

Chapter 1 | Stuck

The branch spun as it rode the river. It shot through a stretch of white water, bouncing in the froth. How far would it go? To the sea? No. It lodged against a rock. Held fast by the current, the stick seemed to strain against the immovable object, trying to break free, but to no avail. Likely, it would remain there until it became waterlogged, then sink to the bottom, forever mired beneath the crystalline depths, in plain view of the world around it, but stuck.

“Just like life. You dream about what lies ahead, and then something grabs you. For the rest of your life you’re stuck.” Shanis swatted at an insect hovering at her brow, and cursed when she succeeded only in slapping herself in the face.

“Are you all right?”

The voice took her by surprise. She whipped her head around, annoyed that she had not heard anyone approaching.

“I’ve been looking for you,” the young man said. “Aren’t you coming to the ceremony?”

“Wouldn’t that be wonderful?” She hefted a stone and hurled it into the river. “Stand by smiling like a good girl while you *boys* are told you are now *men*. What possible reason could I have to watch that?”

“Because you’re my best friend?” he asked, laying a hand on her shoulder and turning her to the path that led back to town. “Because you’re happy for me? Because you cannot bear to be away from me for more than a few moment’s time? Because you admire my unsurpassed swordsmanship?”

“Nice try, Hierm.” She gave him a shove that sent him stumbling into the thick bole of a chanbor tree. “You can’t handle me. You need someone shorter and weaker than you.”

“You are *not* taller than me,” he said. “And you’re not stronger than me, either.” He saw the expression on her face and raised his hands in a defensive pose. “We are of even height and strength. Fair enough?”

“If that is what you need to believe, so be it.” She had inherited her father’s height, and at least some of his breadth. She was taller than most of the men in Galsbur, and as strong as many of the young men, making her the subject of stares and whispers among the other girls in town. “Just don’t try to claim you’re better with the sword.”

“So that’s what’s bothering you,” he said, grinning. “You think you are bigger, stronger and better than everyone else, yet we are the ones who are going to be recognized as men, while you are still a girl. Is that what you want? A sixteenth nameday ceremony, so you don’t have to wait for your wedding before you’re considered a woman?”

“You are truly a stone head sometimes,” she said. She could not believe that he didn’t understand. “I’m not saying I’m better than everyone else. What bothers me is that some of you young *men* will be chosen as apprentices. One of you in particular.” Stopping in the middle of the path, she folded her arms across her chest and turned to face him, tapping her foot on the hard-packed earth.

Shafts of slanting morning sunlight filtered through the trees and shone in his pale blond hair, making him appear to glow as realization dawned on his face.

“Master Yurg has never chosen an apprentice,” he said. “No one knows why Galsbur even has a swordmaster. Ham Lurel might choose Oskar, but only because Oskar is strong enough to heft a hammer. I shudder to think what kind of damage the oaf would do at a forge.”

Shanis could not help but smile at the thought of the big, bookish Oskar trying to shape iron.

“Truly, I think you need not worry. Most likely, I will end up working for my father. Laman is already learning to run the business, so I suppose I will guard the wagons or something equally unimportant. At least it will be a good use of my sword.” His sheepish smile and the twinkle in his blue-gray eyes belied his sincerity.

“You know Yurg is going to choose you,” she said, resuming their trek through the cool, shady forest. “He works with you almost every day.” She omitted the fact that the swordmaster also included her in these lessons. Her father had raised her like a boy, and arranged at an early age for Master Yurg to instruct her in weaponry. But now that she was approaching marriageable age, it felt like everyone expected her to suddenly become something she was not.

“Shanis, I know how you feel...”

“No, you don’t. You are a man, so you could not possibly know how I feel. What’s more, you are going to be the swordmaster’s apprentice. Your father could afford to send you to the academy if he wanted. In the meantime, I’m stuck here waiting for some farmer to make me his bride. And you want me to stand by and pretend to be happy while you take what should be mine?” There, she had said it, and it sounded every bit as selfish as she feared it would, but it was true nonetheless.

“Why shouldn’t he choose me?” Hierm’s voice was tinged with hurt and a touch of defensiveness. “It has nothing to do with my father being firstman. He disapproves of my learning the sword, and only tolerates it because I’m the younger son. But as far as the other youth my age, I am the best swordsman in Galsbur, and if Master Yurg wants to choose me as his apprentice, then that is precisely what he should do.

“You are the best of the young *men* in Galsbur,” she said, her implied meaning clear.

“Is that a challenge?” Hierm asked, neither looking at her nor breaking stride. “Because if it is, there is still time before the ceremony for me to correct your misconception.”

“I’ll make you a wager,” Shanis replied, glancing down at the man’s tunic and hose she wore in part for comfort and in part because it offended most of the townspeople. “The loser wears a dress to the ceremony.”

“Are you mad?” Hierm’s eyes were wide with surprise, and he missed a step. “My father would...”

“So you admit that I’ll win?” She was taking a reckless chance here. Master Yurg seldom let them practice against one another, but they had squared off with makeshift wooden swords enough to know that they were almost evenly matched, though Shanis believed herself to be the more skilled, if only by an eyelash.

“Fine,” Hierm said through gritted teeth. “My mother says you need to learn a touch of humility.” He clammed up, apparently having said more than he intended.

“Your mother,” Shanis said, envisioning Mistress Faun Van Derin’s pinched features and severe expression, “would have me in skirts, learning to dance. Maybe she’ll teach you once she sees how lovely you look in a dress.”

Shanis swept the weighted wooden practice sword in a vicious arc, all the time scowling at Hierm, who pointedly ignored her while shrugging on his padded leather vest. It was a good thing that no one was home at Master Yurg's house. He would not approve, but Shanis had a need to release the frustration boiling within her. Hierm was, perhaps unfairly, the focal point, but he was taking what should rightly be hers. Being born female was not something that should be punished.

"You know how this is done," she said. "Three points or a killing blow. And you may not leave the circle. Are you ready?"

"Let's get on with it," Hierm said, glancing at the sun with narrowed eyes. "My father will have my hide if I am late."

They faced one another in the center of the circle she had scratched on the ground. Hierm held his practice sword motionless before him in a two-handed grip. Shanis' hold on her weapon was relaxed, her anger held barely in check beneath an icy calm.

"Begin!" she said.

Hierm leapt forward with an overhead blow. She parried his stroke, the loud clack of solid wood ringing in her ears. She felt the vibration all the way down to her elbow, and relished it. She never felt more complete than when she held a sword. It brought back distant memories of her father teaching her the basics of swordplay with branches almost too heavy for her little arms. She had always felt she was meant to wield a sword.

She countered Hierm's attack with a waist-high slash. There would be no surprises. Years of training together had revealed their strengths and weaknesses. Hierm continued his furious offensive, seeking to keep her off balance. Shanis took a different tack, utilizing forms which made use of her agility. She warded off Hierm's blows with relative ease, waiting for him to make a mistake.

The error came quickly. Hierm reeled off a series of blows that she immediately recognized would culminate with a powerful upward slash to her midsection. She risked a quick thrust at his throat. A bob of the head was all that he needed to avoid the half-hearted attack, but his footwork was now off. Something, most likely stubbornness knowing Hierm, led him to complete the attack. Or, rather, to try and complete it, because when he spun to deliver the final blow, Shanis scored with a deft thrust to the midsection.

"Point," she shouted, stepping back and waiting for Hierm to acknowledge the blow.

A chorus of cheers drew their attention to a cluster of children who had stumbled across their makeshift dueling ground in the woods behind Yurg's house. The little girls were taking great pleasure in Shanis' success, while the boys urged Hiern on.

They returned to their places and resumed their match. This time Shanis took the offensive with quick, short strokes that Hiern was hard-pressed to ward off. She forced him to give ground, knowing that if she drove him from the circle, she would be the winner. She took a nasty swipe at his head. He ducked underneath the stroke and circled to his right, trying to gain maneuvering room.

Shanis' concentration slipped for a moment as she savored the way Hiern's face reddened at the taunts from the girls who watched them. Was he thinking about what his father would say, or was he just angry at the thought of being whipped by a girl?

Hiern gritted his teeth, growled and barreled forward. He reeled off three vicious swings, lowered his head and threw his shoulder into her chest, knocking her backward. She pretended to stumble. Thinking he had the advantage, Hiern pressed the attack. Shanis dove forward, rolling under his down stroke and inside his guard. She sprang to her feet with the point of her sword at his throat.

"Yield." All trace of anger was gone from her voice. Hiern had no choice. He let his wooden sword clatter to the ground and glared at her, his eyes dull and his face without expression. "Say it," she urged.

"The ice take you if I'll ever yield to you," he muttered. "I have to go." He stalked away, ignoring the children who whispered and laughed as he passed by. He stripped off his leather vest and tossed it on the ground.

She immediately felt remorse. What had changed, save the fact that her best friend was now angry with her? No one would care that she had beaten him with wooden swords. She was still a young woman, and in Galsbur that counted for very little. Small hands tugged at her tunic, and she looked down at the beaming faces looking up at her in adoration.

"Will you teach me to do that?" A little girl with brown eyes and a freckled face asked.

"Perhaps another time," Shanis said. "I really have to go. Detaching herself from the children as gently as she could she gathered the swords and Hiern's vest and hastened away.

She returned the items to Master Yurg's barn and caught up with Hierm at the edge of the town green. A crowd had gathered around the ancient oak in the center of the grassy oval. Before she could apologize, Mistress Faun emerged from the throng, followed by Lord Hiram.

"What have you been at?" Faun scolded her son. "You are a mess. Your clothes are dirty and you are all sweaty." She smoothed his hair and tried to straighten his clothing, but soon surrendered with an exasperated sigh. She glared at Shanis with cold eyes, making it clear she knew to whom she should affix blame.

"Everyone has been waiting for you," Lord Hiram said. Hierm lacked his father's angular body, long chin and hooked nose, but Hiram's blue-gray eyes, so like a stormy sky, were the twin of his son's. "Let us go before you embarrass me further." Hierm shot her an unreadable glance as he followed his parents.

Shanis let them get well ahead of her before making her way over to the crowd ringing the tree. She spotted Mistress Anna, Master Yurg's wife, and shouldered through the throng to stand beside her. The white-haired woman greeted her with a kind smile. She wore simple blue dress, and her snowy hair pulled up in a bun. Despite her age, the beauty she had once been was evident in her high forehead and delicate cheekbones. She was Shanis' image of nobility; not Mistress Faun with her expensive clothes and jewels.

"They are starting, child," Anna whispered, laying her hand on Shanis' shoulder. Shanis' mother had died when Shanis was only a baby, and Mistress Anna had been, if not a mother to her, a grandmother. She adored the kindly woman, though Master Yurg remained a stolid, distant figure.

A hush drew over the crowd like a thick blanket. Lord Hiram had donned his sign of office: seven cords of different colors braided into a rope worn draped around the back of his neck and down his chest like a stole. Each color symbolized one of the gods of Gameryah. Unlike most nations, Galdora did not adhere to a single god, but worshiped all seven. He stood in front of a fabric-draped table in the shade of the ancient tree. The items needed for the ceremony lined the edge.

Shanis' eyes flitted to the carvings in the oak. They had fascinated her for as long as she could remember. Some of the primitive images were obvious: The sun symbol for Rantor, the whirlwind for Vesala. All the gods were represented, but some of the icons defied interpretation. No one talked much about it, but Shanis wondered how this tree could be old enough to be adorned with symbols older than memory.

At Hiram's signal, the young men came forward to kneel before him. Four youths from the town and surrounding area had reached their sixteenth summer: Hierm, Oskar Clehn, Natin Marwel and one she did not recognize. The annual ceremony drew families from remote parts of the countryside; families whom the townspeople would not otherwise see, save at harvest time and the occasional Seventhday market.

