keovan lived on. The Protectorate was still generally benign and just. The guilds could manage their own affairs. Ungifted citizens had rights under the law. Folk might grumble at the taxes and distrust the autocratic sorcerers, yet—uniquely in the history of the world—they lived their lives in peace and prosperity, with the hope that their children and grandchildren might do the same.

Nearly four hundred and fifty years after Keovan's death, the Protectorate had expanded to cover all the lands around the Middle Seas, dwarfing the overnight empires of lone sorcerers.

It was a society where the circumstances of one's birth counted for nothing, compared to one's abilities. What did it matter who someone's parents were, or where they came from, if that person was a sorcerer? Rich or poor, male or female, north or south—nothing counted in relation to the ability to work magic. Even the ungifted might advance through guilds and find wealth and status, unhampered by preconceived notions of their worth.

These possibilities drew many from the surrounding barbarian lands. Some came seeking riches, some fled from danger, and some arrived by chance, displaced from their homeland and washed up like flotsam in a strange new world—or so Tevi viewed her own arrival in the Protectorate.

CHAPTER ONE—UNDERCOVER IN EKRANOS

The man might have been six inches taller than the woman had he not been lying curled on the ground. Blood stained the back of his head red—a result of the blow that had floored him. The woman pulled back her foot, about to kick him in the kidneys.

“You keep your hands off Zak.” Her voice was a shrill howl. Judging by her clothes and build, she was one of the dock porters.

Tevi hurdled over a row of barrels and cannoned into the woman, shoving her away before her foot made contact with her opponent. Tevi continued to press the angry woman backwards until she was pinned against a wall of crates. The woman struggled, but Tevi was able to restrain her without making too obvious a display of unexpected strength.

“Let me at him!” the woman screamed in Tevi’s face.

Tevi thumped her against the crates, hard enough to jolt, but not to cause injury. On the third blow, the woman’s eyes left her victim and focused on Tevi. From her change in demeanour, she finally registered the sword in red and gold, tattooed on the backs of Tevi’s hands—the sign of the Guild of Mercenary Warriors, and also the badge of the port authorities on Tevi’s leather jerkin—her current employer.

“He was after Zak.” A pleading edge entered the woman’s voice.

“Who’s Zak?”

“He’s mine.”

“Did he threaten to hurt Zak?”

“Zak don’t want nothing to do with him.”

The answers were not helping. Tevi looked over her shoulder. Now it was safe, a couple of onlookers had gone to aid the injured man. They had him in a sitting position, clearly dazed, but not seriously hurt.

To Tevi’s relief, at that moment, two more people arrived. Both were mercenaries and one had a second crossed sword on his tattoos, marking him as a senior guild member, and therefore someone to take

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charge and work out what was going on. The senior mercenary strode up to Tevi and her captive.

“What is it this time, Chel?”

“Tell him to keep away from Zak.” The woman, presumably called Chel, sounded aggrieved.

“She’s a frigging nutter, that’s what it is.” Chel’s victim had recovered enough to give his own version.

“Keep your filthy hands off Zak.”

The senior mercenary cut in before the argument went further. “Right. I get the picture.” He looked at the group around the injured man. “Get him to a healer and check his skull ain’t cracked. And you, Chel”—he turned back to the woman—“are coming with me for a little visit to the lockup.”

“Zak loves me. I’ll kill that pig if he tries to paw him again.” Despite her defiant words, Chel let herself be led away.

With the excitement over, the onlookers dispersed, leaving Tevi alone with the other mercenary. Tevi had been working on the docks since her arrival in Ekranos, nine days before, but did not yet know all her colleagues by name, although she recognised this one’s face from meals at the guild house.

“Have you been warned about Chel?” he asked.

“No. Does she do this a lot?”

“Every other month.”

“And Zak—is that her partner?”

