

HOUSE OF GROM

RED SONYA OF ROGATINO & THE SECRETS OF THE AMAZONS

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CHAPTER 1

“I don’t think I could ever...” A wave at the pregnant woman’s belly finished the thought, eloquently.

“My dear child. If what I thought had any bearing upon the situation, I would have stopped at two!” The older woman’s eyes sparkled, her pride beaming through as she caressed her swollen belly and turned to either side to display the swell properly.

“How many?”

The pregnant woman held up four fingers, her thumb tucked against her palm. Then she put her other hand flat in the air at the lowest spot her arm could reach. A moment later, a little higher and then higher still. Finally, beaming, she held the hand over her head.

Four children born, four still living. She unfolded her thumb and poked her belly with it.

How many pregnancies, how many born, how many still living; an ancient ritual between women newly met. Often a grim one.

The younger girl asked permission with her eyes and the older woman nodded. A tentative hand stroked the round, firm flesh beneath the sari, only to be kicked from within. The hand retreated in shock at the unexpected buffet.

“The midwife says twins. At my age. Parvati watch over us,” she laughed, resigned. The hand she swiped over her belly was more protective than proud.

“When your belly swells with life, daughter, Parvati will be at your side,” said a new voice. “But first you must take a man.”

“I thought that you might be one of them, child,” said the pregnant woman to the younger woman, taking the new arrival in with a glance. “Your people don’t grace our side of the water much these days.”

“Devika Khan, well met,” said the younger woman. “This is my mother.”

The third woman to join the conversation was extraordinary. A head taller than any man in the market, her shoulders broad, the muscles of her arms and shoulders bulging beneath her sari. Incredibly, she wore a hammered bronze breastplate over that sari, covering her breasts and accenting them at the same time. The flesh of her bosom

threatened to overspill the metal of the armour, the stylized muscles of the abdomen carved in perfect opposition to a woman's usual soft, pliant flesh.

Amazon.

The huge woman offered an inclination of her head at the neck, respectful but not deferential. "Mahadevi, good mother," she offered. The pregnant merchant returned the greeting, her eyes taking in every detail of the massive, regal woman.

Despite her overlarge frame, the woman exuded femininity. The lashes of her eyes were enhanced with kohl, and beautiful scrollwork of henna adorned her hands and wrists, reaching up halfway to her elbow. Her waist and hips, while much broader than those of any other woman here, were perfectly proportioned to her height; those hips rolled seductively as she moved gracefully around the little stall to get a better view of what was on offer.

Her black hair was bound behind a circlet with a huge ruby diadem at its centre. The ruby could purchase the contents of every stall in the market and the carts the merchants hauled it in, thought the older woman, covetously, as she stared. Mahadevi saw the glance and smiled. Covet they might, but no one in this coastal village would likely try to steal from one such as Mahadevi. Not if they were fond of their hands and teeth, at least.

"Your cloth is lovely," complimented the leader of the Amazons. "My daughter is in need of something more..." She looked Devika up and down, scornfully. The girl's sari was sloppily draped, the colour faded and stained from her training and her youthful disregard for propriety. "Appropriate," she finished with a roll of her eyes.

"Will she grow to your impressive build?" asked the older woman, glancing up at the massive shoulders, then over to the slimmer, slighter girl. The planes of both faces showed the familial resemblance, but the girl was but a shadow compared to the mighty woman in the strange, armoured sari.

"Her father was well built, as I recall," said Mahadevi, an almost wistful expression briefly crossing her dark, almond-shaped eyes. From beneath the board that served as her cutting table, the pregnant woman produced several bolts of cloth; one of red and blue, atop the others, chased with gold thread, picking out sacred patterns that flashed in the sunlight. "These are full bolts, not cut to more... delicate proportions like the others." She offered the topmost to the young Devika, whose perfect, white teeth showed

her delight in return. “More expensive than my regular wares, but of better quality and sufficient quantity to accommodate your growth, young one,” she said with an avaricious smile.

The two visitors were not quite as darkly skinned as the local men and women, but neither were they as pale as that strange, crimson-haired woman who had come through earlier in the day. The variety of clients at her stall would be the talk of the village for weeks, she knew. Already she was fashioning the tales she would tell her boys of the day of foreign women and their foreign ways.

The two Amazon women from the strange island of Tamasira picked over the colourful cloth on display at the pregnant mother’s stall. They held up bolts of fabric against each other’s skin to test the colour and surreptitiously test the quality of the cloth. It was a drawn-out affair.

Across the market, half in shadow, a woman pulled an unfamiliar hood down over her eyes to hide her out-of-place crimson hair and pale skin.