"We gather to recognize and honor the passage from boy to man," Lord Hiram said. "May the gods look with favor upon us gathered here, and those who submit themselves this day." He turned his attention to those who knelt before him. "Recite with me the Vow of Manhood."

Despite her frustrations, Shanis could not help but feel a tremor of excitement as the young men recited the ritual vow in unison.

"Upon my honor and in the sight of the gods, I pledge to uphold the obligations of manhood. I will protect and provide for myself and mine through the strength of my hand and the fruits of my labor. My words and deeds will be worthy of honor and respect. This is my vow."

Lord Hiram took a stone disc and one-by-one touched it to each young man's forehead, and said the ritual words. "May Kordlak grant you strength, wisdom and courage." He repeated the ritual with two more objects; a golden disc inscribed with a stylized sun image for Rantor and an alabaster stone carved in the shape of the moon for Lunmar. He used an eagle feather to fan each young man's forehead in honor of Vesala the wind goddess, and anointed them with earth and water for Dagdar and Boana respectively. For the fire god Arscla he lit a bowl of lamp oil and carried it down the line, with each youth passing his hand through the flame. Each time, Hiram repeated the ritual words, changing only the name of the god or goddess.

When the ritual was finished, Hiram ordered the group to stand and face the crowd. One by one, he introduced them. He saved Hierm for last, placing a hand on his younger son's shoulder and saying, "I present to you Hierm Van Derin, this day a man." His smile looked odd on his usually stolid face.

The ceremony was not over, though. The town council, comprised primarily of tradesmen, formed a line behind the table. There was little suspense in this part of the ceremony. Most of the townspeople's needs were supplied through Lord Hiram. The town mercer, he bought and hauled produce to market, and brought in and sold most of the items people needed. Thus, there was little call for many of the craftsmen and tradesmen a larger town would have. Consequently, there was little need for apprentices, but it was a part of the annual rite nonetheless.

“Master Ralman,” he addressed the town thatcher, “do you take an apprentice?”

“I do not,” the small, wiry man replied. The question was posed to each man. Oskar, notoriously lazy, relaxed visibly when Ham Lurel declined to take an apprentice. Master Yurg was last.

“Master Yurg,” Hiram’s voice had an odd tone, “do you take an apprentice?”

Shanis bit her lip. A part of her, albeit a very small part, wanted to be happy for Hierm, but she could not. Now she was determined not to let her disappointment show. That was the best she could offer him today. She looked at Hierm, who was making a point not to meet her eye, and then to Master Yurg, who was slow to answer.

“I do not,” he finally said, twisting his lips into a tight frown beneath his thick, white moustache. He folded his arms across his chest and stared at Lord Hiram with a defiant expression on his face.

Shanis sucked in her breath. Mistress Anna made a puzzled sound and squeezed Shanis’ shoulder as Yurg made his announcement.

Hiram, for his part, was unfazed. He returned his attention to the assembled. “Let us share words of congratulations with these, the newest men of our community.” He stepped back as well-wishers converged on the young men.

Shanis lost sight of Hierm in the crowd. She was uncertain as to whether or not he would want to see her, so she held back. Mistress Anna excused herself and left Shanis standing alone among the milling throng. Her head was abuzz with possibilities. What did it mean that Master Yurg was not taking Hierm as an apprentice? Had Lord Hiram put a stop to it? She could easily imagine Hierm’s father doing that very thing.

She felt a strong hand take her by the shoulder and turn her about. Master Yurg’s cold stare withered her. Though he was a hair shorter than her, he always seemed to be looking down at her.

“Are you pleased with yourself?” His deep, raspy voice resonated with anger. His moustache and bushy eyebrows seemed even whiter against his reddened face.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said, painfully aware of the timidity in her voice. It galled her the way Yurg could still make her feel like a small child. She had no reservations about shouting, stamping her feet and even breaking things to get what she wanted from her father. Yurg was, for some reason, a different story.

“You and my other *pupil*,” his lips twisted as if the word was souring in his mouth, “held a duel.” He pointed a scarred finger at her. “Without my consent and without my supervision. I would know why.”

She hung her head and scuffed the toe of her boot against the soft turf, kicking up a clump of grass. The conversations around them quieted as people took notice of the exchange.

“Hiern and I were talking. Well, we were arguing,” the right words would not come. “I couldn’t abide the things he said to me. He thinks himself the better swordsman. I wanted to show him he was wrong. I was so angry...”

Her words hung in silence between them. She looked up at Yurg, who was staring daggers at her. The creases at the corners of his eyes deepened. When he finally answered, his voice was as cold as a midwinter gale.

“He made you angry? If an opponent can make you angry, he can kill you just as easily. For all the gifts you have with the blade, you can not grasp that most simple concept.”

She caught sight of Mistress Faun approaching. “Must we talk about this right here? Right now?”

“*We* are not talking about anything. You are the student and I am the teacher. I am pointing out a mistake that you made.” Yurg’s glare challenged her to defy him. “I will not have a pupil who chooses not to meet my expectations.”

“Is that why you did not take Hiern as an apprentice?” Shanis was horrorstruck by the sudden thought, but she had to ask. “Master Yurg, please don’t hold him responsible for what I goaded him into doing.”

“Hiern is a man now, and responsible for the choices he makes. As are you. In any case, it is not the place of the student to question the master. Is that clear?”

“What is unclear to me,” Shanis said in a harsh whisper, “is why you ever took me as a student in the first place.” The familiar anger enveloped her like a mother’s arms, and her courage rose. “You will not take me as an apprentice because I am a girl. For as long as I can remember, I have wanted nothing more than to be a swordsman.” She forced a cynical laugh. “Do you hear me? A swords*man*! None of it has been to any purpose!”

“It has been of more purpose than you know,” Yurg whispered, taking her by the shoulders and pulling her close. “You will keep a civil tongue, do you hear?”

“Is this how you train your pupils, Master Yurg?” Mistress Faun’s words dripped with contempt as she glided up next to Yurg. “I always said that such a long-legged girl should be taught to dance. Truly a shame.”

“Dance?” Her temper had finally gotten the better of her. She rounded on Mistress Faun, her fists clenched. “Lady I’ll teach *you* to dance!”

White light flashed across Shanis’ vision. Her cheek stung where Yurg struck her. She shook her head to clear the ringing in her ears, and looked at Yurg through teary eyes.

“I told you to keep a civil tongue,” he said, still in that infuriatingly calm, cold voice. “You go to my house right now. Anna and I will be along soon, and we will talk about respect for your elders.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” she said, tears streaming down her face. Yurg had slapped her once before, years ago, for taking a similar tone with him. But to do it here, today, in front of everyone. To treat her like a child while her friends were named as men... It was too much. “I’m leaving this town forever.” She turned on her heel and dashed away, Yurg’s calls ringing in her ears.

Chapter 2 | Breaking

Boy! Where have you gone?” Mistress Faun’s footfalls echoed in the narrow stairwell. “Answer me, Boy!”

“So much for the manhood ceremony,” Oskar mumbled, stashing the book under a pile of rags and looking about for something to help him appear industrious. The morning ritual now felt like a distant memory, and he was back to ordinary life. “I’m up here, Missus!”

“What are you doing up here, young oaf? Oh, never mind. I have something for you.” Faun proffered a small cloth bundle. “Scraps of meat,” she said. “I was going to give them to the dogs, but I thought your family might like to have them instead.”

A tall, slender woman, one needn’t look twice at Faun Van Derin to know where Hierm had gotten his golden locks, and most of his other features. Only her face kept Mistress Faun from being considered beautiful. Not that hers was an ugly face. Rather, it was severe. Her features appeared to have been carved in granite. Her eyes were not the deep blue of Hierm’s, but the pale, icy blue of a harsh winter morning. At any rate, she was striking.

He forced a grin and accepted the greasy bundle. Faun knew very well that his family was not poor, yet she took great pleasure in lording over him, even going so far as to refer to him as “the poor boy,” with emphasis on “poor.” Once she had even walked him outside to show him to a visitor from Archstone, and boast of her generosity in providing a job for him.

He ignored her as always. It was not for the meager wages that he worked in the Van Derin’s warehouse. It was the books. Lord Hiram owned three books, which was, as far as Oskar knew, three more than anyone else in Galsbur. They were ancient, musty-smelling tomes with delicate brown pages and cracked leather covers. He loved the feel of them in his hands, and the odor of the old pages. The fading text,

painstakingly copied by some nameless scholar held stories that set his imagination awhirl. Hiram's interest in books was limited strictly to possessing them. Oskar had never seen the man so much as look at one. Consequently, he had not yet noticed when Oskar slipped one of the battered tomes from the office and secreted himself in this upstairs room, poring over the stories and histories, copying maps and interesting passages on whatever scraps of paper he could scavenge.

"Thank you, Missus. Most kind of you." Clutching the bag to his chest like it was the greased pig at Arskhain, he aped a foolish grin, hoping she would go away. His hope was in vain.

"Why are you up here?" Faun scanned the room through narrow eyes, delicate hands on rounded hips. "You should be down in the warehouse unloading wagons."

"No wagons as yet," he replied. "I was just looking to see if there was something up here I could clean or organize. Don't want the Master to send me home, you know."

"Well aren't we the industrious one?" Her voice had a patronizing tone that would have been lost on Oskar had he been half as slow-minded as she thought him. Her gaze fell on the pile of rags. "Hand me those old bits of cloth. I'll have them washed and your mother can make herself a dress from them."

"No thank you, Missus," he said, desperately trying to think of a reason not to pick up the bundle. "Mother has dresses."

"For your sisters then," she said. Her eyes locked with his, and for a moment he thought she was angry. But then she laughed, or at least he thought it was a laugh. It sounded more like dead corn husks rattling in the breeze.

"You need not worry that it will be taken from your pay," she said. "No, you poor boy. This is a gift from someone fortunate," she touched her chest, "to someone unfortunate." A long fingernail pointed between his eyes. "Do you understand?" She asked the question in a loud, flat voice, as if he were hard of hearing.

His face reddened. "Yes Missus," he said, his voice low. What was he going to do? "I'll bring them along in just a moment."

"Oh, just stop," she said, her voice exasperated. "I'll get them myself." Before he could protest, she glided past him and retrieved the bundle. Her eyes widened when she found the book.

"This is one of the Master's books. What are you doing with it?" Her icy tone froze his marrow. He could do nothing but stare at the floor. At the very least, this would be the end of his employment with Van Derin

and Sons. He held his breath, waiting for the explosion. Strangely, Faun's face registered surprise, then comprehension.

"You wanted to learn to read, you poor fool." She threw her head back and laughed. "Even if you could learn to read, you could never read this." Again she laughed. "Do you know what this is? Of course you do not. This is *Patrin's Conquest!* It's all maps and military history."

One by one, Oskar tensed and relaxed each muscle of his body: first his shoulders, then his back, his hips. Anything to hold his emotions in check. The laughter continued unabated. He knew what was in the book: the tales of kingdoms conquered and riches plundered, and the quest for the lost city of Murantha. He had spent most of the morning copying the maps onto scraps of paper using a bit of charcoal. He was no idiot.

Mistress Van Derin had regained some degree of composure. "You poor young fool," she crooned, reaching up to stroke his cheek as if he were a favorite pet. "You just didn't know any better, but not to worry. We shan't tell the Master. Just you keep yourself out of his office. Am I understood?"

Even if he had wanted to answer, he could not. Hot anger clamped the muscles of his jaws closed. He simply nodded.

"Very well. Don't worry too much, Boy. Someone of your station has no need of reading." She whisked away, leaving him to watch her graceful retreat.

His anger dissolved when he realized how close he had come to being head down in the manure pile, as his gran was fond of saying. Twisting his mouth into a self-deprecating smile, he contented himself with admiring Faun's backside as she descended the stairs. She certainly was not shaped like a woman of nearly forty summers. Cursing himself, he followed her down the stairs.