He gave a yelp of laughter. “Zak’s a two-bit whore. He’s anyone’s for a copper shilling. But Chel thinks they are the great love story. Zak was probably trying to make a little money on the side and got caught out.”

“Right.”

Shaking her head, Tevi walked away. Even after a year on the mainland, she was still sometimes left dumbfounded by the ways of the Protectorate. Everything was so different from her childhood on the Western Isles. She stopped on the quayside and looked out over the water, still trying to adjust her thoughts.

Taking money in return for sex was the least of it. Even on the islands, a woman might try to win a man’s favours with gifts. More unsettling was that nobody had been shocked by a woman assaulting a man. Admittedly, Chel had enjoyed no unfair physical advantage. In

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fact, had she not caught her victim by surprise, she might not have come out on top. Yet Tevi could not easily ignore the moral voice of her upbringing.

The situation would have been so different back on the island of Storenseg. Thanks to the legacy of a shipwrecked sorcerer, the women of the Western Isles enjoyed magically enhanced strength—something Tevi had to disguise on her current mission if she wanted to avoid attracting undue attention. On the islands, men were so weak by comparison that any woman striking one would be seen as a bully and coward, and in the warrior culture of the islands, cowardice was the gravest failing.

Tevi sighed at the thought. Actually, there were worse traits a woman could possess—such as wanting another woman as a lover—which was something else that nobody in the Protectorate would think twice about. Any more than the onlookers had been surprised that Zak might be an object of desire for both men and women.

Her preference in lovers was the reason that Tevi had been unofficially exiled. Her grandmother, the Queen of Storenseg, had seen to it, with the fake quest to retrieve the stolen chalice. Nobody knew where the chalice was. Nobody expected her to return. It was just an excuse to get her out of the way. Only Tevi's close family knew the true reason for her going.

Tevi continued walking along the quay, thinking about the irony of it all. Swapping Storenseg for the Protectorate had been the best move for her. She had found a place in the Guild of Mercenaries, and she had found a lover, the sorcerer Jemeryl. Even more ironic, the fake quest had turned out to be important—important enough to concern the Guardian.

Tevi stopped again and raised her eyes to the cliffs west of Ekranos. Perched atop was the School of Herbalism. Jemeryl was at the school, hunting the rogue sorcerer who had stolen the chalice. The artefact still meant nothing to Tevi. She would happily have forgotten all about it. But the Guardian had sent Jemeryl to investigate, and Tevi would not leave her to face danger alone. She only wished she could be closer at hand.

The work as a customs officer involved checking payment of port taxes and curtailing the smuggling of contraband. It meant long hours in an erratic shift rota, following the tides. Jemeryl's work at

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the school was more regular, but no more flexible. However, their free time coincided that afternoon—their first chance to meet since reaching Ekranos. Tevi took a deep breath and tried to let the thought wash away her anxiety.



The sound of waves beating against the rocks below came softly through the thick glass. Jemeryl stared through the window, scrunching her eyes against the brilliant sunshine. As far as the horizon, the sea was dotted with boats: small fishing craft, trailing nets; and larger cargo ships, laden with merchandise, slicing through the waves. A seagull, rising on the updrafts created by the cliffs, steadied for a moment and then soared away.

Another headland rose across the bay several miles distant. The rocks around its base formed a jagged fringe in the surf. Its top was crowned with a lighthouse—a thin dark finger pointing at the cloudless morning sky. On the coast between school and lighthouse lay the wide estuary of the river Dhaliki. The nearer bank was lined with the red-tiled roofs and whitewashed walls of Ekranos. A soft smile lifted the corner of Jemeryl’s lips. Tevi was down there.

“Hey. Stop gawking and give me a hand...or is something happening outside?”

The voice recalled Jemeryl to her surroundings. She turned and smiled apologetically at the speaker while her eyes adjusted to the subdued light of the hospital ward. Jemeryl’s study partner, Vine, was sitting beside a patient. Her expression of eager curiosity raised a flicker of amusement. Vine was renowned for a love of gossip, in both the gathering and spreading of rumours. Her superiors could only wish she would devote a fraction as much enthusiasm to her work as junior sorcerer.

