

BEYOND THE CITY OF SWORDS

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Chapter 1

It was the third fortnight of the season of warm rains, in the four-hundred-ninety-eighth year of the Highwall City sword academy. Silla, the assistant to the master, felt tightness in her back, as she started to do the morning exercises. She heard one of the students' joints creak, too.

Silla realized she had forgotten her gloves at home. "*Blast*," she thought. She was going to have to admit the mistake and miss part of class running back for them.

From the front of the training hall, Dranna, the master, shouted, "You are twitching!"

Silla looked to see which of the slaves she was talking to. Dranna's weapons woman, in a green uniform, looked back at the master, with an expression Silla couldn't read. The slave's arms moved in subtle circles.

Dranna yelled to another slave, "Call the guard!"

The young man grabbed his rain cloak, and ran from the school. Dranna glared at the weapons woman.

The students moved around, a churn of multi-colored tunics. Their postures betrayed an eagerness for the ritual that Silla did not share. She found the turning-outs unsettling. Before long, she heard the sound of bells at the south gate, chilling even this tepid morning. Rain pounded on the roof.

The slave Dranna had sent away returned, followed by four guards, two men and two women, in black uniforms. Their rain cloaks dripped.

After them, entered a middle-aged woodman, who ran to the weapons woman, and embraced her, murmuring something Silla didn't understand. He carried a yellow bag, which the assistant to the master knew contained the woman's possessions.

The burliest of the guards separated them, taking the woman by her arm. The woodman put a necklace of woodbeads around her neck. The room was so silent, Silla could hear the click of the beads. There were a half-dozen other slaves in the school, who came up to the weapons woman, and handed her woodbead necklaces, or bracelets. The assistant to the master was surprised at the calmness of their demeanor.

The guards escorted the weapons woman out, with Dranna behind them. They were followed by the other slaves. Silla's daughter, Pel, and the other students looked at her, questioningly, a desire to be part of the action evident on their faces. She hesitated, then, said, "Yes, you can go."

They emptied out, rapidly. The assistant to the master pulled on her boots and threw her rain cloak over her shoulders. She touched the icon in the doorway, barely

registering the sword that it held half hidden behind it.

She followed the procession down the hill from the school to the gate. Rain dripped from the net-shaped branches of the likki trees onto her shoulders. Her thick soles were sure over the cobblestones.

Slaves came out of lavender houses, what looked like deep concern on their faces. They followed the procession down the hill to the south gate, handing bracelets or necklaces to the weapons woman, as they did. Rain dripped on everyone. Silla smelled the mud of the yards. She noticed the weapons woman's walk had the soft lurch of the tremblers.

When they reached the south gate, the woodpeople gathered around the woman, to say goodbye. The guards pushed her out the gate. A few townspeople had joined the students. They cheered at the turning out. Silla didn't feel the same excitement.

She watched the woman work her way across the grass outside the wall. The exile's steps had a slight sway to them. Her hands circled. Rain and mist shrouded the woods she was approaching. The trees lurked, as dark as death. The guards started to close the gate. Silla shouldered it back toward them, to allow herself one last look at the lonely sufferer.

The woodpeople climbed to the top of the wall, to wave goodbye. Since the ritual left everyone scattered, Silla took the risk of running home, on her way back to the school. With any luck, she would have time to grab her gloves, and Dranna wouldn't notice how long it took her to get there.

Silla rushed across the courtyard, past the well. Rain and sweat soaked her red training robe. The door to her house swung open on well-oiled hinges. On her dash through the entryway, her hand barely touched the icon there. No one was home. Bas'ta had the slaves with her at some damn rehearsal. Silla was going to have to rush to get back, or she would attract Dranna's ire, too.

The passage to her home training hall had never seemed so long. The doorknob stuck, until she leaned her weight against it. It suddenly gave way, and she stumbled through. Silla was shocked to see her weapons man, Kyr, doing the ninth form. He was in the midst of circling one of her swords aloft. The slave achieved the final one-legged pose as the door crashed open. He wobbled a little at the sound.

"Stop that!" Silla shouted.

Kyr put the wooden blade down. His head, with its curly red hair, was bowed. His hands were pale against his uniform sleeve. Three of his woodsbead bracelets were visible on his wrist. He was almost as short as Silla.