Faun left him in the warehouse with an admonition to stay out of further mischief until a wagon arrived. When he was certain she was gone, he headed to the back corner where he had rearranged some old crates to make a hiding place. His breadth of shoulder and ample waist made it a tight squeeze, but it was a comfortable spot to while away his time, and he could be on his feet at the first sound of someone entering the building.

Cracks in the wall filtered in adequate light for reading. He reached into his cloak and fished out the crude map he had copied the day before. He held it in a dusty, golden beam and whispered the names that conjured up fantastic images in his mind.

“Halvala, Riza, Cardith, the Claws...” He longed to see these places that existed for him only in faded ink and weathered paper. Sometimes he thought himself the only one in Galsbur who knew there was a world beyond their quiet village.

A slamming door snatched him from his daydream.

“How could you do it?” He was seated against the wall of Lord Hiram’s office, and Hierm’s voice came through clearly. *“You know how much I want...”*

“Settle yourself.” Lord Hiram sounded agitated. *“I have my very good reasons. You are a boy no longer.”*

“Then let me make my own choice, Father! Stop controlling me. Have you forgotten that this very morning you declared me a man?”

Oskar smiled. It seemed that neither Van Derin put much stock in the manhood ceremony. He felt only a slight tinge of guilt at eavesdropping. Life in Galsbur was too boring to pass up something as interesting as a quarrel within its leading family.

“A ceremony does not make you a man any more than that fool sword makes you a blademaster. You will be a man when you begin acting like one. And while we are on the subject, I have spoken to...”

“No, Father! I won’t hear it. No betrothal. No job in the warehouse. I want to learn the sword. Just because I do not choose your life does not make me less of a man.”

The bang he heard was most likely Hiram’s fist on his desk.

“What makes you believe you can apprentice the swordmaster when you cannot even best a girl? Oh yes, I have heard about your little duel, as has most everyone else in town. A fine show indeed. When I went to see your precious Master Yurg yesterday, I believed I would have to persuade him with gold, but it turns out he had already decided not to take you on. What say you to that?”

Oskar winced. If Hiram was telling the truth, that bit of news would cut Hierm to the quick. He did not hear the young man’s reply because a wagoner, a paunchy fellow with a sour face and gray-streaked brown hair, chose that very moment to pull his wagon into the warehouse. With a sigh, he hauled himself to his feet.

Some day he would escape from all of this.

Shanis sat alone. A single candle cast long shadows across her sparsely furnished room. She stared at nothing, her lips mouthing curses at unseen recipients. A deep growl in the pit of her stomach interrupted the

silence. The aroma of roast venison still hung in the air, but she was not about to eat. Perhaps after Papa went to bed.

Rising from her chair, she moved the three steps across the room to her bed, where her belongings lay in a heap. Twice already, she had packed everything, once even going so far as to don her travel cloak and twice she had changed her mind. Now the urge rose anew.

Her sword hung in its scabbard a post at the foot of the bed. She drew the blade with loving care and held it aloft, watching the candlelight waver on its shiny surface.

“Do you ever put that thing down?”

She leapt to her feet and thrust the sword in front of her as if preparing to ward off an attack. So much of Master Yurg’s training was ingrained her that she felt she scarcely needed to think with a sword in her hand.

Chin cupped in his hands, Hierm leaned on the windowsill, beaming like a fool. “Careful, or you’re going to hurt me one of these days.” He heaved his lanky form over the sill and fell hard on the dirt floor.

“What do you want, hairy mule?” She turned her back so he would not see her smile, and sheathed her sword. It slid home with a wicked whisper.

“Not much.” He shifted into a sitting position, his back against the log wall beneath the window. “I just thought I’d give you the chance to apologize.”

“Apologize to *you*? I’d sooner...” She clenched her fist as the anger shot through her. Then she saw his impudent grin and relaxed. “You’re right. I apologize.”

Hierm looked as though he had been run over by one of his father’s wagons. He clutched his chest, crumpled to the floor and began twitching. His foot struck the wall with a loud thump.

“Sorry,” he whispered, sitting back up and brushing his cloak.

“Don’t worry. I’ve been hitting and throwing things for most of the evening. Papa started ignoring me after a while.” As if to emphasize her point, she aimed a fierce kick at the wall between her room and Papa’s. The thud resounded through the modest cabin, but predictably, her father ignored her.

“Your father builds a solid house.” Hierm whispered, still seated on the floor.

“I don’t give him much choice,” Shanis laughed. “I’ve kicked a few walls and doors in my lifetime.”

“Remember when he made you sleep in the barn for a week?” Hierm rolled onto his back and laced his fingers behind his neck. “It was wintertime, as I recall.”

“Don’t remind me. I nearly froze.” She shivered at the memory, still feeling the cold seeping into her bones. She had thought she would never be warm again.

“Considering the condition of your room, I dare say you were better off in the barn.” Hierm’s eyes danced with mischief.

“It wasn’t my fault. Thatch just makes for a weak roof.” Shanis shielded her face from her friend’s incredulous stare.

“Shanis, you climbed onto the roof and hacked a hole in it with your sword.”

“Not a large hole. I fell through before I could do much damage.” She paused. “Of course that made me so mad I threw a chair and broke it.” Papa was so angry.

“He laughed about it when he told my father.” Hierm smiled and stared at his boots. “Did you know that you’re the reason you don’t have glass in your windows? He told my father that he had set aside...”

“Wait! Papa laughed?” Stunned, Shanis dropped to the floor alongside Hierm. “But he made me sleep in the barn...with *bugs*.”

“He thought it was what you deserved. My father suggested that you be put out with the pigs.” Hierm grimaced as he spoke of his father. “You do sometimes get a bit out of control.”

“Tonight was another of those times,” she said, forcing a smile as she sank to the floor next to him. “I asked him why he made me spend my life learning the sword when he knew I could be anything more than someone’s wife. He said he could not talk about it, and that I should trust him. I started screaming, and he told me that my mother would not approve of my behavior. That’s when I started throwing things.” Hierm chuckled, but she could not share his mirth. “I don’t even remember my mother, and he never talks about her. Why now? None of it makes any sense.”

A warm tear slid down her cheek. She tasted salt in the corner of her mouth. Before she could wipe her face, she felt Hierm’s arm around her shoulders, pulling her close to him. She lay her head on his shoulder and tried to imagine they were children again, exploring the forests, battling imaginary monsters with swords of reed plucked from the banks of the Vulltu. She could be anything she wanted back then, but now she was a young woman and everything had changed. Rather, nothing at all had

changed. Galsburans would always be the same. One of them in particular.

“How is your loving father?” she asked, straightening and pulling away from Hierm. “Still pretending I’m invisible?”

“He took notice of you today,” Hierm said. “I got the rough edge of his tongue for losing to you.” He was silent after that. For so long, in fact, that she wondered if he had fallen asleep. Finally, he took a deep breath. “My father asked Master Yurg not to make me his apprentice. He wants me to join the family business. He thinks the sword was just childish folly.”

A sudden determination filled her, and she sprang to her feet. Taking him by the hand, she hauled him up to stand in front of her. “Hierm, I will never be anything if I don’t get out of here. Perhaps you should do the same.” She placed a finger across his lips before he could reply. “You need to be home. We’ll talk soon.” With that, she gave him a rough shove toward the window. He climbed out and headed down the path toward the road, with only a single glance back. She leaned out the window to watch him go. Diamond stars scattered across a velvet sky colored the world a faint gray. Elbows propped on the sill, she watched until his tall, lean form faded into the darkness.

Chapter 3 | News

Oskar hurried through the crush of the Seventhday market. People filled the green at the town's center. Wagons laden with produce jutted out above the throng. The sounds of laughter, calls of greeting, and good-natured dickering sang a happy tune in his ear. Seventhday was his favorite day. People from the countryside gathered to exchange goods, news, and gossip, not necessarily in that order.

He dodged a woman carrying a basket of tomatoes, only to careen into a cart loaded with apples.

"Watch yourself, boy." Lars Harim shot a tobacco-stained grin in his direction before turning back to haggle with a potential customer.

"Sorry, Master Harim." How long would it be until people thought of him as a man? Obviously longer than one day.

Certain that Master Harim's attention was diverted, Oskar filched an early summer apple, small and deep red, almost purple, from the cart and hurried away. Reaching a safe distance, he paused to take a bite. Sweet juice ran from the corners of his mouth and down his chin. He located a comfortable fencepost and contentedly munched his prize. The smell of freshly baked bread wafted through the air, and he looked around for the source of the delicious aroma.

He dropped the remains of his snack to the ground, scrubbed his face with the back of a sweaty hand, and set off along the hard beaten dirt path that encircled the green. His nose guided him to the front porch of the Dry Birch, Galsbur's only inn, in front of which a local youth stood holding a basket of bread.

"Natin," Oskar hailed the young man. "What do you have for me?"

The slender, brown-haired youth greeted Oskar with a gap-toothed smile. "First, I want to know what you have for me. You still owe me for a loaf."

"May we consider it a manhood gift?" At Natin's answering smirk, Oskar dug into the pocket inside his cloak. His fingertips found a bit of

string, a smooth stone he had found on the riverbank, and finally a single copper. “What will this buy?” he asked, handing it to his friend.

Natin accepted the coin and motioned for Oskar to join him on the front porch. They sat down together on the top step. Natin took a loaf from his basket and broke it in half. Oskar gratefully accepted his half, savoring the rich, yeasty smell. He tore off a warm crust and stuffed it in his mouth. Natin’s mother was quite the baker.

“Ordinarily I wouldn’t accept the coin, but things are hard.” Natin did not meet Oskar’s eye.

The bread was doughy, and Oskar could only answer with a sympathetic “Mmhm!” Natin’s family farmed a plot owned by the Van Derins. Each year Lord Hiram took most of their crop for rent, leaving Natin’s family to make do the best they could. Natin sold or traded his mother’s bread each Seventhday. Otherwise, when he wasn’t working on their small farm, he was fishing for the fat speckled trout that made the Vulltu their home. Oskar could think of nothing to say, so he took another large bite of bread, and looked out over the town.

Galsbur was centered around an oval-shaped green. The dirt road that encircled the green was ringed on its outer edge by various shops, homes, and buildings. The Dry Birch lay on the west side of the green, directly opposite the main road that led toward civilization. On either side of the main road stood the Van Derin and Sons warehouse and the Van Derin home. Its whitewashed exterior and wooden shingles made it stand out like a pearl in a pigsty among the log and thatch buildings. He regarded the town with a disheartened stare. It was so small, so insignificant.

“Oskar,” Natin whispered. “Look over there. Have you ever seen that man before?”

He immediately located the person of whom Natin spoke. Even with farmers from outlying villages in attendance, a stranger was a rare site on Seventhday, or any other for that matter. The man was tall; fully a head taller than Hierm. His auburn hair was pulled to the left side of his head and wound in a thick braid that hung down past his shoulder. His travel-stained cloak was dark brown stitched with intertwining vines of green and gray. His face and clothes looked as worn as his cloak. A sword hilt, its grip worn smooth, with a plain, round pommel was just visible inside the cloak. The stranger strode directly toward them, his wide-set hazel eyes fell upon them with a disinterested gaze.

“Pardon,” the man said in a voice that was like rough stones grinding together. “There a common room in there?”

“There is,” Oskar said. His voice sounded boyish compared to the stranger’s deep baritone.

Nodding, the man took the steps in two strides and seemed to melt through the door.

“Did you see that? He had a sword.” Natin said. “Who wears a sword in Galsbur, save Master Yurg?”

Master Yurg! All thoughts of the stranger were forgotten as Oskar recalled the reason for slipping out of the Van Derin’s warehouse in the first place. He mumbled an apology around another mouthful of bread and ran for the swordmaster’s house.

He reached his destination out of breath. Sparing a few moments to lean against the split rail fence and let the stitch in his side release, he scanned the enclosed yard behind Master Yurg’s home.