Red SonYa of Rogatino watched the two with interest.

She watched the lithe little man who flitted from stall to stall, pilfering small items, unseen and unnoticed by the vendors and their customers. By her reckoning, he had collected a tidy sum in coin from slit purses and a neat little collection of trinkets he would doubtless sell in another village, further along the coast. She knew his type, though this man’s skill was as deft as she had ever seen. He moved like a phantom in the broad daylight, somehow instinctively in the right place to avoid notice at every turn.

His knife work was so skilled, his blade so keen and quick that SonYa almost missed him relieving the huge, armoured woman of several coins from a purse at her ample hip. Almost.

SonYa lit out after him, catching the slippery little man as he rounded another stall at the very end of the market that lined the little plaza. A hand clamped on his shoulder stopped his progress and the other hand caught his wrist and twisted the wicked little blade free to clatter on the cobbles. With the tip of her boot, she kicked the knife into the air. She briefly released one hand to snatch the blade at the apex of its arc, and then

held the blade to his flesh. “Time to return your ill-gotten gain, little man. I need an introduction.” The man did not understand a word of her language, but he could read her intent clearly.

SonYa frog-marched the thief back to the stall where the two women from Tamasira were still fussing over bolts of cloth. She twisted one arm up behind him to control his forward momentum, holding him firmly to keep him from squirming away. The man was not cooperative, but SonYa had handled more than one slippery cut-purse in her time. When she was within earshot, she cleared her throat loudly to get the attention of the Amazon leader and her daughter.

With only a few words of the local language at her disposal, SonYa made it as clear as she could. “Man,” she said, shaking the little thief by his shoulder. Holding up his knife, she added, “Coin. Yours,” and pointed to the armoured woman’s hip where a flaccid purse still hung.

Finding the little leather pouch empty, Mahadevi scowled down at the little man.

Shrinking from her, he gabbled his innocence, calling the woman holding him a white devil. Surely the good mother knew him to be an honest customer?

Mahadevi reached down and unwound a thin, golden chain she had been wearing as a sort of belt below her hammered bronze breastplate. In her hands, it almost seemed alive, dripping and looping around her wrists as if of its own accord. For an instant, SonYa thought that the looping, writhing henna tattoos on the woman’s wrists moved in sympathy with the thin, strangely menacing chain.

“The Agni-Pasha will have the truth of this,” declared the muscular woman with certainty. A flick of her wrist and a loop snaked out and around the man’s neck. “If you speak the truth, little man, you need not fear.”

She jerked the chain, and it tightened like a thin noose until it left him only enough slack to gulp shallow, panicked breaths. “Speak false, and the Agni-Pasha will burn the lie from your lips.”

“Mistress!” he pleaded, his knees giving way. Only SonYa’s iron grip on his arm, still twisted behind his back, kept him on his feet.

“Did you steal my coin, little man?”

The man shook his head, vigorously, afraid to speak. His motion of denial was enough. SonYa felt a strange heat suddenly radiate from the man, so hot she had to let

go of the restraining hand she had upon him.

The scream that came from the constricted throat was of such pain and fear that SonYa, well used to the suffering of men, winced in sympathy. He clutched, first at his throat, then his head, and then at his ribs, as if unable to find the source of his agony, let alone soothe it.

“Yes, yes,” he choked, finally. The change was instantaneous. His writhing and screaming cut off as if a cord had been sliced with a sharp blade.

Ducking his head, he proffered a purse of his own, holding it out with both hands to the huge, muscular figure of Mahadevi. She took the purse and handed it to her daughter. “See that all the coin is returned to anyone shy of it. If you suspect any of them are lying, attempting to take more than they are owed, point to me and remind them of the power of the Agni-Pasha, Devika.” When the girl did not rush immediately, to the task, her mother added, “Hurry now, it is near midday, and I would sail with the turning tide.”

“Did you steal from this woman, little man?” she asked the still-shaking thief, jerking the strange chain to get his attention and gesturing at SonYa who stood behind him, still and watching.

“No, mistress,” he answered, fearfully. There was no reaction. She pointed to the pregnant merchant, who had watched the proceedings with great interest. No doubt the tale would spread up and down the coast within a day. The little thief shook his head. Again, no reaction.

“And did you take aught but coin?” she asked. He hesitated, and SonYa thought she saw him begin to shake his head reflexively, but an instant later, he said, “Yes, mistress,” and pointed to the wrappings at his feet. SonYa did not understand many of the words, but she could read the language of bodies and faces as well as any woman could. She reached down to one leg while the bigger woman bent to the other.