"I don't have time for this!" Silla crossed the room, grabbed her leather gloves, and stamped out.

She strode back down the hallway. Rushing out the door, she touched the surface of the statue, and whispered to it, "A lot of help you are."

Silla ran up the hill, puffing. She clutched the gloves against her chest. They got wet in the downpour. A dank smell rose from them. What she had seen heaped new stress

onto this terrible day.

“*Curses, curses, curses!*” Silla thought. She wished the errant woodman would just disappear before she got home. This just proved what they say, you can’t turn your back on the woodpeople. She cursed his quiet eyes that had obviously been watching her. And his hypocritical appearance of obedience. Why had she trusted a son of a quiverer? The weakness that ran in their families must have surfaced in Kyr.

With her daughter’s contest coming, Silla needed her weapons man. For the same reason, it was essential that she be above reproach. His betrayal put her in a tight trap. She tried to think it through, as she walked. The only way out was to turn him in, and find another slave, while she still could. It would be hard to match his skills, but she would do her best.

What if she couldn’t find someone good enough? Her daughter’s whole career could teeter and slide. She would have to find a slave who was equally good. She’d search the whole city, and even beyond the walls, if she had to.

Rain dripped through the net-shaped branches of the likki trees. It beat a staccato pattern on the light-weave robe on her shoulders. The wide doors to the school’s training hall hung open. She could hear that class had continued without her.

Silla felt bedraggled and angry. The scent of medicated massage oil and musty timbers usually comforted her. Today, her mood clashed with the setting.

She only had time to quickly graze the school’s icon with her hand. As Silla touched the clay, the image of how smoothly she had seen Kyr move flashed under her skull. She looked at the god, and asked, silently, “Why did you send this man to me?”

The assistant stepped across the threshold. Her pulse quieted a smidgen in the dusky spaciousness of the room. The solo forms had already started. It was too late to join them without interrupting.

Dranna, the master, stood at the front of the class. Silla rarely had a chance to watch her do the solo forms. The master’s tall body looked relaxed and powerful. She wore a purple tunic over her red robe.

The solo forms reviewed the basic movements of the sword art, but empty-handed. As Dranna’s body returned to the most elemental postures and strokes, Silla felt for a moment that she could see the whole history of the sword unfold. Dranna seemed to be expressing, in her own body, the way generations of old masters had created the art.

Dranna’s arms and legs moved in tight circles around her, reminding Silla of the way the master had looked, when they had been students and both coming to these forms fresh. The master progressed through the series. The sphere she described in the air around her extended further, in the same way her power had in the time since.

Fifty students, wearing various colored tunics over their red robes, followed her slow movement. Silla watched the way the braids they wore down their backs swung in unison with the master’s. Dranna’s was brown with the tinting of gray that spoke of her age.

When Silla and Dranna had been students, they all had worn their hair short,

following the old master's style, believing it made them faster and less vulnerable to being grabbed. Then, when Dranna became the master, she grew her hair out, and developed a distinctive spiral braid. She had an uncanny ability to flip it over her shoulder, before an assailant could catch it.

Silla, her assistant, was the only one who kept her hair in the old close shaved cut. It made her less self-conscious about its tint and texture, so different from the other swordpeople's. When she was young, the bright reddish color it was then seemed to her to be shouting. Now, its odd waves were cut short, and the strangeness of its hue was mellowed by the years.

There was one student whose hair differed from the brown braids around her. It was Silla's daughter, Pel. Her braid was a blend of Silla's auburn thatch and the sleek brown her father's had been.

Silla buttoned her gold-colored tunic over her robe. Her daughter was the only student whose posture was as erect as the master's. Silla felt a twinge of jealousy that Pel should emulate Dranna so devotedly. Dranna's oldest son, Tay, stood almost as erect as Pel.

The assistant to the master threaded her fingers into her damp left glove, briskly. Once Silla had the left glove on, pulling on the right one was difficult. Her rush magnified this to the point that glove wouldn't budge.

"Oh, nice," she said to herself. "I'm supposed to be teaching these kids, and I can't even dress myself."