Hierm and Master Yurg were working forms. The youngest Van Derin would not be giving up the sword after all. Shanis, however, was nowhere to be seen. A cluster of girls hovered nearby, feigning disinterest while watching every move Hierm made. He was the most popular and eligible young man in the area, thus all the older girls strove to catch his eye.

For a moment Oskar tried to imagine Shanis wearing a dress and giggling at the first glance from a young man. The image made him laugh. Who would marry her? If you could see past her height and muscles, she was pretty enough, with her soft red hair and gray-green eyes, but could anyone handle her temper and stubbornness? Her father was the most physically imposing man Oskar had ever seen, yet he scarcely managed to keep her in check.

“Do you find something funny?” Khalyndryn Serrill eyed him over her tiny, upturned nose. Oskar shook his head. Her golden hair and emerald eyes always put him ill at ease. He fancied her, but so did every other young man in town, and he was no prize catch. No one in Galsbur seemed to share his desire to learn what lay beyond the horizon. He was an outcast in his own way, but it did not matter. He was not going to stay in this town forever. He would visit those places in Lord Hiram’s books and have his own adventures. And then someday he would write them all down in a book of his own.

“Oskar, shouldn’t you be off pilfering books?” Hierm and Master Yurg halted their lesson and came over to where Oskar leaned against the fence.

“Have you seen Shanis?” Oskar asked. “I need to talk to her. And you too.”

“I haven’t seen her since last... um, yesterday.” Hierm blushed and turned his head. He pushed back his sweaty mop of blond hair. “I thought I would see her today. Why do you need to talk to us?”

Oskar had to force himself not to go ahead and tell Hierm what he had heard while listening at the wall of Lord Hiram’s office. The news seemed to be trying to claw its way out of him. But he wanted to tell Hierm and Shanis together. They were his best friends and both would be thrilled by his news. That, and he was not going to admit in Master Yurg’s presence that he had been eavesdropping on the firstman of Galsbur.

“I have the most amazing news,” he said. You won’t believe it. But I want to tell the two of you together.” Nearby, Khalyndryn and her friends had ceased their conversation and were actively pretending not to listen.

“Are you certain that she’s not around market somewhere?” Hierm asked.

“I haven’t seen her anywhere. Strange, she never misses market. What is it?” Hierm’s eyes were suddenly wide, as if something had frightened him..

“She wouldn’t,” Hierm mumbled. “Yes she would. Swordmaster,” he said to Yurg, “may I be excused from my lesson?”

Yurg arched an eyebrow at his pupil, looking like a hawk who had spotted a wounded rabbit. “Would either of you young men care to tell me what this is about?”

“It’s Shanis,” Hierm said. “She isn’t here.”

Yurg pretended to scrutinize the empty sword yard. “Truly? I had not noticed.” He smirked. “She is not very pleased with me right now, but she’ll come around once she’s had time to clear that fool head of hers. Why is it of concern to you?”

“She told me last night that she wanted to go away. I didn’t believe her then, but now...” The implication was clear.

Yurg ran his fingers through his closely cropped silver beard before venturing to speak. “Van Derin, one day you’ll learn that women say a lot of things they don’t mean, simply to get a reaction.” This comment elicited angry whispers from the group of girls nearby. Oskar smirked. He had never heard Yurg talk about anything but swords and tales of his battles. “I do feel a bit guilty about the way I treated her yesterday. You are dismissed.”

Hierm wasted no time. Ignoring the nearby gate, he vaulted the fence.

“Van Derin,” Yurg said. “Let me know what you find out.” He sounded unconcerned, but there was an intensity in his eyes that belied his tone.

Hierm nodded and set off at a trot. Oskar groaned and stuffed the last bite of bread in his mouth. He was a firm believer that running should be reserved strictly for those moments when a vicious predator was snapping at your heels.

“Do you really think Shanis has left?” Oskar gasped, trying to keep pace.

Hierm grimaced. “I certainly hope not.”

The Malan’s home was just far enough from town to make the run exhausting. When the tidy cabin and small log barn were in sight, Hierm stopped running. Oskar trotted forward until he had caught up with his friend.

“Why...why are you...” he gasped, resting his hands on his knees. His face felt like it was on fire and salty sweat burned his lips. “Why are you stopping...now? We’re almost...” A rasping cough cut the question short.

“Look,” Hierm pointed to a white horse that stood cropping a tuft of thick grass in the corral that adjoined the barn. “She wouldn’t go anywhere without Shine.”

Oskar dropped onto his backside, panting. A rock dug painfully into his bottom, but he ignored it. “Then we’re in no hurry. Van Derin, one of these days you’re going to kill me. I really mean it. You’re going to kill me.” He lay back on the hard-packed trail. The sky was a rich blue. He wondered if this was the color of the sea of which he had read in one of Lord Hiram’s books. A cotton cloud drifted slowly past, and for a moment he imagined it was a sailing ship come to carry him away to adventure.

“Come on,” Hierm said, his voice earnest. “I’m worried about her. She’s never been like this. Something isn’t right.”

“I’ll help if I can,” Oskar said. His cheeks heated. How could he help? In his mind, his words flowed from his lips like prose from the pages of Lord Hiram’s books, but in reality, everything he said sounded wrong. He stared at the ground, feeling foolish.

Hierm seemed to understand what he was saying. “I’m not sure we can help. Shanis wants to learn the sword, to be a soldier. People around here are not going to let that happen. Of course, I don’t know where she could go.”

“Hallind,” Oskar stated. “It’s an island, actually an island nation. They have male and female soldiers. Some of their elite troops are made up entirely of women. I was just reading about it. It’s fascinating.” He stopped when he saw the look on Hierm’s face.

Hierm pressed his hands to his temples. “Women soldiers? Elite troops? Is this some fairy tale you read somewhere?”

“You’ve never heard of it? Haven’t you read any of your father’s books?”

Hierm shook his head.

“Seriously? How could anyone not... Oh.” Compassion welled up inside of him. He tried to make his voice sympathetic as he placed a hand on Hierm’s arm. “I’m sorry. I just assumed that all you rich people learned to read.”

Hierm slapped the hand away. “Of course I can read, you dolt. I just don’t like to.”

Oskar stared for a moment. He didn’t understand. “Well, in that case, you’re just dense.” He pushed past Hierm and began walking toward the Malan house. Hierm followed. Oskar could feel his friend’s scowl burning into his back. “Don’t you think Shanis might feel a little better if she knew about Hallind?”

“Oskar, don’t you say a word to her. Not...one...word. The way Shanis has been acting, the last thing she needs to hear about is this...Hallind. No telling what she might do.”

Oskar felt a cold tightness in his chest. He could sense a big fight just around the corner. How to avoid it? He stopped and turned around.

“What do you say we just go back to town? I mean, now that we know Shanis is all right.” He was talking very fast. “We don’t want to upset her or anything.”

Just then, Shanis emerged from the house. “Aren’t the two of you missing Seventhday?” She walked past without meeting either boy’s eye. “I’ve a stall to clean, so if you two insist on gawking at me, do it in the barn.” Hierm fell in step beside her. Oskar lagged a few paces behind, debating whether or not he would be able to slip away quietly. His eyes drifted to the wagon track that led back to town. After a moment’s debate, he uttered a resigned sigh and followed his friends into the barn.

The cool, dusty air assailed him immediately. He brushed a sleeve across his nose and suppressed a sneeze.

“We were worried about you,” Hierm was saying. “I was afraid you had gone...oh, I don’t know.” Hierm threw up his arms.

“Where would I go Hierm?” Shanis’ tone was mocking. “Who has any use for a girl with a sword?” She took a pitchfork down from the wall and headed to one of the stalls. It was a small barn, with only two stalls, which Shanis kept clean. She loved horses.

Oskar leaned against a post and watched as Hierm took up a shovel and helped Shanis pick the stall.

“I’m actually quite satisfied with my lot in life,” Shanis continued. “I mean, who wouldn’t enjoy this?” A flick of her wrist sent a clump of manure hurtling at Oskar’s head. Almost too late, he ducked out of the way. The dung projectile struck the post against which he was leaning, splattering dirty clumps on his tunic. “Nice reflexes for such a stout lad. As I was saying, I can spend the rest of my years cleaning stalls, washing clothes and pulling weeds. Quite an exciting life, full of adventure. If I am truly fortunate, I might even have the opportunity to face down some evil foe. Perhaps a garden spider, or a rat.

“Ho there, little field mouse,” she said in a deep voice, thrusting her pitchfork at an imaginary opponent. “Surrender, or I shall skewer thee in the foulest of ways!” Dancing around the stall, she thrust the tines at Hierm’s face. He raised his shovel in a half-hearted defense. Oskar stepped back a few paces just to be safe. Laughing, Shanis feinted high twice before sweeping Hierm’s feet out from under him with the end of the pitchfork handle. “For shame, young rodent. Next time I shall seek combat with a worthy adversary. A groundhog, perhaps.”

Hierm fanned at the cloud of dust that engulfed him. From his seat on the barn floor, he pointed an accusing finger at Shanis. “What is going on? The last time we talked, you were ready to challenge the world to a duel, to run away. Now you’re acting like nothing happened.”

Shanis smiled. “I’m sorry. It was good of the two of you to worry about me.”

“We couldn’t help but worry. Even Master Yurg is wondering where you are.” Hierm picked himself up and brushed at the straw that clung to his backside. “Will you be coming back to sword?”

“Of course. I just felt like making Yurg sweat a bit. I might not be an apprentice, but I won’t stop with the sword until I choose.” Shanis returned to her work in the stall. “I’m still angry, mind you, but I was a bit in the wrong myself. I know Yurg. He will probably stop in tonight to apologize, and that will be that.” She dismissed the thought with a shrug.

“You don’t think you owe him an apology?” Hierm placed his hands on his hips, a posture which reminded Oskar just how much his friend resembled Mistress Faun. “Either way, that doesn’t solve your real

problem. You can't be his informal student forever. What do you plan to do?"

Oskar could have kicked Hierm for blurting the question out so hastily. He didn't want Shanis to lose her good humor.

Shanis stopped her work in the stall. "Didn't you tell him, Oskar?" Oskar waved his hands to silence her, but the gesture was futile. "Hallind. It's a country where..."

Hierm's face contorted in a scowl. "I know about Hallind, and it's crazy." He rounded on Oskar, grabbing his tunic. "What were you thinking? You had no business telling her about that blasted place."

Oskar ripped Hierm's hands away, and gave the boy a shove that sent him careening into a stall door. "Enough! My business is just that, Van Derin. Mine. Who are you to tell us what to do anyway? You're more like your father than you think." Shanis' sharp intake of breath indicated that Oskar had gone too far. Hierm hung his head, unable to speak. A pang of guilt swept through Oskar. From where had that anger arisen? "Hierm I... well... You just get too bossy sometimes. And you know me, I never say anything right. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You were right." Hierm raised his head to meet Oskar's gaze. "I'm the one who's sorry. I don't want to be like my father." He turned to Shanis. "You are leaving?"

It seemed to Oskar that something passed between Hierm and Shanis. It was not a question but a benediction. An affirmation of something that those closest to Shanis had always known. Galsbur was not for her, nor she for it. She had never fit in.

"You know I have to go. There's no other way," Shanis replied firmly. "I'll keep working with Yurg while I make preparations. Don't think I haven't thought this through."

"How can you have thought this through?" Hierm waved his arms in frustration. "How long ago did Oskar tell you about this place? A few days ago?"

"The place is not important. I've been thinking about leaving for a long time." Her face grew serious. "This is my home. I don't take leaving lightly. If there were any way at all..."

"May I interrupt here?" In the midst of all the concern over Shanis, Oskar had forgotten the reason he had been searching for her in the first place. Hierm and Shanis looked at him with mild surprise, as if they had forgotten his presence. "I was looking for the two of you this morning because I have something to tell you. It might be the solution to your problem."

