

# Chain of Command

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"Mom," Kayla said in that tone teenagers use when they're practicing for the time they will put you in the nursing home. "You're not going to wear THAT, are you?"

I forced myself to smile, making sure I showed teeth. I'd had my canines lengthened and my incisors filed to subtle points. Remember, I told myself. I'm the mom. I'm Alpha. Wolf Woman. A CEO of Earth Muthas, a militant woman-owned multinational. Only my teenage daughter was powerful enough to make me forget this.

I was wearing mail and a leather thong and copper breastplate because I had a focus group to lead in half an hour and there wasn't time between now and then to change from civvies. I held the keys in my mouth for a second while I tightened my belt. All I had to do was drop off Kayla at her friend Tiffany's; from there they would walk to their cheerleader meeting at the high school. I could hide in the Jeep; no one need see me.

Kayla was five foot seven and growing fast enough that I expected her to surpass me during the coming year, when she would be a junior. Her hair was bronze from a bottle, though on her, it looked feminine. She preferred a fruity-smelling department store perfume called Flower Power to my musky Marker, the flagship product for my company. Her scent made my eyes water, but I decided against saying anything. "Choose your issues," our family counselor had warned.

I had chosen.

So had Kayla.

The issue was not about scent.

Kayla did not want to come with me to this weekend's Women Warriors retreat, starting tomorrow, where one hundred women would gather to trap trespassing trolls, celebrate our strength, hunt our own dinners and leave nature's scavengers to do dishes when they picked the carcasses clean. Instead, my daughter wanted to stay in town with Tiffany and shop for makeup and high heels. Kayla was a pacifist. I was a warrior, an awkward situation for us both.

"You look good," I said, thinking that if her pleated skirt had been cut from leather instead of polyester and if her tank top had been chain mail instead of spandex, she could have passed. Her arms and long legs were muscled and tan, not from fighting, but from cheering the football team. It stunned me that someone who existed on tofu and fruit could grow the body of an Amazon.

She made a face. "I can't believe you're going to wear that. This is SO embarrassing."

"Are you all packed?" I asked. The counselor had recommended changing subjects to diffuse tense situations.

"Let's talk about packing later," she said, meaning she hadn't started. "We gotta go."

I had prearranged for Bear Woman to get the focus group sharpening knives if I ran late, so I wasn't in any hurry. "Pack," I said, settling into a power pose on the floor. I crouched on my haunches as if ready to spring, fingers poised an inch above my boar-tusk knife handle. I had killed the boar myself while on safari in Peru.

"Mom!" Kayla screamed.

I forced myself not to smile. "Go upstairs and pack," I said. Alpha power surged through me in a premenopausal electrical storm. I unsheathed my knife and lazily carved my initials into the pecan floor.

Kayla stood by, defeated. "Oh, all right!" she said at last. She turned and ran to her room.

Only then did I notice I wasn't breathing. I gasped, both with surprise and the need for air. I had won the battle. The war wasn't scheduled to start until tomorrow.

Kayla's suitcase was big enough to hold a gray whale, which, incidentally, she tried periodically to save. She had packed a month's worth of clothing, makeup, and reading material—nearly all relating to Ricky Martin, her latest pop star heartthrob. She was bringing her own cooler filled with Rainier cherries, mangos, and a chewy vegan concoction called tempeh that Kayla liked to chop and season with sunflower seeds and roll up in whole wheat tortillas.

My cooler held a case of chocolate truffles, a few bottles of my favorite white zinfandel, barbecue sauce, spices, and pork casings to make sausages, in case there were any leftovers from the kill. Okay, so we were militant, but I was born in the Midwest, and when you were from Iowa, you never threw away anything you could can, freeze, or over-winter in the cellar.

The retreat was near the Washington/Oregon border, a three-hour drive by highway, a little over two hours if you knew how to get there off-road, which I did. I ignored Kayla's whining and refused to take the Jeep out of four-wheel drive until we had crossed a shallow ravine called Starving Woman Creek. The creek was empty year-round, except for an occasional flash flood. Tomorrow, if things went well, we planned to fill it with a river of animal blood when we hosted our full moon Earth Mutha ceremony.

"Mom," Kayla said, "you're not really going to trap trolls, are you?"

"It doesn't hurt them," I said, for the umpteenth time. "We just trap them in cages to transport back to the Idaho wilds." I had no sympathy for the hairy beasts. They weren't even native to the area and had been brought to the Northwest by Idaho farmers looking for cheap help to harvest their potato crop.

