

THE GROWLING

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"You have used up the last of the birch moss, Honi," Dahli complained, a frown on her heart-shaped face. She tipped up the earthenware container to prove the truth of its emptiness, then dropped it to the dirt floor. Her strong hands, more used to clenching a sword than a broom, clamped down on her hips.

"Why not? My need is the same as anyone else's." Honi pouted, flexing a bicep until her apron sleeve split, showing her bronzed arm. In a moment, the shield-sisters might come to blows over an increasingly petty argument. Their chief flung herself between them.

"Enough!" cried Shooga, her voice filling the small supply hut. "Peace between you. Since there is not enough birch moss, I order that you two shall go out and seek more, and furthermore, you shall not raise your voices again. Now, apologize," she said, patting her palms against the air as if pushing the two women together. "You are warriors and sisters in combat!"

Dahli looked at Honi, who eyed her with suspicion.

"I apologize," Honi said at last.

"So do I," Dahli said, tossing back her mane of brown hair. "But you did use up the moss." Honi's face turned a deeper shade of tan.

"I needed it!"

"And what am I supposed to do? Watch where I sit for a week?"

Dahli breasted up to Honi, her fists clenched. Honi went on guard with her basket, as if she was about to belabor her shield-sister over the head with it.

"Girls! Girls!" Shooga shouted, pushing them apart in truth this time. The warrior women dodged to glare at one another over her head, making faces. Shooga was fed up with the lot of them. Herback hurt, too.

The time of the Growling had come again. Thank the Goddesses such times were rare in the history of the village of Hee Kwal, or there would be no unity, merely widely spaced houses full of woe. The fault lay with Mother Nature herself. Women of bearing age had children, with only a few turns of the moon between birth and conceiving anew. With men gone so long, though, the last of the children had been born months ago, leaving wombs idle. It was as if all the women returned to the time of their earliest nubile season, before they had bargained between themselves for husbands. As was the way of the Mother Goddesses during the time of creation, each of the women's cycles had gradually returned, joining the pattern until they were identical in timing and duration. When the girls who had reached womanhood but never been with a man were numbered alongside the grown warriors, that made the Red Time very strong. Woe betide the unwary stranger who wandered into the village during the Growling. True, it only lasted a day or two in every moon, but it sorely tried Shooga's patience.

The men of Hee Kwal had gone to the capital of Sen Serif, to serve their year's time as honor guard to the king and queen. Next time Shooga would see that it was the women who went to represent Hee Kwal. The men had been away so long Shooga's youngest baby

was already fourteen moons old, and she was feeling the lack of male comfort. So were all the others, though they didn't precisely want them now. Her mate, Brohne, usually made himself scarce during this time of the moon anyway when he was at home, preferring to be out of range. Yet the women's patience was wearing thin at the men's absence. Their anger was never so obvious as at this time of the month. The Growling released fierce, wild, magical energies, and lent strength to female warriors' arms.

The seeress Wysacha hobbled up to them and raised her rheumy eyes to Shooga. "The Hen of Night laid the Day Egg hours ago. This argumentative one," she pointed a chipped nail at Honi, "has her appointment when the Egg reaches its highest. If she is not at my hut by the time it hatches into the red Rooster of Evening I will take the next patient."

"I will be there I" Honi said, glaring at the old woman. "You shall take away my pain, Wysacha. I receive no relief and no respect either in this village. If my husband was here..."

"If your husband was here you'd be with child, and there'd be no Growling," Wysacha said, with a grin that showed her toothlessness. "Thank the Goddesses I'm past all that, but I thank you for the extra magic I can draw upon."

"I think the men stay away deliberately," Dahli said, shoving her dark hair behind her and working it into a rough braid. "Why resume the responsibility of home and child when they can be away, free to hunt and fight?"

"My husband will pay when he gets back, that I promise you,"

Honi said, hoisting her basket on her hip and tossing her golden hair. "I'll be with you very soon, Wysacha."