“My, aren’t we full of useful information?” Shanis mocked.

“Useless is more like it,” Hierm scoffed. “What is this wonderful solution you’ve come up with?”

Oskar ignored their sarcasm. “A man came into town today. He was wearing the livery of the prince’s guard. He came to talk to Lord Hiram. I was listening...” He paused for a moment, blushing. “Anyway, there’s going to be a tournament.”

“The Prince’s Tournament? That’s not held again for months, and even then a town sends only its most talented apprentice.” Hierm argued. “Even if Shanis could somehow become an apprentice, my father would never stand for her to represent Galsbur. Not at the capital.”

“Hierm is right,” Shanis said. “That tournament is for the very best. In the best of circumstances I wouldn’t be ready to try for a spot in the academy for another two years or more. I don’t think I’ll ever have the opportunity. Some day Hierm will, but not me.”

Oskar stood silent until he again had their attention. “Are the two of you finished arguing with me yet? I know what the Prince’s Tournament is. It’s an annual event at which apprentice swordsmen who are ready to become journeymen compete for places in the prince’s elite units. Those who don’t make it join the army, or become free swords.”

“All right, Oskar, you’re very smart,” Hierm jibed. “Now tell us what you learned while you were eavesdropping on my father.”

Oskar ignored that. “There’s going to be a tournament here.” He hurried on despite the suddenly stunned looks on their faces. “It won’t be just swords, either. Archery, wrestling, you name it. Prince Lerryn himself will be here.”

“But why hold a tournament here?” Hierm asked. Shanis remained silent, her face an unreadable mask of thought. “Why Galsbur?”

“There’s a rumor that we might go to war with Kyrin. There will be tournaments like these in many of the larger towns. The best will go to the academy. Others can sign on as foot soldiers. Lerryn hopes to double the size of the standing army in the next year. They need good soldiers. If they see Shanis fight, maybe they’ll give her a chance. They’d have to, wouldn’t they? She’s the best.” Feeling quite proud of himself, Oskar folded his arms across his chest and nodded, waiting for their reactions.

“This doesn’t make sense,” Hierm protested. “You said the larger towns would have tournaments. We’re not a larger town. We’re a nothing town three leagues from nowhere.”

Shanis grabbed Hierm’s shoulders and gave him a firm shake. “Who cares about that? Oskar may have something here. This could be my

chance.” If the prospect of her nation going to war fazed her at all, she didn’t show it. “If I can put on a good enough showing, they won’t care that I’m a girl. If we go to war with Kyrin, they’ll need all the fighters they can get.”

“I’m not so sure,” Hierm replied. “Do you truly think they’ll let a girl compete? If Oskar has it right, this will be the most important thing that has ever happened in Galsbur. Mother will be in rare form, and Father will not be much better. They won’t take a chance on embarrassing themselves.”

“You’re right about one thing,” Oskar said. “They won’t want to embarrass themselves. That’s why they have to let her compete. Shanis is the best. And you, of course,” he added, noticing Hierm’s frown. “All of the small towns and most of the villages in this part of the kingdom will send people to compete. Master Yurg isn’t going to let them beat us if he can help it. I wouldn’t be surprised if your father felt the same way. Besides, won’t it take the vinegar out of them to be beaten by a girl?”

Shanis squeezed Oskar in a bear hug and planted a noisy kiss on his cheek. Her lips were softer than he expected, and the sensation was uncomfortably pleasant.

“That settles it,” she said. “I don’t need to be an apprentice. All I need is the chance to compete. Once they see me fight, all they’ll see is my skill.” She dashed out of the stall. “Besides,” she called over her shoulder, “Yurg owes me!”

Chapter 4 | Karst

Excitement tempered with a heavy dose of skepticism greeted word of the tournament. Sensible Galsburans were not quick to believe the crown had suddenly taken notice of their remote corner of the kingdom. Mistress Faun, eager to be the first to spread the news, had hurried to the Dry Birch's common room only to be treated with flat disbelief. Her vehement insistence won her only a small battle, bringing a touch of condescending acceptance, the way one would indulge a small child's fancy. She finally stormed out with her skirts clutched in white-knuckled fists, raucous laughter nipping at her heels. But when word come from both Lord Hiram and Master Yurg, that gave the townspeople something to think about. And when a squadron of soldiers arrived in town, tacked up a notice to the same effect, and proceeded to drink Master Serrill dry in an impressive display the like of which none could remember seeing in these parts, the remaining holdouts were finally persuaded.

Once reality set in, Lord Hiram and the town leaders set to work. They chose a nearby pasture ringed on three sides by gently sloping hills, forming a natural amphitheatre. On the open end they built a viewing platform for Prince Lerryn and any dignitaries who might accompany him. Word was, Mistress Faun had arranged the seating to place herself next to the prince.

"I scarcely recognize this place anymore," Shanis said as she and Hierm jostled through the crowd.

The flow of visitors had begun as a trickle as soon as word of the tournament spread. In these last days before the event, they poured in, turning the countryside into a bustling anthill of activity. Some planned to enter the tournament, while others simply had come to witness the spectacle. So much had changed in the span of ten days. The common room was packed; Music and laughter rolled forth in steady waves at all

hours. Seventhday market was now an everyday market, and had grown with the influx of “outlanders” as the locals called anyone who lived more than a day’s ride from Galsbur. Familiar faces mixed with those of strangers in a whirl of festivity. Shanis drank in the sights, the sounds, everything.

The practice yard brimmed with swordsmen. Master Yurg was watching as young men practiced. Shanis felt a touch of resentment that their swordmaster was providing any assistance at all to outsiders, but that was Yurg. From what she could see it was evident that few of the young men had the skill to go far in the competition, but the opportunity to be a part of such an important event was too much for any youth with imagination to pass upon. The usual crowd of girls milled about, but they were not watching the drills. They focused instead on a young man standing in their midst. He was slightly taller and broader of chest than Hierm. His glossy black hair fell almost to his shoulders and his hawkish brown eyes seemed to glow against his pale skin. His clothing was fine by Galsbur standards. He was working forms, all the while carrying on in a voice loud enough to be heard beyond the throng of young ladies.

“Of course I shall make it good sport. I’ll permit my opponents to stand with me a few moments. The spectacle would be ruined for the onlookers of course, should I make quick work of the entire field.”

Shanis leaned close to Hierm’s ear. “Fascinating,” she whispered, “how he can work his forms and his tongue at the same time.”

“Perhaps he means to talk his opponents into submission,” Hierm mumbled.

She clamped a hand over her mouth, trying without success to stifle a giggle. She caught the attention of one of the girls, Madelaine Halton, a chubby, brown-haired farmer’s daughter with one green eye slightly bigger than the other, who turned and glared at the pair.

The young man also noticed, and broke off his form. “What have we here?” The look in his eyes belied his forced smile. “Admiring my forms, are you?”

Shanis felt an immediate aversion to this pompous stranger. “Amusing ourselves with them might be more accurate.”

The youth was unfazed. “And what makes a girl such an expert at swordsmanship?” He flourished his sword in emphasis. To Shanis’ practiced eye, it was nothing more than a silly affectation, but given the burst of hushed whispers among the onlookers, it must have appeared quite impressive.

“Didn’t you know?” A voice piped up from the crowd. “She’s fighting in the tournament.”

Shanis did not try to stifle her impudent grin, but she remained silent. It was not altogether certain that she would be fighting in the tournament. Master Yurg planned to enter her name. Whether or not the prince would allow it was still in question.

The lad sheathed his sword. His eyes appraised Shanis for a moment before he replied. “That’s not what I hear. I hear that Prince Lerryn will not allow any woman,” he spat the word with disgust, “to disgrace his tournament with her ineptitude. The very idea is an affront to the gods and to good sense.”

“Shanis is good.” Natin had wandered up to the gathered crowd. “She’s the best among us.”

The dark-haired young man took a long, level look at the bread basket hooked over Natin’s arm, smirked, and made a mocking face that elicited giggles from the girls. “I do not doubt that one bit.” He looked around at the crowd that encircled him, seeming to challenge each person individually. “Of course, that is only a reflection of the sad state of the local manhood.” The rumblings that arose from the onlookers only encouraged him. “My dear ladies,” he shouted, “I am very sorry! Sorry that your birth has condemned you to live in a hamlet where masculinity is so obviously in short supply. Sorry that you have to live in a town full of large...*boys*.” Nervous laughter tittered from the girls not bright enough to realize he was insulting their home, their fathers and their brothers. “I do so hope you ladies will not hold it against me when I thrash your local lads.”

Shanis rolled her eyes. She had heard more than enough from this flatulent sheep’s bladder. She grabbed Hierm by the arm and turned to leave, but he shook his head and pointed to Natin, who had dropped his basket of bread and was shouting at the stranger.

“Who are you to come here and mock us?” Natin’s face was scarlet, and his hands trembled. He had been humiliated, but what could he do? He was no swordsman. “You are not so great!”

Smiling wickedly, the stranger turned on Natin. “Perhaps you are right. Mayhap I have not nearly the skill of your local, ah, swordsmen.” The face he made for the benefit of the onlookers said that the very idea was absurd to him. Another smattering of laughter arose. “What I am certain of is that you are not man enough to prove it.” His predatory gaze locked on Natin.

“I guess we will find out at the tournament, won’t we?” Shanis said in a raised voice, pushing her way past the cluster of girls. She gave Madelaine an elbow to the ribs on the way past, eliciting a satisfying grunt.

“Why wait until then? Surely this gentleman would not object to making a few passes with me. He seems the brave sort.”

Natin did not meet the stranger’s eye. He was staring at the ground, probably trying to think of a way to extricate himself from the situation without losing more face.

“Go ahead Natin,” Khalyndryn piped up from behind Shanis. “Show us what you can do. You aren’t afraid, are you?”

It was time to put a stop to this foolishness. She was about to say just that when she felt a hand clamp down on her shoulder. “Don’t interfere” Hierm hissed. “You can’t.”

Did Hierm not realize what was happening? “He’s just trying to pick a fight. To show off,” she whispered back, turning to face her friend. “Natin can’t handle a sword. He’d stand a better chance fighting with one of his loaves of bread.”

Hierm’s gaze was stern. “Shanis, if you stop this, you will shame him. You must not do it.” The look in his eyes one of sadness, but resolution.

Shanis sniffed. Men and their ridiculous sense of pride! Hierm was right, of course. But if it did become necessary, she would put a stop to it. And she and Khalyndryn were going to have a long talk.

Khalyndryn’s coaxing was all that Natin required. By the time Shanis turned back around, he had borrowed a sword from one of the bystanders. The crowd drew back from the combatants. With a cruel smile, his opponent prepared himself. Natin, his face ashen, raised his blade, and nodded.

The dark-haired stranger leapt to the attack. His first strokes were clumsy. Natin easily warded off the blows, and took the offensive. A murmur arose from the observers as Natin’s assault was barely deflected. Shanis was not fooled. The stranger was toying with Natin. She needed only to see his footwork to know that he was, at the very least, experienced.

The crowd around the two combatants grew. A few of those drilling in the practice yard had taken notice, and now perched precariously on the fence, trying to gain a better vantage point. Master Yurg was busy on the far end of the yard, unaware of what transpired.

Shanis was struck by a sudden thought.

“Get Master Yurg! If he puts a stop to it, Natin won’t be shamed. Hurry!”

Hierm nodded and pushed his way back out of the crowd.

Natin’s advantage was short-lived. His adversary returned to the offensive with strokes that were increasingly precise. The rain of blows became a torrent. Natin backpedaled, all attention to form forsaken in a desperate attempt to defend himself. Shanis watched as the attack pressed on, and the concern in Natin’s eyes became outright fear as it became apparent to all that the outsider had no intention of stopping.