A handful of small items emerged from each wrapped calf; small craft pieces of shell and coral, a couple of small iron hooks, a knife, and a length of good leather cord piled up on the pregnant woman’s cutting table. Mahadevi asked the woman if she would see to returning the items, and she agreed, readily. SonYa could see that today’s events were as interesting and exciting as any the jovial woman had likely seen in a lifetime. The gossip she would share was well worth the effort of tracking down the owners of the

trinkets.

“Would you punish this thief, good mother?” asked the Amazon as she wound her strange chain back around her waist.

“We all know his face now,” the expecting woman said. “He will not be welcome here again. Let him be someone else’s problem. The small crowd of merchants and villagers that had gathered to watch the excitement murmured their agreement, and Mahadevi gave a shrug.

“As you wish, good mother. My coin has been returned, and this one,” she gave the little man a rough shove, pointing at the last stalls and the empty curve of the coast beyond, “will not soon easily let lies come to his lips. The Agri-Pasha’s power lingers.”

The little man set off at a trot, the jeers and laughter of the villagers and merchants chasing him from their lives.

“And you, fire hair,” said Mahadevi as her daughter returned, skipping happily up to her mother’s side, her task complete. “What would you have of me for a reward?”

“SonYa,” she said, pointing at herself. “With you,” she added, firmly, pointing at the sea. “Learn.”

Mahadevi turned to her daughter and said, “Devika, it seems our fire-haired friend would be an Amazon.”

The young woman glanced up and down at SonYa, her eyes assessing. “She is strong, Mother. Not as strong as one of us, but stronger than...” She stopped and thoughtfully looked back at the mother of four, soon to be six children, earning a living for her family even as she was about to bring new life into the world. “She is a strong woman. The second strongest we’ve met today.”

“So be it,” declared Mahadevi. “Sonya, you may come and join us for a time.”

“SonYa,” corrected the redhead, emphasizing the two syllables and the hard pronunciation of the “Y” in her name. “Son. Ya.”

“SonYa,” repeated the Amazon with a smile. “I can see we do not need to teach you to assert yourself.” She clapped the pale-skinned woman on the back so hard as to stagger her. Only SonYa’s quick reflexes and cat-like balance kept her on her feet. “Good! You can instruct my daughter in this, at least! We will teach you everything else about being an Amazon!”

CHAPTER 2

The three women set off in the small, single-masted sailboat. Mahadevi handled the sail, while Devika operated the tiller, turning the craft as instructed. The wind was fair and steady, and Mahadevi knew her business. They tacked and turned, catching good wind and, from what SonYa could tell, making an excellent pace. In short order, they were out of sight of the land and making their way by signs only Mahadevi could see.

She watched the sail, the clouds, and the wheeling birds, then dipped her hand in the water rushing by their hull. She pulled her hand from the water and sniffed, searching for a scent or a sign SonYa could not tell. Standing in the prow of the boat, letting the wind batter her massive form, she would call minute adjustments to her daughter, step back and trim the sail, then return to the pointed prow to stand, feet planted as if on solid ground. Watching, tasting the wind, and listening to the ocean as the little craft swallowed the leagues before them.

A day and a night. The woman did not sleep. She spoke only to instruct her daughter to adjust their course, and then was otherwise silent.

It was SonYa who spotted the other ship. Lacing up her green trousers as she finished her morning ablutions, she saw a white shape poke briefly above the waves. A moment later, it again bobbed into view, slightly larger this time. A third glimpse and she knew the white shape for a sail. She did not know the word for such a thing in the language of these women, so she simply said, "Sail," and pointed. Hearing both women speak the same word, SonYa now knew the local word for sail. Or boat. Or enemy.

Mahadevi and Devika then did something that SonYa could not comprehend. Instead of turning the boat away to run ahead of pursuit, the younger woman wrapped a cord around the tiller and started rummaging in a leather sack. From it, she pulled a stoppered glass bottle and two thin, wooden styluses. The women sat opposite each other and began to apply henna over their already painted forearms. Each held an arm to the other, and with their free hand, painted the offered arm. After a few minutes of intense concentration, each smoothly switched hands and began painting the other's opposite arm. Though she could not imagine a less useful thing for them to be doing, SonYa had to admit that they were both experts at the application, and the artistry of

the work was gorgeous to behold.

Once they had been so decorated, Devika stowed the henna and application tools, and pulled out a large chest from beneath the planks that served them as both seat and table. Within, a great curved sword that SonYa would have trouble even lifting with one hand, let alone wielding; a second blade, this one a short, thick, curved scimitar akin in size and weight to SonYa's sabre; and two stout round shields banded with dark iron and festooned with metal studs, all wrapped in oilcloth to protect them from the salt and spray.