"Good, good," the old wizardess said, turning in a swirl of dark red robes to totter back toward her hut. "Bring some food. The Day Egg needs nourishment to grow. Huh! Goddesses pity the first man to set foot in this village: the whole place is set against you."

"The Night God spat the Gob of light hours ago," Pex, chief of the Buh Bah, admonished his spy. "How lies the land?"

The man grinned, his white teeth gleaming in the blackness of his beard. "You'll like this, chief. The whole place is empty of men, except for boys not old enough to grow peach fuzz. The women are alone, and for a long time, I wager. The village has deteriorated. Gardens are untended, and above all lies the fume of an unfamiliar smell."

"No men? Do you say so?" demanded Abbs, chief of the Ma Cho and Pex's second-in-command.

"I swear, brother," the spy said, slapping his hand on the other's well-muscled buttock in testament of a good oath.

"Hur hur hur," laughed Pex, diabolically. "It shouldn't take much to conquer them, and men-Par Tee!"

The scared rite of Par Tee involved the consumption of much fermented spirits, followed by the ingestion of well-greased meats, and then fertility rites, the more vigorous the better. As Pex looked around at his cohort, he saw that every man's face wore a grin wide

enough to swallow the ears of the man on each side.

The tribes of Buh Bah and Ma Cho had once been at war. The battling had lasted for many seasons until peace had grudgingly been proposed. It seemed that the two sides would rather sneer at one another over the bargaining table until one wise soul pointed out that if they united forces they could go and pick on smaller tribes. A treaty was suggested, and both sides agreed at once.

The most defenseless of Buh Bah's neighbors were the Sen Setif. Sen Setif males were objects of derision in both the Buh Bah and Ma Cho lands because the Sen Setif valued male and female alike, both in the arts of war and of peace. The Buh Bahs and the Ma Chos knew well that a woman's place was in a man's bed. Any woman's place. How convenient it was that they wouldn't have to fight the Sen Setif for their females.

Honi was grateful for her close-fitting leather armor as she brushed past the waist-high, stinging nettles to get close to the birch trees. She spotted a lush clump of moss and began to pull it off the white bark. Such dull work.

She heard the clink of metal near her. It must be Dahli threshing through the reeds on the bank of the stream, looking for wide lily leaves to pack the moss in. Honi wished she would hurry up. She wanted to get back to the village and have Wysacha work her magic on Honi's aching lower back. Though her skin felt as if it itched on the inside, she discovered that the irritation that had dogged her all day disappeared as soon as she set foot outside the village wall.

Wysacha was right: the place was packed full of magic. Perhaps in the rite of the Third Day they could wind the whole package into a spell and send it to bring their men home safely-so she and Dahli and the others could beat them with sticks for having been gone so long.

She sighed and rested her back against the nearest tree bole. Mytee was a good man. He'd hardly know their son, who had grown up enough to walk and wield a play spear already. She'd even taught the little one to say "Surrender or die!"

Honi knelt to yank one more chunk of the absorbent moss off the handiest birch. Almost enough now for ten women, she told herself, looking down at her well-filled basket. The metallic clank came nearer. It must be Dahli. She looked up, expecting her shield-sister. Instead, she had one moment's glimpse at a tall, well-muscled, handsome, but greasy, unshaven, and dirty man before hands grabbed her from behind and clamped over her eyes and mouth.

"Ow! Gods damn her, she bit me!" Gluetz howled. The eight men trying to hold onto the blond woman paid him no mind. Their captive was refusing to cooperate. She struggled and Kicked, even managing to work a fist loose now and again to punch a man in the face. Pex signalled to the warriors to drop their burden and sit on her so he could tie the woman's hands and feet. Most of them sported scratches and bruises before he was finished.

"A fine one," Abbs said, running his eyes up and down her body. "Spirited. I like that. She'll be a worthy object for the rite of Par Tee."

The female glared at them over the gag made of a wad of birch moss and her own belt. Pex grinned down at her. Suddenly, her body

relaxed, and her eyes closed.