Dranna came to the end of the ninth form, and said, "You're late," as if her voice could slam her assistant onto the straw-covered floor.

"I'm sorry," Silla said, keeping her self from snapping back, "Do you ever notice the thousand things I do right?"

On a black table at the front of the room, sat two metal gongs. Dranna struck the high note of the smaller one to start practice, and signaled to Silla to join them. To the room full of students, Dranna said, "Paired warm-ups, please."

As the sound diminished, Silla took her place at the head of the line of students. She went to the rack of training swords on the wall, and put her hand on the smooth wood of her favorite. Next to the racks was a shelf with opaque blue rocks from the seven directions. Silla raised her sword toward it, holding the blade in her left hand. She pointed the hilt toward the altar, bowing, and then circling the handle into her right hand.

Reb, a scrawny student in a brown tunic, raised the butt of his sword toward a colleague named Porta, who was dressed in gray. Porta ignored Reb and paired herself with a swordman named Bun, who wore the teal rank. Reb's disappointment was visible to Silla, though he was almost successful at controlling the quiver of his soft-looking lips. Protective rage flared in Silla's chest. She raised her hilt to him. He responded with a genuine smile.

The warm-ups were a slow series of crosses from low to high. Silla felt her joints become more fluid. The movement started to mellow her crankiness.

The larger gong rang. Everyone raised their swords, to each other to thank their training partners. They sat on their knees on the floor, lay their swords down beside them, and turned toward Dranna.

Dranna pointed her sword to Silla, to call her up to demonstrate. The lines around Dranna's mouth turned up slightly. She gestured for the attack she wanted. Silla raised her sword toward Dranna, then, ran the lunge full force, as she always did.

Dranna parried, and thrust her sword up to Silla's face, stopping just before she touched it. Dranna's black eyes connected with Silla's, sending a shock of dominance into the assistant. The master raised her sword to thank her attacker. Silla did the same. Dranna struck the high gong for the students to begin practice again.

Silla returned to Reb. They did the sequence slowly at first. As it became more familiar, they picked up speed. Reb's upswing lacked energy. Silla held up her hand to stop him, while she looked around for a good example to point out. The windowless hall was shadowy. She picked out a profile whose form she admired across the room, before she realized she was looking at her daughter.

Pel's long-limbed body reminded Silla of her own when she was young. Pel was thinner and all tough grace. She was training with Dranna's son, Tay, of course. The smoothness of her daughter's sword work reminded Silla why she put up with the school politics and Dranna's enormous ego. It was because there was a time like this, in every day, when the whole school danced. Dranna rang the low gong to interrupt practice. Everyone knelt on the floor in attentive postures. For that moment, Silla shared their enthusiasm.

"That's a good start," Dranna said. "Now let's perfect this move."

She raised her sword to Silla, who stood, raised her sword back, and approached with the same attack again. Dranna's deflection was sharp and quick. Her face flashed an extra sizzle of warning. Silla froze with the sword at her throat, thinking, "She never fails to notice when I have something to hide."

Dranna pointed at Silla's feet, and said to the students, "Watch the swordman, not the sword. Her body will always give itself away. She can't do anything without sending you a signal, first. You can always get there first. Practice that some more."

Dranna raised her sword to Silla and clanged the gong. Silla raised her sword to the master in return. She returned to Reb. They did the sword-raising gesture again. She lunged toward him. He imitated Dranna's speed and angularity.

"Good." Silla said. They repeated the combination, over and over again.

Dranna rang the low gong for lunch, and raised her sword to the students, then toward the table with the blue rocks on it. Silla and the students raised theirs to each other, to Dranna, and then to the rocks. Dranna walked into her private area, her back as straight outside of class as it was in.

Silla led the students to rack their swords. She fell to the back of the line, and followed them to a table, where a man and a woman in green uniforms with red hair were laying out a buffet of vegetables, cold game and lots of pitchers of water. Distractedly, Silla ate, and watched her daughter and Dranna's son roughhousing like young pedibuls

at play. She noticed that the burly Tay pulled his punches with Pel, but Pel did not do the same with him.

“Pel,” the assistant to the master called out. Her daughter did not respond.

“Pel!” she said more sharply. The young woman disentangled herself from her boyfriend, and walked to Silla, looking as determined as her mother felt.