“No, you’re not missing anything. My mind was just wandering.”

Vine’s face fell. She shrugged and held out a bloody bandage. “Oh, well. Throw this away and get some clean water. We need to wash the bite.”

Somewhat gingerly, Jemeryl took the soiled linen. She dropped it in a bin at the end of the ward, trying to avoid seeing or smelling the other unsavoury contents. The combined aura was definitely best

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ignored. She rinsed her hands in a stone sink before filling a shallow bowl and returning. A few drops of antiseptic turned the water purple, then Vine dipped a cloth in the solution and began washing the patient's wound.

The man moaned in a semiconscious stupor. He was a docker who had been bitten by a rat hiding between sacks of grain on the quay. The wound had become infected, and the docker was carried to the school running a high fever and delirious. Jemeryl's stomach heaved at the sight of an ugly ring of black scabs, stark against the swollen, bloodless skin. She busied herself by taking another cloth and wiping the patient's face. Lank hair clung to the sweat on his forehead. His eyes were glassy and unfocused.

"The bite is clean. No sign of pus," Vine noted cheerfully.

Jemeryl clenched her teeth. She hated working in the hospital. Sunshine flooded through the windows, but for Jemeryl, the rooms held a murkiness the light could not pierce. Herbalism and medicine had always been her least favourite magical disciplines, and the addition of genuine patients had not improved her liking. It was unbelievable that any sorcerer willingly chose this work when there were so many other fields to explore, yet many did.

With hindsight, Jemeryl could see that she had been unwise to take her previous post in the valley, where her main responsibility had been caring for ungifted villagers. She had not meant the common people any harm, but she had confused and frightened them and had been relieved when they stopped pestering her with requests for aid.

A twinge of guilt hit Jemeryl. Maybe she had gone some way to deserving the reprimand when she was removed from the post and ordered to accompany Tevi. Yet equally, she knew the Coven leaders had been working on a secret agenda, rather than expressing any real anger on behalf of the villagers. And now she was back, caring for unwell citizens, more a servant than a sorcerer.

Jemeryl tried to take comfort that she had not been sent to the school before, as part of her general training—a fate that had befallen several of her fellow apprentices. At least her present stay in Ekranos need not be a long one. If only she could identify the traitorous sorcerer quickly.

The docker gave another rasping moan. He seemed to be attempting to swallow. Jemeryl stared into the man's face.

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“Something’s not right. His aura is more distorted than you’d expect.”

Vine chewed her lip thoughtfully. “Maybe.”

“Should we ask Neame to look at him?”

“It might be an idea.”

“I’ll find her.” Jemeryl hurried off.

The hospital was a large collection of buildings laid out between trees and gardens. Searching it all would take a long time. Fortunately Neame was not far away. Jemeryl found her in an adjacent ward, deep in conversation with an elderly witch.

While waiting politely, Jemeryl studied the senior sorcerer, who was both head of the hospital wing and deputy to the principal. In Jemeryl’s mind, the only good thing about the school was the chance to watch Neame at work. In the days since she had arrived, Jemeryl had acquired a great respect for the woman—even though Neame was one of the main suspects.

She was listening to her assistant, her forehead puckered in a distracted frown. Neame was a plump woman in her mid-fifties, with peppered grey hair twisted in an untidy braid. Much of it had escaped, and the wispy strands were tucked carelessly behind her ears. Her clothes gave the impression that they were following her around purely out of habit. Her face would have been ordinary were it not marked by intelligence and determination. Her manner would have been brusque were it not underlain by compassion. Jemeryl could not help hoping that Neame was innocent.

Eventually, the witch nodded and disappeared through a side door.

Neame pushed the hair back from her eyes “What is it?” she asked, noticing Jemeryl for the first time.