"The force of my personality," Pex said, certain that it was true. "Pick her up. Let's see if the rest of them are so easily subdued."

The men shouldered their burden, but not before Pex saw the woman's eyes open again. In them he saw hate, and the promise of retribution. That look would change to love once he gave her his personal attention.

"Soon, my pretty, soon," he said, patting her on the thigh. The woman kicked at him with both legs, almost throwing herself off Abbs's and Gluetz's shoulders.

Across the meadow, Dahli straightened up from the mass of lilies, her hands full of dripping leaves. A sharply painful impulse had hit her right in the guts. She thought it was belly cramp, returning earlier than Wysacha had promised, but no. It was a warning, the kind she felt when there was to be a battle.

"Honi?" she said out loud. Her friend didn't answer. Dahli threw away the water lilies and reached up over her shoulder for her sword.

The noise of feet threshing the reeds made her drop to one knee, on guard and out of sight.

A group of men passed her by. At first she was gladdened by the sight, thinking it was their husbands returning from their travels. The next puff of wind swiftly disabused her of the idea. These men stank

like months-dead offal. Their tunics and treads bore so much soil and grease at first Dahli didn't see the rips. And besides, the garments didn't match. No Sen Setif man would let himself go so badly.

Between them, two of the men carried a struggling bundle. Honi! Dahli thought at first of leaping up and charging in to save her friend, but realized she was well outnumbered. Better to sneak back to the village and get help.

"They've got Honi?" Shooga asked, but she was already buckling her sword harness over her black body armor. She added her favorite war hammer to a loop on her belt. "How dare they?"

"Who were they?" Wysacha asked, wringing her thin hands together.

"Buh Bahs," Dahli said, pacing up and back over the chief's carpets. "And Ma Chos, too, unless I mistake the smell. There's at least forty of them, all filthy."

"By the Goddesses, they will pay," Shooga said, slapping one hand into the other. "Muster all the women. Put the children in the central barn with the beasts, and put a heavy guard on all the doors. Attack our village, will they?" The chief felt herself getting hot, as if the air around her had caught fire.

"Careful," Wysacha said, holding out her palms to sense the ether. "The magic is packed around us like bomb-powder. A forceful thought could set the whole place off."

Shooga stopped three paces before charging out the door and made herself calm down. The heat died away to a warning of warmth. She turned to nod at the wisewoman.

"I'll save that for the right moment, old one. In the meantime, I must see to our defense. Get to a safe place, and watch out for us."

"I'm already weaving spells," Wysacha said, tottering out the door as last as she could.

Pex had his hand on the hilt of his sword as he swaggered into the village square, followed by his men and their captive. Nice place, this. Houses in good repair: all of them even had roofs. Plenty of trees to lounge beneath, lots of wood for fires. Good grass for herds. They were going to like it here. He surveyed the village as if its surrender was a mere formality.

Abbs carried a sheep he had killed. It would make a fine barbecue for the Par Tee. He threw it on the ground in front of the group and stood next to Pex. In the doorways and courtyards, women went nonchalantly about their tasks: drawing water, weaving cloth, milking cattle, pulling weeds.

"They can hardly contain their enthusiasm," Gluetz said, looking around him.

"Perhaps they haven't noticed us," Abbs whispered.

"How could they not?" Pex asked, thumping his chest mightily. "Do we not have the appearance of warriors? Do we not reek of manly musk? They ought to be grateful to us for coming. Look around you. These might not have had a man in months. Some will feel the lack."

"And how good could a Sen Setif man be anyhow," Delts snickered, "with his foolish ideas about equality? A woman gets just as much pleasure from a rough tumble as she does from slow wooing."

"Hah!" Gluetz said, slapping his leg. "And a man can get in three or four women in so much time. Why waste a nice, warm day like this one getting all hot over a single roll in the straw?"