So the word she had heard was the one for "enemy," not the one for "sail" or "boat." She lifted the sabre in its scabbard at her hip, ensuring it was free and would not catch as she drew it. From her own leather purse, she pulled two charges for her pistols, a squeeze of the paper telling her that the powder within was yet dry. She tore open one and with practiced hands loaded first one pistol and then another. Thankfully, her pistols were flint-fired, so no powder was required to prime the pan as in her old pistols. The upgrade had been worth the precious coin. Powder-primed pans on the high seas were a recipe for misfiring disaster, in her bitter experience.

This would be close-quarters fighting, two shots, and no chance to reload, even if she found targets with both. That was assuming that the oncoming vessel didn't simply lob over a well-placed cannon shot and take their little vessel to the bottom without a fight at all.

SonYa pulled her long mass of red hair back as best she could, lamenting the loss of her kerchief some weeks ago, blown from her hand as she forded a river on her horse, and gone down and down the wide course of water and out of sight before she could react. The young Devika saw her movements, rummaged further in her leather pack, and came to SonYa's side, holding a length of stout leather cord. She motioned for SonYa to turn and then expertly tied the mass of crimson curls in a tail, tight to SonYa's scalp.

The clap on the back that Devika gave SonYa was nearly as strong as the one she had received from the girl's mother. Only pride kept the grunt of pain behind her lips. Amazons indeed.

As the ship closed, SonYa could see more detail. Two masts, hanging enough sail to make far more speed than their little vessel. If the unknown ship was hostile, there was

no choice but to fight. Women could not hope for mercy from the sort of sailor who would be aboard such a ship. Death would be far preferable to the treatment they could expect if they were captured alive.

Strangely, she did not sense any fear from the two women standing in the little boat with her. For herself, she was accustomed to such life and death struggles, having led a life of mercenary service despite her sex. Red SonYa of Rogatino was well favoured by many mercenary companies, known for her ferocity in battle and keen, strategic mind. No one aimed a cannon so well as she.

To stand shoulder to shoulder with two women with a similar lack of fear in the face of battle was something she could never have anticipated. Yet her companions merely rolled their shoulders to warm their muscles and waited patiently for the enemy to bring the battle to them. She had stood on the gunwales of other ships, shoulder to shoulder with men in similar circumstances, but this sense of feminine camaraderie was like nothing she had ever experienced.

Pride, more than courage kept SonYa from ducking when the first gun barked from the opposing vessel. Not a cannon, thankfully. A well-placed ball would hole their tiny hull and leave them floating in the waves in minutes. Guns fired from rocking decks rarely found a target of flesh at this distance. Wasted shots, almost without question.

A moment later a ragged volley from at least three rifles. Devika casually threw up an arm and SonYa heard a strange, almost musical, metallic ping that she had never heard in her life. The sound seemed to have come from the young girl's arm, but that was impossible. She wore no armour and barring great luck, metal armour rarely stopped a rifle ball if it hit the body squarely, anyhow. If anything, the wounds she had seen on men who took a ball through metal armour were worse than a clean impact on flesh.

Another, more disciplined volley reported from five guns at the least. Both women now flicked their arms up and around, and more musical, metallic sounds sang out, definitely from their arms. SonYa, watching closely this time, discerned a glow that radiated around their wrists and forearms, which flared to life as the strange pings rang. It couldn't be!

Could it?

There was no time to ponder the question further. Ropes, weighted and hooked, arced out over the waves and thunked solidly into the railing and decking of their little

vessel. The first few feet of each rope were not actually rope but chain, making hacking themselves free almost impossible, though SonYa suspected that Mahadevi might manage it with her great, two-handed blade.

Instead of hacking at the chains, both women tensed and without warning leapt, impossibly, across the distance between the ships. No man could have leapt so high or so far, but both women spanned the distance effortlessly. SonYa could only stare as she was left suddenly alone in the little sailboat.

A moment later, a man flew bodily off the deck and he too spanned the distance between the vessels, easily clearing the far side of hers. He splashed into the water and flailed for a few moments before grabbing hold of the little sloop's low railing. Leaning over the side, SonYa pointed one of her pistols at him and scowled. "Move to board and you feed the sharks!"

The man made no move to try to climb over the railing, still coughing and spluttering as he bobbed in the waves alongside the little boat.

Shouts and the sounds of metal clanging against metal floated across the waves, but from her vantage, SonYa could see no movement, her little vessel sitting far lower in the water than the enemy ship. A shrill scream wafted over the railing, but she was certain that the voice, despite its pitch, belonged to a man and not one of her companions.