“Please, ma’am. I wonder if you could take a look at a patient.”

“Of course.”

At Neame’s arrival, Vine vacated the stool, allowing the senior sorcerer to take her place. The patient’s condition had not changed. Neame studied him intently, her fingertips just touching his forehead.

“The rat was diseased. Not surprising. A healthy rat would have run away when it heard the dock workers.” Neame made her diagnosis. She picked up a slate and chalked a note before passing it to Jemeryl.

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“We need different medication. Go to the dispensary and ask Orrago for this.” She hesitated. “Have you met Orrago yet?”

“No, ma’am.”

Neame looked at Vine. “You’d better go and introduce them. I’ll take care of things here.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The air outside smelt clean. The bushes lining the path were alive with the chirps of insects and the rustle of leaves. Jemeryl took a deep breath and ran both hands through her hair as if to brush away the aura of sickness. She glanced at the other young sorcerer.

Vine’s expression was untroubled. She was shorter than Jemeryl by half a head, with a mat of straight black hair and a round, good-natured face. A guttural burr of an accent betrayed her origins far outside the Protectorate. Jemeryl had learnt that Vine was a nickname, short for “The Grapevine.” Her real name was never used, mainly because it was both long and impossibly short on vowels.

“I don’t know how you can be so cheerful in the hospital.” Jemeryl’s tone held more emotion than she had intended.

“You get used to it. You’ve only been here nine days. I’ve had fourteen years.”

“You must have been young when you arrived.”

“I was. I’m from a tiny tribe way down south in the rain forest. I don’t think they’d ever had a sorcerer born there before. My family didn’t know how to deal with me, but they’d heard of the Coven. They got river traders to bring me here. I was dumped in Ekranos, not knowing a word of the language. I caused a bit of commotion on the docks. You know what a seven-year-old sorcerer can be like. Fortunately, no one got seriously hurt. They coaxed me up to the school, and I’ve been here ever since.”

“You weren’t sent on to Lyremouth?”

“I went there to take my oath and stayed a few months, but I came back as soon as I could.”

Jemeryl shook her head in bemusement. “You like it here?”

“Mostly. Some bits aren’t so good. I’ve got to help Tapley with his precious ravens this afternoon.”

“It can’t be worse than working in the hospital.”

“It is. Believe me, it is.” Vine groaned for effect. “You’re free this afternoon. Why don’t you take my place and find out?”

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“Thanks for the offer, but I’ve arranged to meet someone in town.” The words drew an immediate reaction. Too late, Jemeryl realised she had been careless. Anything told to Vine would be circulating the entire school by sunset.

“Known them long?”

“We met on the boat from Lyremouth.” Jemeryl lied. She certainly could not let Vine know they had been sent together by the Guardian’s orders.

“A, er...good friend?”

Jemeryl shrugged, not wanting to answer. Vine was on the trail of gossip. Fortunately, the dispensary was at hand, curtailing the conversation.

As they reached the door, Vine stopped abruptly. “You’ve not met Orrago yet?”

“No.”

“She’s not...” Vine hesitated. “She’s old. She used to be principal, but her wits are going and she had to resign. She looks after the dispensary now. Sort of. She’s not really up to the job. You’ll see what I mean.”

Vine knocked softly. “I wouldn’t want to wake her if she’s asleep,” she explained, but an elderly voice called out indistinctly.

An obstacle prevented the door opening fully, and Vine had to slip in sideways. Jemeryl followed dubiously. She came to a halt just inside the room and stared around.

A sweet, acrid smell pervaded everywhere. Mounds of dried vegetable matter littered every horizontal surface, stacked between precariously balanced bottles. Several crates stood in the centre of the room. It had been one of these blocking the door.

Vine was making her way towards a high-backed armchair positioned in the sunlight beside a tall window. She beckoned Jemeryl to follow. Great care was required not to dislodge anything, but Jemeryl managed to squeeze safely past the overflowing ledges.