"Hur hur hur," Pex laughed "So true. Ladies!" He raised his hands on high, turning so every woman could look upon his masculine splendor. The women turned disinterested eyes toward the group in the center of the grassy square. "Greetings! I am Pex of the Buh Bah! You will be glad to see us. My men and I here claim title to this land and everything that grows or walks on it. We are your conquerors! Surrender to us easily, and you may even enjoy our attentions. We are bold and experienced lovers, and I promise none shall go without. What do you say?" He stood with his hands outstretched and a broad smile on his face, waiting for the gratitude of the village maidens.

"Aaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh!" The voices from a third of a hundred female throats were raised in a shrill war cry that caused the hair on the nape of his neck to stand straight out. From behind looms, from under milking stools, from flower baskets, from the folds of dresses came swords, spears, and maces. The loose robes fell away,

revealing armor and ringmail.

For just a moment, the Buh Bah were paralyzed. Then Pex swept his sword out of its scabbard just in time to meet a blow aimed at his head.

"Oh ho! So you want it rough?" Pex chortled, beating back the attack with ease. "Wonderful! My men prefer it that way."

Dahli led the first wave of ten Hee Kwals. At her side was Timayta, Honi's younger sister, eager to redress the wrong done to her family's honor. Eight of them charged straight into the midst of the men, forming a shield for the two who swung bludgeons at the knees of the men guarding Honi. While the erstwhile guards were jumping up and down clutching their legs, Dahli's squad surrounded Honi, cut her bonds, and guided her out again. As soon as her hands were free, the blond warrior drew her own sword and waded in against the invaders.

"Cooperation," Shooga had said over and over again, when teaching tactics. "Cooperation-and hit them where they live." Honi took that advice.

Meanwhile, the other two waves of ten closed in on the mob of Ma Chos from both sides. Dahli, the last to withdraw, took a swipe at Pex himself. He disengaged her blade expertly, and countered with a hard blow that vibrated her arm to the shoulder. Gritting her teeth, she swung again. He laughed, parrying her sword and Timayta's with a single cunning move.

Dahli let out a frustrated scream between her teeth and rained blows on him from every angle, only to meet a counterstroke each time. Her own sword turned in her grip, and she had to hold it with both hands. She couldn't hold out long against such a forceful attack. An arm encased in black leather slid past her and caught the next blow on the shaft of a war hammer. Shooga shouted at her.

"Together, now!"

Dahli nodded shortly. Around them, men and women battled fiercely. Dahli saw with despair that the women were not up to their best fighting trim. It had been so long since they'd had a genuine conflict that they'd let themselves go soft. She vowed to the Mother Goddesses that if they survived this battle she'd train her muscles every day, instead of twice or thrice a week. As she began to tire, she recalled Wysacha nagging her to follow the Way of Ayráo Bix, the first and most tireless of Hee Kwal's female warriors. How she wished she had heeded that advice.

"Are you all right?" Timayta asked Honi, as the two of them hammered on the sword and shield of a blackbearded male.

"My hands are numb, my back aches, and the smell is making me sick to my stomach," Honi said, punctuating each phrase with a sound strike on their enemy's sword or leather shield. "Other than that, I am fine."

"Don't get yourselves all tired out," the man said, leering at them

over the edge of his shield. "You should be looking forward to the Par Tee."

"Par Tee? With you?" Timayta cried. "How barbaric!"

"Yeah." The man grinned. "Ain't it great?"

Honi was infuriated by the big man's arrogance. She struck again and again at him, but knew her blows were not connecting with flesh. He turned them all back; not easily, but steadily. She was good, but where skills were evenly balanced, weight and height would always win. Honi was suddenly afraid that her village would fall to these disgusting invaders. They would... touch them. She panted with fury, and was made even more angry when the man watched her breathe with open admiration. Honi saw red.