"Goddess, Mother!" she said, using that I-can't-wait-till-you're-in-the-nursing-home voice. "I suppose you think it was okay for the government to intern Japanese Americans during World War II."

"Not a good analogy," I said. "This is way different. Trolls aren't even human. They behave like pigs. They steal our supplies, trash our site, and urinate on our bedding. That's why they're called trolls, for Goddess' sake."

"Now you're going to pretend like I don't know what I'm talking about so you don't have to listen," Kayla said. "You and your friends are bigger thugs than the trolls."

"I'm sorry, dear, but the trolls are too much of a nuisance to ignore. We tried living in peace with them, but this really is an `Us or Them' kind of issue, and I'm sorry you don't understand that." How quickly our discussions degenerated into variations of Because I Told You So!

"It's people like you who make us have wars," Kayla proclaimed.

I stared at my difficult daughter. She had shed her sweater to reveal the "I heart Trolls" shirt she knew I detested.

"I want peace as much as you do," I said. "We just disagree on the best way to get it."

"I'll say." Kayla liked to have the last word. I decided to let it pass.

She bent to dig around on the floor and came up with a crinkled paper sack. "Want some teriyaki seaweed jerky?" she asked.

"No, thank you," I said. "Could you pass me the dried buffalo strips?"

"Sorry, but I don't touch dead things. Get it yourself." She arranged her earphones, turned on her CD player, and mouthed the words to Ricky Martin's latest hit.

The counselor had suggested that when I was angry I count to ten before speaking. I counted to fifty. That helped a lot. Despite our differences, all I wanted was a nice mother-daughter weekend together. Outdoors, communing with nature. Getting in touch with the warrior within. While Kayla ate her trendy vegan diet, the rest of us would dig roots, pick berries, hunt animals. We would come together for dessert. We had two diet rules: 1) Unlimited chocolates and 2) Everyone eats what they kill. Rule one built community. Rule two protected our offspring when patience ran thin.

Kayla didn't believe me, but I was trying. As a concession to civilization and my easily grossed-out teen, I'd brought plenty of dental floss so she wouldn't have to see her mother with sinew hanging from her teeth. Still, I had my limits; Kayla would have to learn to accept them.

She flipped down the mirror to apply lipstick. I heard the unmistakable sound of a mister as she sprayed herself with yet more Flower Power. My eyes watered. Then she did her nails. I rolled down the window and tried to focus on nature, which was harder than it should have been, despite our being a hundred miles from the nearest town.

Finally, we arrived at the retreat. A narrow gravel road led up a hill to the grassy meadow in the forest where we would sleep a dozen to a teepee. Twelve teepees were already set up, their tanned hide walls stitched together with gut and painted with the stories of our exploits over the years. There were many images of women spearing animals. One picture story depicted the time Mavis shot a man with her crossbow. He should have known better than to wear brown in the woods the weekend of our retreat.

In the center of the circle of teepees was a fire circle. Gladys Badger Woman was already hauling wood

in for the fire we'd need during the drumming we'd be doing later tonight. She had mighty thews and a big axe.

Other SUVs and ATVs were parked beside teepees while women offloaded weaponry, toilet paper, and auxiliary mail. The air was alive with jingling, jangling, clanking, and greetings.

Our meetings would be held in the lodge, a river-rock building just a short hike up the trail. To the left of the lodge, a flagstone deck held a stone altar and overlooked dry Starving Woman Creek. Other communal buildings were tucked further into the forest beyond the lodge.

I parked beside the executive teepee to unload; Kayla scampered out to explore the rock cave in the nearby woods.

Three years ago, she'd been enthusiastic about coming on a Women Warriors retreat with me. She'd had the time of her life here. No whining then about what to save and what not to eat. I had a Polaroid of her in the bottom drawer of my desk at work. In the picture, she held up a half-cooked rabbit on a spit, and her mouth was smeared with animal fat. She wore the biggest smile I'd ever seen on her face.

You'd never catch her smiling at me like that now.

"First workshop starts in three hours," I called after her.

"Oh goody, arts and crafts. I can hardly wait."

"Force yourself," I said.

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There were ten girls enrolled in the Teen Warriors program. The applied arts class was held in a lean-to constructed of sharpened bones and animal hides that opened to the front. It was a rustic look that practically screamed Don't Mess With Me! I thought it attractive enough that I had instructed our PR division to make postcards with an inscription reading "Wish you were here."