“Yes?”

Silla whispered, “Don’t let Tay know your full strength until the contest.”

Pel smiled thinly. “I don’t want to hide. I don’t have to pull tricks to win.”

“Just hold back a little, please.”

“That may be the way you did it in your day, but Tay and I aren’t like you and Dranna. We don’t have to be sneaky.”

“Dranna will be, though. She’ll push him to take advantage of you, just like her father pushed her to do everything within the rules to me. You haven’t married him yet. Keep some secrets until after the match.”

“Oh, gods below us,” Pel sneered. A flush played across her pale face. She turned, and stamped away.

Silla watched, frustrated, as her daughter returned and seemed to play even harder with Tay. Pel’s tan limbs and Tay’s brown ones tangled into knots Silla’s eyes couldn’t keep up with.

The mother looked in the clay water cup she held, as if it had the answer to the question how to get through to her stubborn adolescent. The vessel did not respond, so Silla filled it with water and drank some more, as she tried to breathe through her ire.

Silla leaned back, and closed her eyes. Behind her lids, she saw Kyr again, putting down the sword she had caught him with. His posture had looked as if he regretted what he had done. But, maybe he was only sorry he had gotten caught. Should she give him another chance? He was becoming the best weapons slave in the city. Silla had hoped he was going to give Pel an advantage in her match. She didn’t want to lose him. The assistant to the master wished she hadn’t seen what she had seen.

After an hour, Dranna came out of her door again. Silla and the students returned to the training hall. Dranna raised her sword to the rocks and to the class. They raised theirs to the rocks and to her. The master called the assistant up, and signaled for the same lunge they had been working on.

Silla gave her full effort, as if she didn’t know Dranna was always going to get there first. It reminded her of the plays the puppeteers in the city put on, where the vain old man never seems to tire of falling for the booneybirds tricks. Season after season, he gets battered by their beaks. As Dranna’s move pushed her cut aside, Silla thought she would like to make up a story of her own, where the old man gets his revenge, maybe even taking advantage of the bird’s expectation that he would be predictable.

Reb appeared at her elbow, ready to work more on the counter. Silla broke it down for him, step-by-step. After what seemed like an endless round of repetitions, she

could see and feel that the movement was coming together for him. She smiled to herself.

Finally, the last gong reverberated through Silla's muscles. She was too tired to resist the way it drew her thoughts down into a well of silence. Dranna led the ritual of bowing swords to each other and to the shelf at the front of the hall. Silla let her eyes almost close until the blue rocks seemed to shimmer against the green wall.

The master walked lithely into her quarters. Silla thanked Reb. She put her sword in the rack, and watched the students do the same. Two weapons women dressed in green started to remove the swords, one at a time, and clean and oil them. Silla watched them, wondering whether she could buy one of them from the school, if she let Kyr be turned out.

In the moment Silla had been wondering this, Tay and Pel had disappeared from the slowly churning throng of young people. She looked for Porta, next. The student was gulping a cup of water, her face bright with exertion. Silla grabbed her sleeve and said, "I'd like to talk to you."

Porta nodded, and let herself be led to the inside courtyard. They stood, side by side under the eaves. The student smelled hot and sweaty. Silla still held the fold of red training robe in her hand. She resisted the urge to shake it and rattle Porta. Watching the rain flow in the gutter helped her get her anger under control.

She turned to Porta. The student flexed her confident triceps. She was two inches taller than Silla. She leaned forward so the turquoise dye flashed in her shiny brown hair. Silla was about to respond to this show of strength with one of her own. She noticed a touch of childhood roundness still in the young woman's brown face. This gentled Silla's approach a bit. "Why did you ignore Reb when he raised his sword to you?"

Porta looked at Silla with her child-like mouth set. Her voice was metallic, and seemed dissonant with her youth. "I need to train with Bun, because I have a tunic test coming up."

"If we don't take care of newer students, there won't be a school. There won't be any tests or tunics."

"Advanced students need more work." The edge of imperiousness and the way Porta straightened her barrel-like body almost set Silla off.