The chair’s occupant was an old woman wrapped in a thick woollen blanket. Wispy strands of hair made a halo in the sunlight. Her face was deeply lined, as was the sunken skin between her knuckles.

Vine spoke slowly. “Excuse me, ma’am. I’ve come to collect some things and want to introduce you to Jemeryl. She’s been sent here to study herbalism.”

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The watery eyes examined them uncertainly. Yet Jemeryl could sense the remnants of great power. In her day, Orrago had been one of the Coven's foremost sorcerers. "You're like...what's her name...young Iralin." A frown crossed the lined face. "I haven't seen her for a while. Ask her to pop in and see me."

Jemeryl opened her mouth and then closed it again. Finally, she said, "I think you're confused, ma'am. Iralin is a senior sorcerer at Lyremouth. She was my mentor."

"Oh, no. She's a young thing, here to brush up her herbalism."

Vine spoke softly. "No, ma'am. Jemeryl is right. It's a long time since Iralin was here."

Orrago's gaze drifted away, and a pained expression crossed her face. Her hand tightened on the arm of the chair. "Maybe, maybe. People are getting to be like that."

Vine stepped into the silence. "Neame has given us a list of drugs she needs." She held out the slate, but Orrago brushed it aside.

"Let Frog see to it." Orrago's voice rose to a high-pitched waver. "Frog, come and be useful."

A large speckled toad hopped down from where it had been basking, unnoticed, in the sun. It crossed the floor in a waddling walk and then leapt onto the elderly sorcerer's lap to examine the slate.

"Frog will sort it out. I want to rest." Orrago's eyes closed, and she snuggled into her chair.

With obvious affection, Vine tucked the blanket around the ancient sorcerer. Orrago's features relaxed. Her hand reached out and squeezed Vine's before returning to her lap.

The two young sorcerers manoeuvred to the other end of the dispensary, where Frog was buried under a pile of papers. Only its webbed feet were visible, splaying out behind. A period of scrabbling followed before it re-emerged, dragging a vial of yellow liquid. Jemeryl watched as it then lurched across the desk and disappeared again into a half-open drawer.

"Why does Orrago call him Frog? Surely she knows it's a toad?"

Vine glanced down the dispensary. From Orrago's chair came soft, rasping snores. "It's a joke of hers. She's aware she gets people confused. She'll probably call you Iralin next time you meet. She named him Frog because she didn't see why a small amphibian should be the only one in the school she addresses correctly."

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A succession of bumps and a forlorn croak came from the drawer. Frog crawled onto the bench with a small bag, which it laid beside the vial, before heading off again. While awaiting its return, Vine demonstrated how to enter items in the dispensary record. Before long, Frog's task was complete. It regarded them with moist, bulging eyes, croaked a mournful goodbye, and then waddled back to its spot in the sun.

Once they were outside again, Jemeryl asked, "How long has Orrago been like that?"

"She retired as principal six years ago, but her mind had been going for some time. Most of us hoped Neame would take over as principal. She was deputy to Orrago, but Bramell got the post."

"Why not Neame?"

Vine merely shrugged in answer.

Back in the ward, Neame had been busy. Already, the patient was more alert. His eyes followed her every move. In fact, all the conscious patients were watching from their cots. Jemeryl knew Neame was admired by everyone who worked in the hospital. In the patients, she inspired a devotion that could only be called love. Jemeryl understood the reaction. Neame was able, by her mere presence, to lighten the oppressive atmosphere of the wards.

Jemeryl and Vine supported the patient while he drank the contents of a tumbler. Once he was back on the cot, Neame turned to the two younger sorcerers. She picked up the vial and embarked on a lesson.

"You see how the effervescence fades off through the shadow axis." She indicated a strand of the fifth dimension.

"Yes, ma'am." Vine nodded quickly.

Jemeryl was less certain.