Kayla seemed determined to corrupt the others with her pacifist nonsense. It only took one wrong-headed person to ruin things for everyone else. So why did that one have to be related to me?

"I'll be back to check up on things," I whispered to Lanyard Lana, our arts group leader, and left to make sure the bow-stringing class was running smoothly. All the materials were in place for the mask-making workshop tomorrow. Another group had already speared a twelve-point buck and were gutting it in preparation for roasting over the coals for dinner. Everything looked well under control. I headed for the galley at the back of the lodge and watched Cookie stir her huge black cauldron. I smelled vegetable broth and frowned. Had Kayla somehow gotten to Cookie? "Need any help?" I asked, on the lookout for any white cubes that might be tofu.

She grinned. "One troll," she said. "That's all I ask. Enough for a decent broth, and the rest of them can go back to Idaho."

Trolls were a protected species. "Sorry," I said. "But I'll be glad to skin you a rabbit."

"Not the same," Cookie said with a sigh. "Goddess, I miss the good old days when you could kill anything you wanted."

I shrugged. "You gotta change with the times," I said, and waved good-bye.

I decided to drop by the sign-up desk. There was one problem with a credit check, but otherwise everything was in order. I checked on supplies. We had enough ammo and plastic wrap to last a year. The troll traps were set and my border guards were alert and on patrol.

Back at the lean-to, the girls were constructing chain mail from soda can pop tops, a very clever project, I thought, with proprietary pride. Then I saw Kayla's innovation. Instead of aluminum, her chain mail was made from paper gum wrappers.

She looked up, saw me, and got an impish grin. Before I could protest, she pulled a lighter and her perfume mister from her pocket. She coated her mail with Flower Power. "To peace," she said, and lit it on fire. The whole thing burnt to ashes within seconds.

I could barely see through my allergic tears.

"Kewl!" said one of the younger girls. "Can we burn ours, too?"

"I'd like a word with you, Kayla Marie," I said, and took my daughter's hand to pull her outside. I forgot

how to count to ten and was well into my lecture when I heard Cookie's monstrous laugh, followed by a child's horrified scream.

"Got one!" Cookie cackled.

"Oh no!" Kayla screamed, breaking away from my grasp. She ran up the hill, toward Cookie.  
"Murderers!"

I didn't have to see to know we had trapped our first troll.

I was sound asleep when I heard the camp guards sound the ram's horn. I heard booted footsteps approaching my teepee, and barely managed to rouse myself before a woman in a plated copper tunic thrust her torch before my face and said, "You'd better come out. When we did the bed check, we found a few irregularities."

"What type of irregularities?" I asked, stifling a yawn.

"Well," she said, keeping her cool. "The troll has been sprung, and, uhm . . ."

"Go ahead," I prompted. "Tell me." How bad could it be?

"I'm really sorry to report," she said with an expression so flat I could have used it as a mouse pad, "we think your daughter did it. She and the troll are missing."

I jumped up from my bed of skins and pulled on my light mail nightie and some sandals. I preferred sleeping au nature; because of the chafing factor. I lit a torch and rushed out to search the Jeep first, then climbed up to the tree house, then checked the arts and crafts lean-to. Empty.

I decided to look for her in the cave and headed down the pathway into the forest. The guard stomped along behind me. A breeze wavered our torches, but other than an occasional owl call and the mutter of leaves and pine needles in the trees above, the night was quiet.

The cave was too low for me to stand up straight in it. I crouched over and shone my light in the crevices as I explored. Mud caked on the knees of my nightie. The guard waited at the cave entrance, maybe to spare me embarrassment.

I caught sight of the tip of Kayla's eco-green sleeping bag, peeking out from under a rock overhang. I made my way toward her and crouched down until I could see beneath the overhang.

It was Kayla, all right—her Flower Power scent brought tears to my eyes—but there was something else, something dank, sour, and wild. I saw then that there were two bumps covered by the sleeping bag. One of them moved and I saw a hairy tuft and agate black eyes as a horrid little troll lifted its head and stared into my light.

My daughter was sleeping with the enemy.

I reacted instinctively and went for my weapon. For a wild moment, I wasn't sure who I wanted to slice up more, and I did my best to convince myself this was all something much more innocent than it appeared.

My hand groped for my knife, but I didn't have a knife sheath on my chain-mail nightie, which was strictly for trips to the latrine. All I had on my hip was an entrenching tool. I unhooked it and shook it in the air, making an unrecognizable screeching sound and knocking down a few nearby stalactites.