The only weapon she had was history. "I came to Highwall City as a foundling. I played with sticks before I was old enough to go to the children's school. I worked hard at the small sword to learn enough to become a serious student. None of us comes to this art knowing anything. Dranna had to learn her first crosses from the old master. Even the old master started out as a child, playing with toys. Your training is useless if you leave younger students behind."

Porta's posture softened, but only slightly. Silla toned down her harangue by just as small a measure. "What do you need from Bun?"

"Help. More advanced training."

"What do you think Reb needs from you?"

Porta bent her neck a modicum further. Silla said, "Seek Reb out tomorrow. Just focus on him for one day. Use his unpredictability to improve your training. Working with someone who is a little less smooth will actually help you with your test."

Porta smiled a little more than was appropriate, which gave Silla a clue that Dranna or one of the senior students was sneaking up behind her. She couldn't afford to let her anger interfere with her alertness. She only had a second to listen carefully, and act. From the complete silence, and the scent of floral tea, she knew it was Dranna, who always went for Silla's weak left side.

Silla shifted suddenly to the left so Dranna's left hand wound up clutching Silla's right arm. Silla rotated her captured elbow. Her right hand landed on the hilt of Dranna's sword. The master took a small step back and flipped her hair, now free from its braid, over her shoulder.

Silla drew the practice weapon in an arc so it would have cut Dranna's shoulder, if it had been live. Feeling how hard it was to keep from making a savage, if symbolic cut, Silla realized it was Dranna she was really mad at. The master's awareness was so subtle the assistant had to conceal her ire with skill. She breathed deeply for that control.

"Very good." Dranna said. She turned to Porta. "And she's right about Reb."

Dranna dismissed Porta with a catlike nod. She squeezed Silla's shoulder, as she walked her to the outside door. The master smelled fresh-bathed. She had changed into clean white robes that accented her rich brown skin.

"Nice turn," she said. "It's true you don't have the killer instinct. That's understandable. But your spirit of self-preservation is very good. I love the image you gave Porta of the old master as a child playing with a small sword. Where would we be without your stories?"

Silla sighed, unable to think of an answer to this, so she said nothing. She disengaged her shoulder from Dranna's arm, and looked for her daughter. Except for the slaves working on the weapons, the master and the assistant were the only people left in the hall. Silla put on her rain cloak. She touched the icon's smooth feet, and walked out the door.

Her throat was dry and her clothes were drenched when she got home. The leenio improvisations Silla heard, as she opened the door, sounded as difficult as her own sore muscles. She touched the stone face of the icon grudgingly.

Even though Silla had lived with a musician for many years, the sequences of notes her partner played were often a foreign language to her, and not always a pleasing one. She didn't look into the music room.

Silla knew from experience Bas'ta would be happily lost in a land that was incomprehensible to her. The swordwoman pictured the rhythm of her lover's fingers against purple hide. Sometimes, the color of the wood reminded her of baby puke. Tonight, the vibration from the strings and the thumping on the skin of the instrument sounded out of synch to Silla.

"*What kind of welcome is this?*" Silla wondered. She yelled to the cook. "I'm dying of thirst here. Where's my water?!"

Fryn came out of the music room, his green uniform rumpled and his expression preoccupied. He carried a towel, and wiped sweat from his neck with its seed necklace. Bas'ta's playing stopped, and she called out the studio door, "I'm sorry. I worked Fryn late, tonight, on the new performance."

The cook was tall for a woodman. He rushed into the kitchen and emerged with the water. His long pale hands supported a tray with a pitcher and two glasses. He filled one for her, his face unmoving.

Silla choked on the citrus-tinged drink.

"Why isn't this cold?"

"Isn't it?" the cook asked.

"Every single day, when I come home, I ask for cool water. You should know to leave a pitcher in the pantry. Why didn't you do that today?"

Fryn looked as if he was barely keeping himself under control. Silla wondered if his partner, Kyr, had told him about their confrontation that morning. All he said was, "I'll remember, in the future."

He poured water into the other glass and carried it into the music room. Through the open door, Silla saw him set it on the table beside the low couch. Bas'ta huddled over her leenio. The musician did not look up.

Silla looked into Pel's room. Her daughter wasn't there. The bed was rumpled and some books were thrown on the floor. Otherwise, the room was bare. Pel only grew impatient when anyone suggested adding furnishings.