"This is what we need to de-skew the synthesis. Watch how the auras combine..."



Tevi stood with the noisy squad of mercenaries awaiting assignment outside the customs office. Half her mind was listening to the chatter, the rest was watching seagulls fighting over a fish head. In a world that could seem so alien, the seagulls were reassuringly the same as those of her childhood. A shout recalled her to the present.

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“Hey, Tevi. You’re with us. We’ve got the holds.”

The speaker was Faren, one of the older customs officers. Tevi joined the other mercenaries in his small group. “How many ships?”

“Three set to go on the tide. We’re going to be busy.”

Tevi grinned. There were worse jobs. They set off for the moorings, but before they had gone twenty yards a burst of muffled laughter made her glance back. An overweight young man was talking to the remaining mercenaries. One of them pointed in her direction. Tevi waited as the man approached.

“What is it, Zak?” Faren got his question in first.

Zak looked confused, but then his attention returned to Tevi. “Chel...I heard she...I’m...Do you...?”

At the rate he was going, Zak would not have completed a question by the time the tide turned. Tevi decided to give what was presumably the information he was after. “She attacked a man. She’s been taken to the harbour lockup. You need to go there if you want to see her.”

“What will happen?”

“That’s up to the judge.”

“About me?”

Tevi frowned, confused in more ways than one. She did not have a clue what Zak was after—she wondered if he did either. He was clearly not very bright, nor was he good looking. In fact, it was hard to imagine that anyone would think him worth fighting over.

“You can find someone else,” Faren answered, clearly more in tune with Zak’s thinking.

Zak smiled coyly at him. “Would you—”

“No. Piss off.”

“I was just—”

“We’re on duty. You know better than to start pulling tricks.”

“When you’re off duty, I’ll be at the Navie.” Zak’s smirk took in all four mercenaries before fixing again on Tevi. “Chel, you know she’s—”

“I told you to shove it.” Faren broke in again.

Zak took a step back. He looked as if he was trying to think of something to say, but then gave another weak smile, turned, and trotted away.

The customs officers continued towards their destination. One of them nudged Tevi. “I’d say you’re in with a chance with Zak.”

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“She’s still breathing and she has two copper shillings to tap together. Of course she’s in with a chance,” Faren said. “But he ain’t worth the bother.”

“Is that experience talking?”

Faren’s shoulder’s twitched, as if at an unpleasant memory. “I was desperate. But he’s just as pathetic in bed as he is out of it. He wants someone to play Mummy and wipe his nose clean.”

The mercenaries laughed. Tevi joined in, although on Storenseg, men were expected to be simpering weaklings, needing women to take care of them. *That’s what men are like*, the voice of her childhood said, but Tevi did not say it aloud, and she no longer believed it anyway.

It was Lorimal’s fault. The shipwrecked sorcerer had been washed ashore on islands that had never seen a magic user. In their absence, physical strength counted for everything, and the islands were dominated by violent, patriarchal warrior clans—until Lorimal created the strength potion that resulted in the islands becoming dominated by violent, matriarchal warrior clans.

Tevi could not help thinking it would have been much better if Lorimal had found some way to create an equal society, more like the mainland. Although being imprisoned, tortured, and killed by the men who captured her may have given Lorimal an understandable desire for revenge.

“Are you going to meet Zak in the Navie?” One of her colleague interrupted Tevi’s thoughts.

She shook her head. “Not my type.”

“Why not?”

Tevi’s grimace raised a laugh. Luckily no other answer was required. *He’s male*, she could have said, but that would not be understood on the mainland, where the only significant difference between people was the ability to work magic. An exclusive sexual preference for one gender would be as strange as having an exclusive sexual preference for people whose favourite colour was green.

Tevi did not wish to get into explanations of the island culture, where men and women were believed to be, in some way, opposite. People would think it bizarre. Tevi was starting to agree, though this reappraisal of her upbringing had not made any impact on her deeper emotions.