Kayla's head popped up beside the troll's. "Oh, Mother," she groaned, and covered her head again.

I stopped shrieking.

"Wolf?" the guard called from the cave entrance. I recognized Gladys Badger Woman's voice. "Wolf Woman? You okay in there? What's going on?"

I got a good grip on my entrenching tool and counted off breaths, breathing in for four counts, holding for four counts, and breathing out for four counts. My torch hissed softly and spread a layer of carbon on the ceiling of the cave.

"Never mind," I called. "I'm fine."



The troll stared at me with the jail-yard stare of a hundred boys trying to psych out their girlfriends' mothers, that look that says, "You don't know what she does when you're not around, and you can't stop her." Reflected flames flickered in its black eyes.

My inner warrior was all set to deal with the situation. Let Kayla wake up with hot troll blood splattering all over her. Let her see that she was never too far away either physically or emotionally to escape my protection. How dare this hairy little slug think he was good enough for my daughter?

"What's that noise?" Kayla asked sleepily.

I tasted blood and realized that I'd bitten my lower lip with one of my surgically enhanced canines, an occupational hazard. I also realized I was growling.

I dug a small hole in the damp clay floor with the entrenching tool and stuck the torch in it, then crept toward the sleeping bag and the waking troll on my hands and knees. We had not broken our staring contest since its head rose from the sleeping bag. I wanted my hands around its neck in the worst way.

I knew if I hurt the damned thing Kayla would never forgive me. She was still mad that I'd stomped a spider in the house three weeks ago.

The closer I got, the worse its stench grew, though nothing could match the stunning strength of Flower Power. The troll's b.o. was almost refreshing next to Kayla's perfume. In fact, it startled me to realize I found it rather intriguing. I did my best to put any thoughts of intrigue out of my mind as I prepared myself for battle.

The troll sat up.

It was short and dense. Its head was shaped like an eggplant, with the tuft of dark, dread-locked hair rising from the stem end, its small agate eyes under a shelf of brow in the middle, and its broad, thin-lipped mouth across the big round part at the bottom. Ears like flyswatters stuck out on either side of its head. Its neck was invisible. Its shoulders were impressive under all the stinky, filthy hair. Even its muscles had muscles. It crossed its arms over its broad chest and dared me to come closer by flicking an agile, snake-split tongue at me.

My growl grew louder. I crept forward, right across my daughter's sleeping bag, until the troll and I were

almost nose to nose. If you could call that little button a nose.

"Grrr!"

It smiled and licked my nose like a grateful puppy. Disarmed by its friendliness, I didn't react for a second when it copped a feel. Not easy to do through mail, even light mail.

If it did that to me, what had it done to my daughter? Kayla's tender heart or not, nobody touched *me* without an invitation! Choose your issues, the counselor had said. Protected species or not, the beast was about to become troll sausage. I jumped on the troll, calling on my totem wolf to give me strength.

"Mother!" Kayla screamed. "Stop that this instant! Leave Sticky alone!"

There was something intoxicating about wrestling with the troll. The narrow confines of the cave forced us totally into each other's personal space. I found myself straining to breathe in its scent, and began to wonder if it exuded some sort of pheromone that interfered with my warrior abilities.

Pretty soon I had lost track of my original goal of killing it and concentrated solely on the pleasure inherent in roughhousing. It was pinching me, hard enough to hurt, and I pinched it back and felt proud to hear it gasp at my strength. Then it licked me with that tickly tongue, and now I gasped because I realized I was getting slightly more excited than was appropriate for a woman who thought she was being licked by a dog.

The troll was a worthy opponent, one of the few I had wrestled with recently who possessed a strength equal to mine. I couldn't help but be impressed by his power. In some ways, we were equals. We rolled around without letting go of each other. We smashed into walls and rocks and each other. He tickled my armpits with a stocky finger. I laughed. I couldn't stop.

I had my arms around the troll and he had his arms and legs around me and his mouth so close to my ear I felt his hot breath moisten my skin when I heard Kayla scream, "Mother!" in a tone of absolute shock.

It had been a long time since I'd startled *that* tone out of her.

The troll pressed his broad mouth against mine and licked my lips. The taste was not at all unpleasant. He hugged me one last time, then rolled off me and vanished down a narrow tunnel into the darkness.