And then all was silence. Beyond the sound of creaking ropes in the rigging and waves lapping at the wooden hulls of the two vessels, there was no sound, whatever.

Above SonYa, Devika leaned over the rail and waved. SonYa felt her vessel lurch as the larger ship suddenly turned away, dragging the smaller vessel along in its wake. The young girl threw a thick rope over the side, a good length dropping at SonYa's feet. The knotting motion the girl made was clear enough. Seeing that the thin, grappling ropes were straining as they picked up speed, SonYa made the line fast to a sturdy metal loop at the bow.

A sound behind her reminded her that she still had a passenger. Rolling her eyes in irritation, she picked her way back to where the man still clung to the rail, his body buffeted by the waves as the little boat accelerated. Letting him feed the sharks would be kinder than the fate he likely would have subjected her to, were their positions reversed.

She hauled him bodily over the rail, then trussed his weakened arms behind his back with a length of strong rope and secured that rope to one of the bench seats. He was

too busy panting and coughing to offer any resistance. Whatever passed for justice among the Amazons, he would have to face it.

SonYa had little mercy in her, but neither did she have the capacity for cold-blooded murder. This little sailor was no threat to her. Based on the sounds she had heard of the short battle on the larger ship, she doubted he ever had been.

CHAPTER 3

The island was truly a paradise. A beach so white and wide, it looked like the ocean was offering a warm smile of welcome, the water calm and crystal clear once they had passed a natural coral breakwater. The wind wafted them gently to shore as if the two women aboard the larger vessel commanded it. Tall, straight trees SonYa knew to be date palms, their crown of drooping green leaves waving in concert with that breeze, lined the shore in a forest so dense she could see nothing beyond their ranked trunks. Strange cries echoed around from within the forest; birds or animals, SonYa could not tell. The wheeling gulls overhead returned the calls in their own, discordant voices.

After two further days at sea, SonYa was happy to get her thigh-high leather boots wet to slosh through the gently rolling surf to the beach. She left her prisoner trussed in the little boat. The Amazons who greeted them ashore could deal with him.

Five women, all in brightly coloured saris, each wearing a hammered bronze or iron breastplate similar to the one Mahadevi sported, and each bearing a strung bow with an arrow notched, awaited them ashore. SonYa's two travelling companions leapt from the deck of the ship, now firmly driven into the soft sand. They landed in concert upon the beach as lightly as if they had leapt over an obstructing log, rather than dropping twice the height of a tall man. Without great luck, SonYa would have come away from such a feat with shattered ankles or at least a severe limp. The two Amazons, however, showed no signs of calamity as they strode joyfully to the party that awaited them.

The three leading women lowered their bows and let the strings go slack. The two women at the edge of the party did not. One kept her shaft aimed steadily at the deck of the looming ship; the other sighted down the arrow's length at SonYa's breast. On reaching the little knot of women, Mahadevi put a hand under that arrow and redirected it to the deck of the ship. SonYa exhaled.

A conversation SonYa could not hear, in a language she only barely comprehended, sent the five women across the sand, presumably to gather whatever prisoners and salvage that remained aboard the larger vessel, along with SonYa's single captive. Mahadevi and Devika both gestured for her to follow them, smiling encouragingly. The three women traipsed inland, down a well-worn path between the towering date palms. The can-

opy swallowed the sunlight, and it was suddenly almost cool beneath the shade of the forest. Monkeys screamed and gibbered as the trio invaded their territory, but nothing more threatening than that presented itself.

The land sloped sharply upward after a short walk, forcing SonYa to push her pace to keep up with the effortless, loping gait of her companions. They were not moving faster than a quick walk, but they seemed unaffected by the incline of the land, to SonYa's consternation. Her breath came in great whoops by the time the slope began to level off.

The two women clasped hands as they crested the rise, their joy at their homecoming palpable and infectious. SonYa found herself grinning, despite the toll the exertion of the hike had taken. Below them, in the bowl of an extinct volcano, the most perfectly beautiful town was laid out like a marvellously chaotic and exotic sculpture, poured from the mind of a mad and inspired artist.

SonYa could see figures moving about in the looping script of the avenues, the sinuous, perfectly aligned buildings defined. She could see the mind behind the design of the little settlement, its inhabitants flowing from one task to the next, without impediment or conflict. It was as if the town were a living, breathing being, its sections perfectly in tune with each other, supporting and uplifting one another. A breeze swirled up to her nose and she was surprised to note it carried only the scents of spices and fruit, mixed with a little dust. In her experience, any town or village usually reeked of offal, sweat, and less savoury things best not closely considered, not the pungent aromas of spices and ripe fruit.