The door to the bathroom beckoned. The slaves had brought water from the well, and heated it on the stove to fill the bath. They scented the hot water with muscle-soothing herbs. The candles they had lighted flickered.

Silla peeled her sodden tunic off. She loved easing into the hot water, even on a hot day. She sighed. Bas'ta's music continued to sound like a slow, quiet version of a billowlion's yowling.

Silla sank into contemplation of the problem of Kyr. The law against woodpeople using the sword art was clear. If she reported him, he would be turned out. If she didn't, and it came out that she knew, she could be banished, too. Her only trade was teaching sword. The other schools in the world were too far away and dangerous to get to.

Silla was surprised to find it was actually possible for the leenio tune to grow darker. She could hear the subtle tones that came when Bas'ta blew into the mouthpiece that directed her breath across the strings. The music made Silla shiver despite the hot water.

She turned to worrying about her daughter's forthcoming contest with Dranna's son. The winner would become apprentice and eventually the new sword master. It was clear to Silla that Pel had both the commitment and the skills to win. Pel was in love with Tay. But, then, Tay was in love with Pel, too, so that should even out. Tay was tough. Dranna was training him to be tougher.

When Pel had been younger, Silla had worried about pushing her too hard. She had wondered whether it was fair to saddle a young girl with all of her dreams of greatness at the art. She remembered with a mixture of chagrin and pride the practice session, two years ago, when she had recognized that her daughter's intensity had surpassed her own.

After that bruising, Silla limited how much she trained with her daughter for the opposite reason. She was afraid she would hold her back.

The play of attraction and competition between her child and Dranna's was sharpening their focus, inexplicably. Pel's edge didn't end when she left the training hall. She was increasingly difficult at home, alternating outbursts and periods of withdrawal, like her disappearance this evening.

Sometimes, Silla thought she had created a monster. She hoped that rock-hard will was going to win the contest, and bring her daughter in line to fill the top position in the school, and, in a sense, in the city itself.

Then her stubbornness would be Dranna's problem. This thought gave Silla no small amount of satisfaction, especially since she felt that Pel had learned her relentlessness from watching the master. She thought those two would be well matched.

The bath was beginning to lose its heat, just a little. Silla didn't care to sit in the water, once it cooled. So, she was quick with the sponge, spreading soap on her body, thoughtlessly. She ruffled some into her hair, and splashed water to rinse it all off.

Finally, the music ended, and was followed by the sound of Bas'ta loosening the pegs that tuned the strings and the hide. Silla could hear the wide instrument's case clatter, and then click shut. She stepped out of the bath, and felt dizzy. The swordwoman wrapped herself in one of the lush towels, and sank to the bench, water dripping from her hair onto her back.

Bas'ta walked in, and brushed her hand through the thick air. In her low, resonant voice, she said, "Steamy!" Since Silla liked the water hotter, they had fallen into the routine of Silla having her soak first. This also gave her time to release some of her tensions before they talked. Tonight, despite the quiet time, Silla's grim mood from the day remained.

Bas'ta stepped into the bath, and said, "Perfect."

Silla shook her head thinking, "*Too cold.*" She watched the condensation gather, on the pink bathroom wall.

As Bas'ta sank into the water, she sighed. She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them and looked up at Silla. "Tiline came for her lesson today. I think she must be in love. This is the third fortnight in a row she has been uncharacteristically bumbling. In her case, passion is not inspiring her musicianship."

"What did you tell her?"

"I didn't say anything. I decided to wait and see if the problem continues."

Silla said, "You're probably right. At that age, it could be over in no time."

“Or at least calm down enough to let her get out of bed and practice.” Bas’ta added, “Pel is training with Tay, and eating with them.”

“Damn it, I told her I wanted her to get some distance from him between now and the contest.”

Bas’ta stopped soaping the sponge in her hand and looked up sharply. “Your daughter is 18 years old. Don’t you think she’s grown enough to decide that for herself?”

“This combat is so important; we have to give her some structure now. I particularly don’t want her socializing with Dranna and giving the old barrelcat any extra chances to observe her weaknesses. You undermine me with her when you say she can do something I asked her not to.” Silla felt herself leaning over Bas’ta.