She didn't know at first whether there was something in her eyes, or if the whole world was disappearing in a crimson mist. Around her, fellow warriors were falling, and the men, with fewer opponents to face, were ganging up on single women. Warriors were vanquished one after another, knocked out or tied up by the invaders. She tried to fight her way toward them, but it was getting harder and harder to see. The sun was a red lens in the sky.

Pex turned away the puny blows of the females. His men wielded greater strength, and their cause was just. It was only a matter of time before they had worked all the fight out of the women. When they were exhausted, they'd be that much easier to convince to serve the Buh Bah. And the Ma Cho. This equal sharing stuff was too

advanced for him. Normally he would just tell his men to take the ones they wanted, and leave the rest for the other tribe. Numbers weren't his strong suit, but even he could see there weren't enough women to go around.

"Don't kill any of them!" he shouted. The big woman in black and the sexy woman in ring armor pressed their attack on him as if they really knew what they were doing. For a moment he felt sorry for their fathers. If these girls had been sons, he could have made warriors out of them.

Suddenly Abbs and Delts were beside him, a redheaded woman slung between them, unconscious.

"How goes the day, brothers?" Pex asked, parrying a double blow with both hands on his sword hilt. The woman in black showed all her teeth, and slammed a hammer blow at his arm. He shrugged it off with the edge of his hide shield.

"Over soon," Abbs said, cheerfully. "This is number ten plus two to go down. Only some more to go!" Abbs wasn't too good with numbers either, but he was a good judge of a battle.

"Fine," Pex said. "I'll just finish off these two." His brother chief pushed by behind him, leaving Pex with his opponents. The women were tiring at last. He was pleased to see that the fire in their eyes was undiminished. The Par Tee would be a good one.

And yet, Pex thought, it was strange. The day had been fair, but now there was a low cloud gathering around the battle like rising mist. It wasn't dust; no one was coughing. Besides, the dirt here

wasn't red.

With a skilled twist of his sword, he disarmed the big woman of her hammer. She reached over her head for the sword on her back. Pex chopped at her arm, and connected with the tricep muscle. It didn't cut through the leather, but he could tell it hurt by the tears that sprang to the woman's eyes.

"Give up now," he suggested, almost kindly. "Save us all some time."

"Never," the woman gritted. She shrugged her sword free, and engaged him again. The cloud around them grew more palpable, cutting off the sight of the other warriors around them. She slashed at his chest with the point of her blade. Pex turned it away, but just barely.

The chief of the Buh Bah began to think something was very wrong. The women should have been getting weaker, but instead; they seemed to be drawing strength from somewhere. And he, puissant fighter, felt himself growing tired. How could such a thing be? The woman in black was saying something.

"How dare you invade our village!" she shrieked, chopping deeply into his shield. "How dare you capture one of my warriors and truss her up like a roast! How dare you kill one of our prize ewes! How dare you offer to rub your greasy, smelly bodies against ours! How dare you insult us and the honor of our husbands!"

With every slash of her sword, Pex found himself retreating a step. He blundered backwards over a loom. Another woman joined

the attack on him, her eyes ablaze.

"You ruined my weaving!" she shrieked. "A moon's work, destroyed!" She brought a mace crashing down on him, but only hit him in the head. A mere scratch.

"You should be glad we offered to conquer you," Pex pointed out to the three women confronting him. "We will appreciate your beauty, and you won't have to wear those confining garments any longer."

"You arrogant cretin," the woman in ringmail snarled. The thrust she aimed at him actually passed through Pex's defense and rammed him in the chest. If the sword had had a point, he'd have been done for. That thought struck him just as he bumped into something.

"That you, chief?" Abbs's voice asked.

"What is happening?" Pex asked, dumbfounded, turning his head just enough to see his fellow chief, at bay. His arm moved mechanically, parrying one blow after another. Out of the corner of his eye Pex saw that every one of their men was now back-to-back in the center of the village square, fighting for their lives against a brood of women. "This is impossible!"

The invaders were overwhelmed by the circle of female fighters. One by one, the men dropped, and the women clustered around the next warrior, beating him until he submitted or fell unconscious. Soon, there were only a few standing: Pex, Abbs, Delts, and Gluetz.