A distant voice rang out. Shanis breathed a sigh of relief as she saw Master Yurg running toward them. The dueling boys neither heard nor saw the swordmaster’s approach. Natin was tiring visibly. Stumbling and falling to one knee, he raised his blade in a gesture that was part defensive and part supplication.

“Hold! Hold!” Shanis shouted. The dark-haired outlander ignored her cry. He struck down hard in a sweeping slash. Natin screamed as the blade sliced through his wrist, spraying a hot, bloody froth across his face. His sword fell useless to the ground.

Then all was bedlam. People pushed and shouted. Shanis tried to fight through the throng that milled about Natin. She stumbled over Khalyndryn, who was bent over at the waist, retching. The dark-haired boy’s head bobbed above the crowd, and she took off after him in mindless fury. Before could reach her quarry, two men in white cloaks grabbed her by the arms and lifted her off the ground. She was too surprised to cry out. She looked about her and saw that several similarly garbed men were in dispersing the crowd.

The men wore polished chain mail under their cloaks. All were armed. These were the prince’s guard! Things began to quiet as the soldiers chased people away with sharp commands and more than a few threats of flogging.

Natin still lay on the ground. Master Yurg knelt over him along with two of the soldiers. His sword lay a few feet away in the blood-soaked grass. Another of them held Hierm by the upper arm. Natin’s assailant stood with his arm pinned behind his back by an angular man in a flamboyant red and yellow checked cloak. The strange man seemed to wear a permanent smile along with the harp that was strapped to his back.

A stout soldier, his yellow beard streaked with gray, stalked up to them and inspected the three with a look not much short of contempt. “Come with me.” He led them down the crowded dirt path that ringed

the green in Galsbur's center. The soldiers half-dragged them up the steps of the Dry Birch, through the common room, where everyone paused to stare and shout japes, and into the small, private room in the back of the inn.

Lord Hiram sat at a small table in the corner with two men in merchant dress and a young man who could only be Prince Lerryn

The Prince was a tall man; even seated, that much was evident. His curly brown hair was cut short, just above his high, red collar. His skin was deeply tanned, unusual for royalty, but Larry's reputation was that of a soldier, and a good one. He spent little time at the palace in Archstone, preferring instead to remain in the field with his guard. He took in the scene with an amused expression.

"New recruits, Captain Tabars?" His laugh, deep and rich, cascaded over the three youths. Shanis hated him instantly.

Captain Tabars face reddened. "Dueling, Highness. This one here," Tabars gestured at the young stranger, "near killed a local boy. Cut his hand 'most clean off!"

The Prince was no longer smiling. His brown eyes bored into the three young people. "And the other two?"

"Had to grab them too." Tabars shook his head and directed a scowl at Shanis and Hierm. "Were going to dispense a little local justice, they were."

The Prince cupped his hand in his chin and gazed at Shanis with an intensity that took her breath. "The girl too?"

Shanis' heart sank. She had been deluding herself. The Prince was as bad as the rest of the men. He'd never let her fight in the tournament.

"Yes, Highness," Tabars said. His bearded chin twitched. "Oh yes, indeed."

"Master Van Derin," Lerryn inquired, turning his attention to Lord Hiram, who was staring daggers at his son. "Do you know these young people?"

The question hung in the silence as they awaited his reply. Shanis wondered if he was going to deny them, but he finally spoke, his voice a tired drone. "Your Highness, the boy to your right is my wayward son Hierm. The girl is Shanis Malan, the daughter of a man in my employ."

Hierm bowed as his father introduced him. Shanis knew that she should probably curtsy, or something ridiculously ladylike. After an awkward moment, she nodded and bent her knee slightly. Smiling, the Prince inclined his head in return.

“The other I do not know,” Hiram continued. “He is not from these parts.”

The jet-haired young man piped up right away. “Pedric Karst, Highness.” He bowed deeply. “My father is the Duke of Kurnsbur, to the east and south.”

If this name meant anything to the Lerryn, it did not register on his face. He turned to the man who had brought Karst in. “And who might you be?”

“Sandrin Skedane at your service, Highness.” The man made a graceful bow. “I am a loremaster,” Skedane continued, “and a man of songs. I have come to see your tournament, and perhaps memorialize it in story and verse.”

Shanis took a long look at him. His flamboyant red and yellow cloak was not all that was odd about him. His puffy, black hair was sprinkled with silver, and his chin whiskers, the only hair on his face, was twisted into a hands-length braid, with red and yellow ribbon woven in. His weathered face suggested that he had seen as many summers as Lord Hiram, but he seemed as spry and agile as a youth. He had easily taken Karst in hand.

“I see.” Lerryn’s tone said that he did not care one whit why Skedane was here. “Would you care to tell me what you witnessed?”

“I am sorry, Highness,” Skedane said, holding out his hands in supplication. “I happened upon the scene just as the boy was injured. I took this one in hand,” he said, nodding toward Karst, “before things grew even more heated.”

“I thank you for your assistance. I assume you can find your way out?”

Skedane’s face fell for a moment, but he caught himself and smiled at the prince. “Of course, Highness. Happy to be of service.” He backed out of the room, his smile fading to a grin.

Lerryn waited until the man was well away and Tabars had closed the door before he spoke.

“Master Karst,” he said, leaning forward and placing his hands on the table, fingers interlaced, “can you tell me how you came to cross blades with this other young man?”

“We were only making a few passes, Highness,” Karst replied smoothly. “Practicing for the tournament. At least I was practicing.”

Shanis clenched her fists and glared at the boy. Captain Tabars saw the expression on her face, and shook his head. The message was clear; do not interrupt.

“I have to admit I had teased him a bit,” the boy continued, “all in good fun, mind. I guess he was angry. Things got out of hand, and I just...”

“You just cut off his hand.” Lerryn’s voice was without emotion.

“No Highness,” Karst shook his head. “I mean, yes, but... I didn’t intend to! He fell and I was going to knock the blade from his hands to finish it...impressively. But at the last moment, he flung his hands in the air. I didn’t expect that. There was no time to stop.”

Lerryn now turned his attention to Hierm and Shanis. “I suppose the two of you do not believe that this was an accident?”

“This was no accident. Natin was giving up. This ox brain didn’t have to do what he did.” Lord Hiram sat up straight and cleared his throat, but she ignored him. “Natin was no match for him to begin with. This boy knew what he was doing the entire time.” Silence and expectant stares answered her. She looked quizzically at Lerryn before realizing what everyone was waiting for. “Um... Your Highness,” she added. Tabars snorted, but the slight crinkle around Lerryn’s eyes told Shanis that he, at least, found her lack of formality amusing.

Lerryn turned to Hierm. “And you, young van Derin? Do you concur with the opinion of this girl?”

“Yes Highness,” Hierm replied instantly. “He could have stopped himself.” He did not meet the eye of his scowling father. “There is no doubt in my mind.”

“And did this young man... Natin I believe it was,” Lerryn propped his feet on the table. He rocked back on his chair, hands folded behind his head, and stared at the ceiling. “Did this Natin raise his hands just before Master Karst delivered his blow?”

“He did, Highness, but with all due respect, I maintain that the blow could have been stopped.”

“He raised his hands,” Lerryn said, frowning at the ceiling. “Perhaps the girl is correct, and this Natin was trying to yield. Be that as it may, it would be totally unexpected to one practiced at swordplay.” He removed his feet from the table, and turned back to Lord Hiram. “Is your son an adept bladesman?”

Hiram nodded. “Fair, Your Highness. Better than some, not as good as others.”

Shanis did not miss the man’s meaningful glance in her direction.

“Very well.” Lerryn clapped his hands together. “Young van Derin, in your opinion, had this Natin attempted to block Master Karst’s blow, would his sword have been knocked from his grasp?”

Hiern paused for a moment before answering quietly. "I can not say for certain, Highness. I think it likely, though." He let his head hang.

Shanis was incensed. Had it not occurred to the Prince that she might have an opinion herself? She was about to voice that opinion when someone entered the room.

"And what say you, Swordmaster?" Lerryn looked to the door, where Yurg had just walked in. The prince seemed unfazed by the blood covering Yurg's tunic.

Yurg made a hasty bow. "The boy will live, Highness." He paused a moment, glowering at Karst. "We had to take his hand."

Lerryn shook his head. "Did you happen to witness this incident?" He stressed the word incident.

"I saw that a duel was taking place. I hurried to put a stop to it. But I regret to say I did not see the blow that cost the boy his hand."

"Did the injured boy have anything to say about what happened?" Lerryn gestured to a servant standing against the wall, who hastily refilled the prince's wine glass.

"He is scarcely coherent. He said that he did not know the intent of his opponent." Yurg's voice was flat, but Shanis could tell that he was having a difficult time keeping his temper in check. "Natin was not a student of the sword, but he is a fine young man."

Lerryn sipped his wine and seemed to contemplate those words. When he finally spoke, his voice carried a tone that said he would brook no nonsense. "I cannot judge whether or not Master Karst intended the injury that he inflicted on Master Natin. It is, however, my judgment that Master Karst, as a young man of allegedly noble birth, has no business starting duels with farm boys.

"Tabars! What sort of coin is Master Karst carrying?"

After a brief search, the soldier relieved Karst of a small purse. He sorted through the contents. "Two golds. A few silvers...coppers." The soldier shrugged.

Lerryn nodded. "The gold shall be given to the boy's parents. A poor repayment for his hand."

"Give them the entire purse. I have another." Karst smirked.

Shanis clenched a fist and took a step in Karst's direction. Lerryn waved her back to her place without taking his eyes from Karst.

"Master Karst, do you wish to participate in my tournament?"

"I do, Highness." The boy's face paled as he realized he had said too much.

“You will control your words and your actions. My tournament is two days hence. I want neither to see your face nor hear your name until that time. Am I understood?”

“Yes. I swear it.”

Lerryn nodded, and gestured toward the door. Karst bowed, and scurried out of the room. The Prince now turned his attention to Hiern and Shanis, who stood shoulder to shoulder in front of him.

“I expect that all thoughts of retribution will be forgotten immediately.”

“Yes, Highness.” Hiern’s voice was a rough whisper.

Shanis stood, arms folded across her chest, staring back at Lerryn, who seemed content to wait her out. A few coins? That was all? Karst should be whipped. She controlled her tongue; no use in arguing with the second-most powerful man in Galdora. At long last she nodded in agreement.

Lerryn smiled and turned to Yurg. “Swordmaster, I understand this young woman is one of your students. Is that usual for Galsbur?”

“It is most unusual, Highness, but she is of unusual talent. She and master van Derin are the best students I have ever trained.”

The prince seemed to look at her with new eyes, taking stock of her: her face, chest, arms and legs. He looked at her not as a man might leer at a young girl, but as a man might inspect a horse.

“The two of you may go,” he said at long last, nodding toward the door.

Relieved, Shanis turned to leave when Lerryn called to her.

“Miss Malan.”

“Your Highness?” She turned to face the Prince.

“I look forward to witnessing your skills firsthand in my tournament!”

His words were like a shock of cold water. She gasped, but realization dawned within her, warming her very soul.

“Thank you, Highness,” she whispered, as if a loud voice might wake her from what must be a dream. “Thank you.” She made another failed attempt at a curtsy, then made a quick bow instead before darting from the room, fearful he might change his mind or say he had only been kidding.

She had to contain herself to keep from skipping through the common room. When they emerged into the street, she caught Hiern in a bear hug. “I’m going to do it, Hiern. I’m really going to do it.” She

couldn't take revenge on Karts, but perhaps she could beat him in the tournament. She could do no more for Natin than that.

Hierm merely smiled and squeezed her tightly.

She thought that nothing could spoil her mood, but then she notice the figure standing a few paces from them. Karst waited on the edge of the green, across the dirt track from the inn. Pushing away from Hierm, she stared into Karst's eyes. He had regained his cruel glare, and any semblance of humility had vanished once he left Lerryn's presence.

"I am Pedric Karst," he hissed. "Remember my name." Without further word, he turned and stalked away.