"SonYa," said Mahadevi, waving an arm at the perfect little town. "Tamasira."

SonYa could only nod. And follow.

The path down into the bowl of the volcano was perfectly manicured, the stones demarcating the trail finished with crisply carved channels that would help with traction in wet weather. SonYa was relieved that her companions didn't set such a punishing pace on the descent as they had on the ascent. Perhaps they had noticed how taxing the climb had been for her. Or perhaps they were simply savouring the view. SonYa could not blame them for the latter.

From a certain angle, the town's streets resembled the script she had seen used in this part of the world. She wondered if that was a coincidence. Given the precision and

artistry of the layout, she doubted it.

A spell, perhaps? In her wanderings, SonYa had run across stranger, less savoury examples of such power.

More women greeted them as they entered the town. Most were of a stature similar to Mahadevi; a few were slighter of build, like Devika. There were also children of various ages, all girls. The chatter and laughter were infectious as the little trio were welcomed to the village. SonYa was by turns offered pastries she did not recognize, pieces of succulent, dripping fruit, and cups of strong, unwatered wine. She took the latter with thanks and a piece of fruit for politeness.

SonYa was the object of great curiosity for the younger women. The children, in their bright saris and sandals or bare feet, danced and capered about in a loose circle that moved with the three of them, the bravest darting in to feel the leather of her strange, thigh-high boots or the butts of the pistols in the sash she wore as a belt. The younger women, all with hair as black and glistening as that of the mother and daughter that had brought her to this paradise island, gawked in open-mouthed wonder as they took in her mass of softly curled, copper-hued hair and her pale skin with its dusting of pink freckles that so differed from their almond skin tones as to make her an alien among them.

An elderly woman, her sari dripping with chains of gold and silver, each finer than the last, stalked painfully up to the trio. She thrust a bony hand out and roughly grasped SonYa's jaw in her shockingly strong fingers, her sharp nails digging painfully into her cheeks. The woman crisply turned SonYa's face one way, then the other, and finally pulled her down towards her own face to glare full into her eyes for an eternity.

The authority in the woman's voice when she barked a single word was subtly different from the authority SonYa had noted in Mahadevi's voice earlier, but the result was similar. The assembled women parted and opened a path that clearly led to an open area, something like an empty market square. Their party was subtly encouraged down the avenue until the three women stood in the square, ringed by what seemed to be the entire population of the island.

Deft fingers relieved SonYa of her two pistols before she could whip her own hands protectively atop them. Reflexively, she yanked her sabre free at the offence.

Mahadevi snapped her fingers, the sound echoing through the unnaturally silent

plaza. A woman stepped in and placed a fine, curved blade in the local style in Devika's hands. The young woman twisted the sword, finding its balance. By her motions, SonYa knew she had a great deal of training with the weapon.

A test then.

Slamming the point of her blade into the smooth cobbles that paved the plaza SonYa called out loudly, "NO!"

Though they did not speak her tongue, her posture and tone were easily understood. The women murmured angrily that the challenge was to be refused. SonYa pointed at the young woman who was approximately her size and build. She knew from how easily the two women had handled an entire ship's crew between them, not to mention the incredible leaps that she had witnessed, that Devika was more than her match, pound for pound. "Not her," she called, with a definite shake of her head.

She raised the point of her blade and held it steadily at shoulder height, pointed directly at Mahadevi.

"Her."

There were audible gasps. SonYa wasn't certain, but she thought that the older woman was some sort of priestess, not the leader of these women. She was reasonably sure she had just challenged their queen, a woman of massive and terrifying proportions, to a duel. The reaction of the women all around her confirmed her assumption.

Devika looked disappointed. Mahadevi simply nodded and strode over to her daughter, swiping the curved sword from the younger woman's hand. In her hands, the blade looked more like a carving knife than a sword; so large was she.

A commotion went up as the two women began to circle each other, testing their footing on the cobbles, assessing each other by posture and movement. The ship's crew, eight men in total, were led into the circle and pushed roughly to their knees.

The duel was to have a few more spectators.

CHAPTER 4

Mahadevi swung a long, looping stroke that SonYa parried with little effort. The attack was a probe, not a true attempt to get past her defences. That the woman's enormous strength was enough to nearly rip the sabre from SonYa's grip was alarming. That she could tell that the woman hadn't remotely swung with her full power was *terrifying*.

SonYa would need to end this quickly, and there was no chance that she could surprise and overpower this woman. Men habitually underestimated her strength and skill when she met them in battle, a failing she was happy to exploit whenever she encountered it. Mahadevi was not holding back in deference to SonYa's perceived weakness as a man might; she simply outmatched the redhead by such a margin that she did not have to swing with her full power to dominate the match.