"And now," cried the blond woman that they had captured out in

the field, "kill!" She raised her sword arm over her head, and charged.

The women, only just visible through the red fog that now blanketed the village square, responded with their shrill war cry. The four invaders, as one, cowered and dropped to the ground with their arms over their heads.

"No!" a little old crone shrieked, appearing out of one of the houses. She pushed herself into the midst of the women and stood in front of the chiefs. "Don't kill. The power of the Growling will rebound back on you the way their attacks have on them!"

"Then I've already paid for this!" Honi said, striding forward to Pex. She grabbed a handful of his greasy hair and hauled him to his feet. There was incredible strength in her slender arm. Pex couldn't have stayed down if he'd wanted to.

"This is for sitting on me," Honi cried.

"I'd hate to see what would happen if your men were here," Pex said, weaving back and forth. He tried to lift his hand to brush her away, but it was too heavy.

"If our men were here," Honi said, cocking back her gloved fist and aiming carefully, "they'd watch and applaud!"

With the full force of the Growling magic behind her, Honi swung. Her fist connected with the man's chin. He flattened out on the air, and sailed a dozen yards over the heads of his men before crashing into a tree. Curious birds, disturbed from their nest, sailed down to

fly around his head in a circle, twittering to one another.

As soon as the last of the invaders was defeated, the air cleared. The red mist vanished, leaving the sky a pure and sparkling blue.

"The Growling is over," Wysacha said, with a pleased nod, as if she had arranged the whole matter herself.

"Thank the Goddesses," Shooga said. She reached up to sheathe her sword and stopped in surprise. "My back has stopped hurting!"

"All you needed was some exercise," the old woman said, coming over to pat the chief on the back. "I have told you this before. Exercise and good nutrition, just as it is said the great one Ayrao Bix practiced."

"Is this the answer?" Shooga asked, only half joking. "Next time the Growling comes, we should go looking for a fight?"

"No, no," Wysacha chided her gently. "By then I hope the men are back again. The magic was so strong this time. We won't always find so easy a way to dissipate it."

"Easy?" Abbs asked, staring up at the sky. He lifted his head, then dropped it to the earth again. The village females all walked away from them, the Ma Cho, leaving them lying on the turf as if they were of no importance whatsoever. If he had the strength, he'd... he'd... he'd better leave before he found out what he would do. Some mysteries were better not investigated. He rolled-over onto his belly

and hauled himself to his feet with surprising difficulty. The other men were all scattered nearby like heaps of dirty rags.

"Come on," he said, swaying as he gestured with one arm. He hadn't felt so bad since the time they brewed liquor out of mushrooms. Abbs gathered up those of the tribes who were conscious, and assigned them to carry the ones who weren't. It took four of them to haul the mighty Pex away from the tree where he was resting.

The men boldly slunk out of the village of Hee Kwal. No one attempted to stop them, which Abbs attributed to the reputation of the Ma Cho. And if they told their story first around the pubs in the great cities to the north and east, that reputation would not suffer.

"You forgot the sheep," Delts told Abbs. "We could at least have had the barbecue."

Abbs glanced behind them at the ragged file of warriors. Some of them were walking in a delicate fashion to avoid chafing bruised body parts. Those women did not fight fair.

"Bugger the sheep," Abbs said. "No one is in the mood for any kind of Par Tee."

Honi looked down at her knuckles. "Ech! Look at that, will you?" she said, holding out her hand to her friends. "That brute had enough grease on him to light a lamp."

"Filthy," Dahli agreed, shaking her head over the ugly smudges. She offered the edge of her own tunic to her shield-sister and best friend to wipe off the grime, then something occurred to her. "Honi, where is the moss? I really need it now."

"Oh, I dropped it near the birch trees," Honi said, pointing up the hill. "I'll go with you to gather it up. At least now I am certain we won't be disturbed."