Chapter 5 | Tournament

Lerryn's procession snaked through the crush of onlookers. Most were rural folk who might never again have the chance to witness royalty firsthand. The royal family of Galdora had not condescended to visit Galsbur or the surrounding area in remembered history. The guards, seven squadrons of seven soldiers, were the elite of Lerryn's corps. Called the White Fang, the unit garbed each warrior in a cloak of pure white over black tunic and hose, and a mail shirt of highly polished silver. The only visible marking was on the back, where a serpent's fang was outlined in black. A crimson drop of venom kissed the needle tip. Many in the crowd found their enthusiasm replaced with awe as these legendary fighters passed by. Nearby, Lars Harim stood dumbstruck, mouth agape, arms hanging loosely at his sides. Oskar chuckled at the farmer's reaction.

Oskar regarded the leader of one of the squadrons. His uniform devoid of any signs of rank, his standing was denoted by the silver armlet worn just above his wrist. Oskar had overheard someone explain the meaning of the armlets. One band signified a squad leader. More bands denoted higher rank. The soldier kept his gaze fixed immediately in front of him, but his countenance was enough to shake even the stoutest Galsburan. This was a man to be feared. Only a brief look at the other soldiers was needed to include them all in that category.

"Glad they're on our side," Oskar muttered, his stomach fluttering at the awesome site. A man standing nearby bobbed a bald head in agreement. Oskar's cheeks reddened. He had not intended to speak aloud.

Prince Lerryn rode in the middle of the procession. Unlike his soldiers, Lerryn wore no armor. His tunic and hose were crimson, with matching fringe trimming his snow-white cape. A black viper adorned his cape. Lerryn smiled, a stark contrast to his guard. The easy air about the prince seemed to soften the mood of the crowd. Cheers erupted. Fathers

hoisted children onto their shoulders. A few young women wept openly. The Prince acknowledged the assemblage with an occasional wave, or nod of his head. A girl somewhere in the back of the throng squealed, "He looked at me! He looked at me!" The ensuing thud told Oskar that she had likely fainted.

When the last rider had passed, the cheers abated, but only for a moment. Shouts, whistles, and peals of laughter rang in Oskar's ears. Oskar looked around for the source of the crowd's reaction. He did not have to look far. Another procession made its way toward the tournament grounds, led by a group of what appeared, at first glance, to be soldiers escorting a shiny black carriage. The top was down, revealing several people seated within. One passenger was standing and waving to the crowd. As the carriage drew near, Oskar recognized Mistress Faun. She wore a black dress, which exposed a generous amount of cleavage. Her golden tresses were piled high atop her head, encircled by a sparkling tiara.

Oskar noticed that the carriage was escorted not by soldiers, but by various local farmers and craftsmen who had apparently allowed Faun to talk them into serving as an ill-assorted honor guard. Faun had garbed them all in black cloaks to match her dress. Nothing else about them was uniform. Their clothing was a motley assortment of brown, dark green, and dark blue tunics and hose. Black dye was rare and expensive, thus few common folk actually owned black clothing. A few of the men had belted on ancient swords, likely family heirlooms. The remainder carried a variety of weapons or farm implements. Unlike the men of the White Fang, it was easy to read the expressions on the faces of these men. Most were deeply embarrassed, probably regretting what had seemed like a good idea a few days earlier. Oskar hoped that Faun had at least paid them.

Mistaking the laughter for cries of approval, Faun continued to wave daintily. Hiram sat next to her, his face a mask of serenity. He stared at the sky, not acknowledging Faun or the host of mocking faces. Oskar almost felt sorry for him. Hierm's older brother Laman sat alongside his father. Where Hierm favored their mother, Laman was the spitting image of Hiram. Tall, angular, almost handsome, but not quite. The only feature that he and Hierm shared was their mother's golden hair. Ever the dutiful son, Laman kept a smile on his face, and stared straight ahead, never letting his embarrassment show. Joining the Van Derins in the coach was Master and Mistress Serrill, along with Khalyndryn. The three of them were decked out in their finest clothing. Though her parents appeared

mortified by the jeers of the throng, Khalyndryn seemed not to notice. Her gaze was locked on the knot of white riders in the distance. After the Van Derin's coach passed, the crowd closed in behind and followed it down the road.

The hills surrounding the tournament ground were nearly filled. Some people had staked out spots two days before, and camped until the day of the event. He found an open space near the top of the hill, directly opposite the viewing platform.

Lerryn mounted the dais, recognized the crowd with an imperious wave, and spoke. Despite the distance and the roar of the massed throng, Oskar could clearly make out every word. Sorcery? A chill crawled up his spine, and he shivered. Galsburans were a practical sort. They knew that such things were supposed to exist but did not really believe. Given the response that Lerryn was receiving, most of those in attendance either did not realize that sorcery was being employed, or did not care.

"People of Galsbur... my friends!" A roar of adoration answered Lerryn's greeting. He paused momentarily to acknowledge the praise with a smile and nod. "It is truly an honor to be with you this day." Another cheer, another pause. "Our nation has need of good men! Of strong men!" Oskar wondered how Shanis was reacting to that particular choice of words. "I am pleased to see many such young men standing here before me." His gesture swept across the entirety of the tournament entrants, who stood arrayed before the dais.

"Today we shall honor the most promising of your swordsmen, your archers..." He paused and extended his arms outward, fingers spread, as if to embrace the entire throng of people at once. "Today, the eyes of the realm are on Galsbur." A wave of joy and pride crashed into the dais, rolling across the platform with visible effect. In her seat, Mistress Faun flinched. Several members of the prince's entourage sat up straighter. Lerryn simply smiled, soaking it up. Normally a cynic, Oskar was startled to hear his own voice joining the din.

When the cheers died down, a member of Lerryn's entourage, whose rich, green robes and blue stole marked him an ecclesiast, offered a prayer to the seven gods. The invocation went largely ignored by the Galsburans and other locals, who were impatient for the tournament to commence. Oskar noted that Faun raised her hands in prayer in imitation of the dignitaries seated around her. He was pleased to see that Lord Hiram, at least, kept his hands in his lap and retained his usual, implacable stare. If the ecclesiast thought any of them impious, he did

not show it. When he finished his prayer, he merely bowed to Lerryn, and returned to his seat.

Anticipation rose anew, the tension taut like a bowstring stretched to its limit. To Oskar's mind, everyone seemed to be leaning forward slightly, tensed as if they were about to sprint onto the field. He could almost feel the collective energy of the crowd dancing in the air.

On the platform, Lerryn nodded to a guardsman, who raised his war horn. The rumble of the crowd ascended to a roar. While seven lengthy blasts issued from the horn, the flag of Galdora was raised atop a pole just behind the Prince's stand. The tournament had begun!

The day began with footraces. After several heats, Hanos Herran, a local boy, bested the field. Two members of the White Fang led him to the dais, and Lerryn himself placed a crown of what looked like ivy upon his head. Hanos, quivering nervously, bowed so deeply that the crown fell off his head. Many in the crowd laughed, but Lerryn merely returned the bow. A soldier then led Hanos into a tent next to the viewing platform. Oskar's gaze returned to the field, where the wrestling competition had begun.

Oskar did not completely understand the rules of formal wrestling. Neither did many of the entrants. After a great deal of eye gouging and hair pulling in the first few matches, one of the soldiers called a halt, and launched into an animated explanation, accompanied by demonstrations on an unwilling-looking young man who had been the worst of the hair-pullers. While the demonstration continued, Oskar scanned the perimeter of the field looking for Shanis and Hiern. He located Shanis quickly enough. Her red hair stood out in any crowd.

She sat at the far end of the field, far to Oskar's right. Nearby was a large wall made of bales of straw, which would serve as the backdrop for the archery competition. Several of the more antsy swordsmen were stabbing the straw. Shanis was not looking at them. Rather, she was staring off to her left, where a tall boy with jet-black hair stood with his arms folded across his chest. The boy's smug countenance said that he thought himself superior to these country folk. Oskar knew from Shanis and Hiern's descriptions that this was Pedric Karst, the young man who had taken Natin's hand. Oskar's fists clenched. A primordial part of him that rarely surfaced wanted to force his way down through the crowd and strangle the youth with his bare hands. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes until the urge subsided.

"I hope Shanis gets a chance at him," he whispered. "I hope, I hope, I hope."

“You all right, boy?” Lars Harim, apparently recovered from his shock at seeing the White Fang at close range, cocked his head and stared at Oskar.

“Yes sir,” Oskar replied, a bit abashed. He pointedly fixed his gaze on the wrestlers, so as to cut off any further embarrassing conversation.

The wrestling competition resumed with several spirited matches taking place simultaneously. As the less-experienced wrestlers were eliminated, the matches began to look less like melees and more like sport. Each contest took place inside a small square, with boundaries marked off by ropes only a hand’s length above the ground. Oskar deduced most of the rules by watching. The rest he learned by listening to conversations going on around him. A wrestler earned a point for throwing his opponent to the ground, or by forcing him out of the designated area. A soldier oversaw each match, and awarded points. Kicking and punching were not allowed. Tripping was legal, but one did not receive a point for taking down an opponent in this manner. In the absence of a “throw down” or an “out”, the overseer could award a point for “controlling the action.”

It quickly became evident that the class of the tournament was a veritable giant of a boy from one of the outlying communities. Towering head and shoulder above the rest of the combatants, the young man combined incredible strength with surprising speed for one of his size. He quickly became the crowd favorite as he plowed through the tournament field. Not knowing his name, someone on the hill to Oskar’s left began shouting “Bull! Bull!” The rest of the spectators picked up the chant. Oskar thought that the boy’s matted black curls and lack of a neck made him look more like a troll than a bull.

In the finals, the Bull faced off against a lean fellow of above-average height. The boy had some muscle on him, but next to the Bull, he appeared woefully thin. He also seemed overly preoccupied with his hair, which he combed thoroughly between matches before knotting it atop his head in some strange sort of bun. In his mind, Oskar had already nicknamed this boy “Hair”. The hairstyle, coupled with his perpetual grin made him appear almost effeminate.

“This fellow’s going to be killed.” Oskar voiced the thought that must have been in everyone’s mind.

To everyone’s surprise and pleasure, the match was competitive. Bull, though quick for his size, was not as fast as Hair, who managed to trip Bull a few times, all the while avoiding his clutches. When Hair managed

to send Bull stumbling out of the ring, earning his first point, the chants of “Bull! Bull!” subsided for a moment.

Oskar filled the gap by shouting, “Hair! Hair! Hair!” Most of the people looked at him as if he were deranged, but a few laughed, and joined in. Within moments, chants of “Bull!” met shouts of “Hair!” as the two boys went at one another. Oskar did not think it possible, but the smile on the blond boy’s face actually seemed to grow broader.

The match ended when Bull finally got a solid grip on his opponent, and crushed him in a bear hug. When he finally dropped Hair onto the ground, the boy lay motionless on the thick grass. The soldier overseeing the match knelt over the boy, examining him at length before pronouncing him “out”.

Concern for the fallen wrestler tempered the crowd’s enthusiasm. Oskar was impressed to see Bull drop to his knees and speak to the young man who lay on the ground. Apparently satisfied with whatever response he received, Bull stood and allowed himself to be led to Lerryn’s dais. By the time the prince had crowned the wrestling champion, the runner-up was on his feet to the sound of applause and a few shouts of “Hair”. He was still smiling. Oskar noted that this time, both young men were taken into the tent.

The archery competition opened with a nervous contestant sending his first shot over the protective backdrop and into the crowd. The arrow struck a man in the leg, but the victim was so drunk that he ripped the arrow from his thigh and held it aloft. Laughing, he staggered several steps through the crowd before his legs melted and he fell in an incoherent heap. A few of the spectators, overcoming their surprise, hurried over to tend to the man. The shaken young archer recovered his composure enough that he was able to hit the target with his remaining shots, but did not come near the bullseye.