If she could not equal the woman's strength, that left only speed and guile. Somehow, SonYa suspected that despite her great size, Mahadevi's speed would prove to be equally incredible. That left guile.

They had relieved her of her pistols, but she had other weapons hidden about her person. A woman travelling alone, no matter how skilled, needed a surprise or two at hand to discourage those who might see her as an easy target. She had a dagger in each boot top, both well balanced for throwing. Her sash was weighted and could double as a crude flail or be used to entangle an opponent's weapon hand. The rules of this bout had not been made clear, but she did not think she had been brought 3 days over the waves for a death duel. This was an initiation of sorts, not a lethal contest.

The sash, then.

As she circled, placing each foot in precisely the right spot, with her off-hand, she casually loosened the knot at her hip, disguising the movement as adjusting how the sash sat around her waist. Without the pistols tucked into it, it was loose and sat lower than usual, so the movements looked natural.

Mahadevi did not appear to notice anything amiss. She drove in with a flurry of blows that pushed SonYa back within reach of the women who ringed the plaza. She had another step, perhaps two, behind her before she would be in their arms. Rather than backpedal further, when the larger woman's sword hammered down, instead of

parrying with her own blade, she jinked hard to her right and dived past the Amazon, tucked her shoulder, and rolled as she hit the ground.

Popping to her feet, she spun and loosed the sash in a whip-like strike. The lead weights in the free end of the length of cloth snapped over Mahadevi's forearm, spinning around her wrist and slamming into the muscular flesh. With all her might, SonYa yanked the silken sash back and up. Caught off-guard by the unexpected strike, the huge woman's hand popped reflexively open as the pain of the tightening binding bit into her wrist.

The curved sword clattered to the cobbles. Another surprised gasp rippled through the crowd.

SonYa was about to press her shocking advantage when a pistol was fired, drawing screams of horror from the assembled women. All eyes turned to see one of the sailors whip SonYa's spent pistol across the square, smoking as it tumbled and bounced over the stones. Her other pistol was pressed to Devika's temple, the man holding the girl before him like a shield.

How he had secured the pistols was unclear. That he knew how to use them was.

With a few words that SonYa did not understand, he demanded his fellows' bonds be removed, and a moment later, the seven others stood behind him in a loose semi-circle. He barked more orders, his intention clear. They were going to leave, taking the young woman as their hostage, her life forfeit if the Amazons tried to stop them.

The little knot of men began backing away from the square, the women behind them parting to allow them to pass. Following them without appearing to, SonYa scooped up her pistol in passing. The duel forgotten, every eye tracked the men, every face a frown of concern for their princess. For her part, Devika looked more annoyed than afraid. Seeing the man's finger on the brass trigger of her loaded pistol, SonYa could not share the young woman's bravado.

Mahadevi said a few words, firmly but in a low voice. SonYa caught the local word for "man" and the one for "enemy" she had heard earlier. The Amazons opened a wider berth for the men, pushing back hard into the walls of the surrounding buildings. Clearly, the queen did not want her subjects to imperil her daughter with rash action.

SonYa understood the thinking, but she did not agree.

The man holding Devika was scanning the crowd, clearly seeking threats from all

sides. He kept up a continual stream of instructions to his men. SonYa was reasonably certain he was their captain, so calmly and decisively did he instruct the crew. Such leadership rarely presented itself from thin air.

She watched. He had a pattern. Bark an order, look to his left, and then take a backward step. Then he would whip his head right, lest someone take advantage from that quarter. Another step back, then turn to face SonYa and Mahadevi before taking two more quick, retreating steps.

Then the pattern repeated. Unimaginative, but effective. He could keep the main threat of the massive, muscular queen and SonYa with her sword at bay with this quick, set pattern.

He barked his order, his men moving as one behind him to give him room and keep him shielded from behind. Look left, a step.

SonYa passed her sabre to her left hand, dropping her right to her hip as if easing the effort of holding the blade so long.

His head whipped to his right. Step.

Her hand reached down to the top of her tall boot.

Now he faced SonYa and Mahadevi. His head stayed almost perfectly still as he took his first quick step back. Before he took the second, SonYa's wrist flicked, and her blade sprouted from his eye. The dagger had whipped unerringly across the space between them, finding its mark as if by magic. His grip relaxed and the pistol dropped to the ground, bouncing uselessly across the cobbles.

To her credit, Devika was neither shocked nor still. She whipped around, spinning the man's limp form with her and when she faced the men behind her, she hurled the corpse into their midst, tumbling three of them to the ground in a tangle of limbs.