I sighed. He was gone, yet his spicy taste lingered on my lips and his strong scent filled the cave like a pleasant memory. I wondered if I could work up a scent based on the troll's b.o. for the company. Would I name it "Attract" or "Repel"?

"Mother, how could you?" Kayla demanded.

I sat up. "I didn't kill it. I didn't even hurt it much."

"You terrified him!"

"I don't think so." I patted kinks out of my mail. The troll had really strong fingers. "Roll up that sleeping bag and get back where you belong, young lady."

"It's not fair," she said, and sniffled. She shoved ineffectually at her sleeping bag.

"Life's not fair. Actions have consequences. Your actions in particular are going to have some big consequences. Deal with it." I had a worry I didn't even want to bring into the light. After fighting with the troll, I knew he was male, horny, and well-equipped. What if Kayla's actions had the consequence of making me a grandmother to a half-troll child?

I blinked at her—my innocent baby. Hah! She was no more innocent than I was at that age. I remembered my mother's vague warnings when Ned and I were fooling around in the back seat of his Chevy. At the time I thought she didn't know what we were really doing.

Now I saw that she must have known, she just didn't know how to effectively deal with it. But Kayla and I had gone through counseling, so I knew better. At least, that was the theory. I decided to pretend nothing had happened, just like my mother.

I wanted to ground Kayla for letting that troll loose and sneaking off with it. She knew the camp's rules. Nobody stole someone else's catch.

Grounding, however, did not work on Kayla. Obedience to authority, mine in particular, was one of her issues.

I was tired of flashing my knife and my teeth to get her to do what I told her.

Maybe I should just lock her up in a troll cage.

She glanced up and caught me staring at her. "Mom," she whimpered, and my heart melted.

My head was still solid, though. "You're grounded," I said. It never worked, but what else could I do? "You're so grounded we're leaving for home at first light. No shopping or malls for a month! No TV for a week!" Any longer without TV and she would drive me crazy.

"Mom," she said again. I guess she realized I was serious. She snapped the sleeping bag over, flicked it so it rolled up, and stuffed it into a stuff sack. She *did* remember everything I'd taught her on our first camp-out.

Then she glared at me. "I hope you know, this is war. I challenge you!" She shook her head and looked down at me. "I'll never forgive you," she whispered.

"For what?"

"Stealing my boyfriend." She turned and crawled out of the cave, never glancing back.

When I woke up the next morning, I had the most beautiful collection of bruises I'd ever acquired, even in a lifetime of mock and real battles. Troll-pinching-mail-pinching-skin equaled bruises shaped like purple-black roses, mostly concentrated on my butt. I dressed in my everyday warrior woman wear, mail hauberk, stainless steel cuirass, and chausses, my mail stockings, which covered all my troll marks but the three hickeys on my neck.

Despite the already stifling heat, I unpacked my coif-de-mailles and put it on my head. It covered my head and shoulders, leaving only my face bare. My hair instantly dampened with sweat. It was going to be one of those days. I swallowed a salt tablet and chugged some water.

I pulled on my boots and loaded up on armaments. I really wanted to kill something. Preferably

something big.

I stepped out of the teepee into the heat of the sun, and flashing light temporarily blinded me. Shading my eyes, I took another look.

A tall woman stood there in mail so shiny I knew it had never been fought in. She wore a helmet with a gray whale rampant for a crest.

I sniffled. Her birthday suit, the one I gave her when she turned fifteen. My daughter had finally put it on.

She raised her visor. The look in her eyes chilled me.

"Well," she said. "I hope you're happy now."

By all rights I should have been. She was armed and ready to fight. It was everything I had hoped for when we began this trip. Her upper lip curled into a snarl and her nostrils flared as she sniffed at the air. My daughter the warrior was ready to assert her final challenge to my authority.

The girls from the Teen Warrior program danced around screaming, "Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!"

Cookie bent down to draw a circle in the dirt with her cooking spoon. Gladys Badger Woman, who was our warrior parliamentarian, cautioned, "No holds barred. Just remember our two rules."

I wanted to say, Stop. It's just a troll! He's not worth fighting over. But I couldn't bring myself to say the words. I tried to hold my head up. I faltered, just for a split-second, but probably long enough for her to see me show weakness. I gathered my thoughts and prayed to the Goddess for guidance. My strength returned. "Prepare to lick my boots," I said to Kayla.

"In your dreams," Kayla said. She started toward me, a full-fledged warrior.

In her cold expression, I saw enough of myself to be afraid.

Teenagers. What are you going to do?