As the contest progressed, Oskar determined that archery was not a great spectator sport. The better archers came close to the center of the target with nearly every shot. Only the observers who sat near the front could tell who had made the best shots. Thankfully, the competition moved along at a brisk pace until Edrin Kalloh, a local boy, emerged the winner. As he received his crown, the crowd roared with excitement. Not so much, Oskar thought, in support of the archer, but instead because it was time for the swords!

A chill ran up Shanis' spine as she listened to the roar of the crowd, rising to a tumult as the swordsmen were called onto the field. She had never been nervous about using the sword, it having always come easily to her. Besting the boys had been fun, the pressure always being on them not to lose to a girl. But today it was Shanis who felt the pressure. For the first time, something important was dependant on her performance. This was the chance to live her dream. The chance to attend the Prince's Academy. But she had to win.

The winner of the tournament would gain a place in the Prince's Academy, but others might also be invited if they were deemed worthy. Gossip among the contestants held that two wrestlers and three archers had been invited. The young men needed only to acquit themselves well in order to be considered. Shanis knew that that would not be enough in her case.

She did not know why Prince Lerryn had been so agreeable to her competing. Likely, he was amused by the novelty of it all. A girl with a sword! Doubtless, he did not expect her to win. He probably expected her to make a fool of herself. She would show him. If she won the tournament, he would be bound to admit her into the academy. She would have earned that right in front of thousands of witnesses. Anything less than a victory might give Lerryn an excuse to exclude her.

She scanned the crowd in search of her father. She did not expect to see him. He had left early that morning, hauling goods for Lord Hiram. He had not wished her luck. In fact, they had not spoken of the tournament since the day she had learned that she could compete. Arriving home, she had leapt into her father's arms like a young girl. For a moment he was his old self, laughing a deep, hearty laugh as he clutched her tight to his barrel chest.

Upon hearing the news, though, her father hung his head, shrugged his bear-like shoulders and whispered, "If it must be." He then retired to his room, and did not come out until morning.

Shanis' mother had died during childbirth, but this tragedy had not stopped Colin from filling his daughter's life with happiness and love. Her earliest memories were of walks in the woods with him. He taught her scout craft, how to track, hunt and survive in the wilderness. He taught her hand-to-hand fighting and trained her in the use of the knife and the bow.

He presented her with her first sword in her seventh summer: a blunt-edged tournament sword that was just right for her size and

strength. Colin taught her the basics and then turned her over to Master Yurg for training.

Colin Malan had also taught her to read and to do sums. He was truly a remarkable man. How many simple teamsters had the breadth of knowledge and experience that Shanis' father had? Moreover, how many men would commit the time to raising a daughter alone?

The thing she most remembered was that he had taught her that being a girl should never hold her back. "You can do anything, Shanis. Anything. Always believe." How many times had he said those words to her? Shanis felt that she no longer knew this sad, strange man. His ill temper had grown worse over the past few months. The closer she came to her sixteenth birthday, the less supportive Colin became. All of the things he had taught her no longer seemed to matter. Suddenly he wanted her to be another one of the girls. Which made the note he had left for her all the more puzzling.

She had risen early to find that her father had already left. A piece of parchment lay beneath her sword.

Shanis,

The sword is your destiny. I thought I could keep you from it, but I was wrong. I cannot be with you today because I would try to stop you. A man does not always know when he is beaten. Trust Yurg. Know that I will always be your father.

Papa

The note was strange in many ways. Apparently, her father was resigned to her pursuit of the sword. What did he mean, "Trust Yurg"? She had always trusted Yurg. He was like a second father to her. And why tell her that he would always be her father? It was strange.

The bark of a soldier giving instructions jolted her back to awareness. She recognized Captain Tabars from the encounter between Natin and Pedric Karst. She ground her teeth at the thought of Karst. She hoped that she would have the chance to make him pay for what he had done to Natin. She had only a moment to think before Tabars began moving people around. The contestants were divided into rows, each person several paces away from the others. Tabars explained that they would begin by working through some basic forms.

Shanis drew her sword, and ran through the mental exercises that Yurg had taught her. *One with the blade.* In her mind's eye, the blade

became an extension of her body. She shed her emotions, her random thoughts, whittled away by the sword's razor edge. Her blood flowed through the sword. The sword breathed with her. She was the sword. The sword was her.

She flowed through the forms with a practiced ease. *Calm... focus.* Her mind regarded the activity about her with a detached curiosity. Next to her, an awkward young man with a bulbous nose barely averted hacking off his own foot as he feebly attempted to follow along with the group. One of the Prince's guards intervened, and removed the boy from the group. Some part of Shanis heard the boy's sobs as he was led away. Another part of her wondered who had signed for the boy to enter. Probably he was the son of some nobleman who thought himself worthy because of his station.

The forms came to an end. Shanis noted that several hopefuls had been weeded from the field during the working of the forms. All the better. Even using a tournament sword, a novice could be seriously injured.

Three dueling circles were marked off in a triangle in front of the dais. Almost immediately, a soldier called Shanis to the one nearest Lerryn and the other guests.

A tall, grim-looking soldier with a pockmarked face approached her. "Get a jerkin and a sword. Give your own sword to me." He waited while Shanis unbelted her sword and handed it over. He carelessly tossed it to the side, and then addressed her opponent in the same way. If he had treated her sword casually, nothing else about him was casual. His every move spoke of barely contained danger, like a snake poised to strike.

Shanis chose a jerkin from a nearby pile. The tournament armor was a thick leather vest padded with wool. Shanis chose the lightest one she could find. She took more time choosing from the stack of blunted tournament swords. The weight was not of great concern to her, but proper balance was paramount. After testing several blades, she finally found one to her liking, and moved into the circle. Her opponent was waiting for her, as was the swarthy soldier. She wondered if he would be annoyed at the delay, but instead he gave her an appraising look, and a nod. Obviously, he understood what she had been doing.

Her adversary was a tall, broad-shouldered boy who looked to be of an age with her. The fine cut of his clothing marked him as someone of affluence, if not nobility. He had unruly auburn hair and a freckled face. He made no effort to hide his contempt for her, chuckling as she took

her place in the circle. He must have misinterpreted the delay as hesitation on her part.

Out of the corner of her eye, Shanis spied Lerryn smirking. Mistress Faun, face twisted in revulsion, was whispering in Hiram's ear. Hot rage surged inside of her, and she had to fight to control her temper. *Focus.*

"I am Squadron Leader Khattre," the soldier said. "You will obey my instructions at all times. I will call all points. No points for strikes to the head and neck. Three points wins." With that, he handed each of them a light helm. "Ready positions!"

Hastily, Shanis donned her helm and moved to the center of the circle. She stood sideways to her opponent, looking at him across her right shoulder. She held her sword point-down in front of her. Her grip was tighter than it should have been. She was too tense. *Calm... One with the blade!* Her mind raced.

A few cheers arose from the crowd, but only a few. Taunts and jeers drowned them out. One man made an extremely profane proposition to her, which was received with much laughter. This was not at all how it was supposed to be! Her calm evaporated. Faun and her superior airs. Lerryn making sport of her. The smirking boy facing her in the circle. She wanted to destroy them all. When Khattre called "Begin!" she leapt into her opponent, hacking through him with unbound fury.

Taken by surprise, the boy backpedaled momentarily, then moved to the side, sliding past her. "Point!"

That was too fast. How did I...

More catcalls from the crowd. Shanis looked down. The point was not hers. Her opponent had stabbed her in the very center of the abdomen. With a real sword it would have been a killing blow. A painful one. She felt her face flush. She had lost control. The rage she had felt only moments ago drained away, replaced by humiliation. Khattre looked disappointed. She glanced up at the dais, where Faun veritably glowed with satisfaction. Lerryn maintained his amused grin. Hiram stared through her, as if he wished she were invisible. Everything was amplified. The laughter rang in her ears. She stepped back and shook her head vigorously, as if she could make it all go away.

Glancing up she noticed Yurg seated to Lerryn's left. Why hadn't she noticed him before? Her gaze locked with his. A brief narrowing of the eyes was the only response he gave, but it was enough. She remembered an argument not so long ago. 'If an opponent can make you angry, he can kill you just as easily. For all the gifts you have with the blade, you

can't grasp that simple concept!' His voice echoed in her mind. Now she understood his anger, his frustration. *Calm. Like the forms. Calm.*

"One with the blade." she whispered. "One with the blade". She moved back to the center of the circle, as if in a trance. She sliced away her feelings, and discarded them one-by-one. Frustration, confusion, embarrassment, anger, all gone. She was one with the blade. She was the blade.

No longer did animosity of any sort show on her opponent's face. In fact, he no longer seemed to regard her in any way at all. She was no longer worthy of his concern. It showed in his posture, in the lazy way he held the sword. His eyes darted toward Khattre, impatiently waiting to dispatch this foolish girl. This time, Shanis did not care what he thought of her. She did not care what anyone thought. *She was the blade.*

"Begin!" Shanis easily deflected a broad, sweeping stroke that had been aimed at her head. She flowed smoothly into an attack. She pressed forward, this time under control. Her adversary cocked an eyebrow. Once again she had surprised him. This time it cost him.

"Point!" Khattre shouted.

The boy stared at her for a moment. He suppressed a chuckle, then returned to the center of the circle. When the duel resumed, he leapt to the attack.

Shanis glided into a defensive posture. The blows rained down. She deflected them with ease. She danced around the circle with a grace borne of years of training. Her attacker redoubled his efforts to no avail. His blade never came close. Shanis remained on the defensive. She now knew the extent of the young man's abilities.

Around the circle they spun, the boy now hacking away in frustration. He had tired visibly. His footwork was sloppy, his strokes long and looping. Shanis decided to give him a rest. She neatly deflected his blade and stabbed for the heart.

"Point!" If Khattre was surprised at this turn of events, his serious demeanor gave no hint.

This time, a few people in the crowd cheered. Most still taunted her. Those who did not understand swordplay believed that they had seen a superior swordsman drive his opponent around the circle, only to fall victim to a lucky stab. Khattre met her eye with a lengthy stare, as if taking stock of her. Her opponent received only a sympathetic shake of the head before they were recalled to action. This time Shanis would leave no doubt in anyone's mind.

A tight, measured attack drew the boy's blade in close to his body. He mounted a feeble defense, Shanis blade coming ever closer. Four strokes to the abdomen in quick succession. A forehand slash across the bridge of the nose came just short of blinding the young man. Shanis had intended to miss. In a panic, the boy threw his blade up to protect his face. With a loud smack, Shanis' backhand stroke cracked across his stomach, driving the wind from him and buckling his knees.

"Match!" Khattre thrust his left fist into the air and pointed his right hand at Shanis.

This time the cheers almost equaled the whistles and insults that were hurled her way. Shanis turned toward the dais, removed her helm, and knelt in an exaggerated bow. More applause, and many more jeers. Lerryn stood, and returned her bow along with a flourish of his cape.

Mistress Faun looked scandalized. Shanis treated her to a mock-curtsy, difficult to do while wearing leather armor and holding a sword. Lerryn clapped his hands, and nudged Faun with an elbow to the ribs. It took Faun only a moment to decide this was all Lord Hiram's fault. She ignored both Shanis and the Prince, and laid into her husband with a vengeance. As usual, Hiram took it all with a stony detachment. Lerryn shook his head at Faun and continued to applaud.

"Girl! On guard!"

At the sound of Khattre's voice, Shanis spun around. Her vanquished opponent, now on his feet, charged at her. Reflexively, Shanis ducked under a stroke that would have caved in her skull. She somersaulted on her left shoulder, and came up underneath her assailant. With a deft thrust, she drove the pommel of her sword up into his groin. He made surprisingly little sound as he toppled and fell. The crowd roared its approval. Somewhere beneath the calm of the sword, Shanis smiled. This might be fun, after all.