The Amazons took the cue and, in moments, had the entire party driven to the ground, each man taking a furious pummeling from at least two angry women as he fell. If they survived the assault, thought SonYa, they would not be glad of the mercy.

Mahadevi scooped up her daughter, the men forgotten in a mother's concern. She pushed and pulled at Devika's face, neck, and head, seeking wounds but finding only her daughter's displeasure at being handled so before the whole island's population.

SonYa smiled at a memory of her own mother fussing similarly after a brawl with an older boy over some slight SonYa could not recall. She too had been annoyed by the

woman's ministrations. She envied Devika her mother's concerned touch, though she understood the girl's embarrassment as well.

Looking over her daughter's shoulder at SonYa, Mahadevi locked eyes with the red-headed warrior. She deliberately pushed her daughter from her and made her way back to the makeshift arena where they had battled. Behind her, the women of the island had trussed the surviving men mercilessly, their piteous moans and entreaties mostly silenced by roughly secured gags. There would be no second escape attempt.

Mahadevi picked up the wickedly curved sword that SonYa's desperate move had ripped from her grasp. Watching warily, SonYa tensed as the muscular woman stalked back to stand before her.

Another gasp came from the assembled women as Mahadevi dropped to one knee, bowed her head, and held the sword out to SonYa, balanced on the backs of her tattooed wrists in supplication. She quietly, but certainly, intoned something SonYa took to be a pledge, from its formal cadence and ritual tone.

Though SonYa understood but little of the language, she understood the words for "daughter" and "ask" within the short declaration.

Unsure of the protocol, she sheathed her own sword and grasped the proffered blade by tip and hilt, balancing it in her own hands.

She offered one word in reply. She hoped she had pronounced "training" correctly. In her ears, that word sounded similar to another word she had heard that she thought meant "praise" or "worship." Using the wrong one here might be a problem.

The queen of the Amazons tilted her head up to meet SonYa's eyes and nodded once. SonYa offered the sword back and the huge woman plucked it from her hands and casually tossed it across the square to Devika, who caught the spinning blade from the air by the hilt. She gave SonYa a nod of appreciation and held her head down in respect. Around her, every woman in view did the same.

"I guess that really was the word for 'training', she muttered under her breath. "I hope."

EPILOGUE

SonYa's training began with menial tasks that at first she resented. Cleaning the kitchens, sweeping the streets, carrying messages, and the like. After a week of this, she realized that her grasp of the language had improved dramatically, her mind forced by its isolation among these women to grasp meaning and nuance from alien words and phrases just to keep up with her chores.

Devika met her in her spartan quarters after another long afternoon of work that had little to do with the skills SonYa sought to learn from these women.

"SonYa. I bring your next lesson," said the young woman, brightly.

SonYa caught just enough of the words to understand. Definitely improving, she thought.

"Why, now... lesson?" she asked haltingly. Understanding came faster than her ability to form the strange language with her own tongue.

"You could not understand proper speech well enough before now."

SonYa could not disagree.

A large, leather-bound book, its corners shod in gold, a gorgeous script embossed in gold on its luxurious cover, slammed down upon SonYa's single table. Devika dropped into one of the two simple chairs that were her only furniture beyond the table and simple cot. The young woman motioned to the other chair for SonYa to join her.

She pulled the chair up beside the raven-haired beauty, noticing for the first time that she wore a new sari, brightly dyed blue and red fabric artfully draped to cover her modesty while leaving glimpses of flesh at shoulder and hip to emphasize her lush femininity. A gold chain, much as the one Mahadevi had used in the market the day they had met, perhaps even the same one, was wrapped loosely around her waist, her hips catching it before gravity could finish its work. The strange, almost living patterns of loops and swirls of henna upon her forearms were freshly reapplied.

Devika, though unarmed, was girded for battle. Her weapon, apparently, was the book she brought with her.

"To learn to fight as an Amazon, you must first be an Amazon," she intoned, formally. SonYa understood every one of those particular words.

She nodded.

“To be an Amazon, you must first understand *who* we are. *What* we are,” Devika continued. SonYa realized that this was a spoken ritual. An oath.

“This,” she tapped the leather of the book, reverently, “tells who we are. What we are.” She turned and locked eyes with SonYa. “Only Amazons know these truths. To share it with any other is our highest crime.” Another tap on the cover, this one gentle, its impact as loud as a volley of cannon.

SonYa nodded. Revealing these secrets to anyone would mean...

“Death,” SonYa confirmed.

The dark-haired girl nodded back. The leather cover creaked as Devika pulled it open.

END