“Undermine?” Bas’ta’s voice showed she was not intimidated by having to look up at Silla. “You sound like you think she’s still a little girl you are going to send to her room. I want the best for her, too. And I don’t think keeping her home is going to help her learn to make good decisions.”

“She may look like a little adult to you, she still needs our advice.”

“That may be true, but from what I heard, you didn’t give her advice. You told her what to do.”

“You don’t know how aggravating she gets.” Silla picked up the robe from the damp wooden bench and wrapped herself in it. Cool drops of water dripped from the ceiling above her.

“How could I not know that? Oh, you mean you have to be the mother for her to really annoy you?”

Bas’ta stretched her right leg out of the water. She ran the soapy sponge under her foot and between her ruddy-toned toes, then down her shins, around her calves and down the thigh. The musician put that leg in the water, and then repeated the routine with the left one.

“It’s different when they come out of your body.”

“I know. That doesn’t mean someone who has watched her grow for a thirteen years doesn’t have some ideas of what she needs.”

Silla didn’t have an answer to this. She watched Bas’ta get up on one knee, and soap her crotch. Then, the musician sank back into the water and soaped her back, reaching one arm behind to meet the other, so she didn’t miss an inch. She was just as thorough sponging her round belly, and under her big breasts. Her chest and her neck, and her face received the same treatment. She gave this task as much detailed attention as she gave her instrument. Bas’ta slid all the way into the water, until it covered her head. Then, she rose to sitting, again, looking fresh and clean.

The fastidious way her partner took a bath irritated Silla. She scowled

Bas’ta leaned back and looked at Silla more closely. “Did you have a bad day?”

The swordwoman sat back, and described what had happened in class and afterward. “If Dranna gives me that killer instinct line, one more time, I’m going to slice

her snotty head off."

"She complimented your move," Bas'ta said.

"Right, but she slips me the low cut about my lack of family. And praises my stories to say my sphere is literary, not martial." Silla looked at her lover's round body. It seemed to waver in the green water; so familiar she no longer noticed it.

"If Pel beats Tay, Dranna will have to take her into her own family."

"That would cement Pel's position. But, it wouldn't stop Dranna from getting her digs in at me."

"Why do you let her get to you?" Bas'ta's eyes were dark and cool-looking.

"You don't know how relentless she is. She thinks it's part of the training to always be looking for undefended spots and testing them. I'm so tired of it I could scream."

"You don't have to keep working for the tudya."

When Bas'ta's emotions ran strong, the Belurian language she grew up with popped into her speech. Tudya, she had explained to Silla, years ago, meant a woolly animal with a strong smell. Silla raised her voice. "What am I going to do? Be a bouncer at the Two Trees?"

"How bad would that be?" Bas'ta's voice stayed low and insistent. She leaned back in the bath. Her blue-black hair stuck wetly to her shoulders.

"I need to hold it together until Pel gets through her contest."

"We should take a vacation after that."

"Dranna will need me to help train the new apprentice, whoever it is."

"Honey, you've got to take care of yourself. Nothing is so important you can't give yourself a break." Bas'ta sat up and added, "Our relationship could use the time."

"What? What's wrong with our relationship?"

"These last two seasons, all you seem to think about is that contest. I just hope we'll be able to pull ourselves back together when you're through being unavailable."

"I'm unavailable? What do you think your double load of students and a concert every season is doing? And the deadline for Rupa's partnering ceremony composition on top of that."

Bas'ta sighed, stood stiffly and towed herself off. She pulled on her robe. The emphatic motions made her short stature look larger. Her departure was swift, as was the swing of the door behind her.

"Don't walk out on me. I'm talking to you," Silla barked, but Bas'ta did not come back. The evening and the room were cooling. The swordwoman dressed brusquely, blew out the candles, and followed her partner to the dining room.

Fryn brought out a tray with two plates of woodfowl, vegetables and noodles. The man stood by while Bas'ta tasted the dish. The musician looked up at him. Silla

didn't like the conspiratorial appearance of the ruddy face and the pale one hanging together. It was as if Bas'ta had turned toward Fryn the affection that should have been Silla's.

Her partner's voice was appreciative. "You were right about the tyzl root. That sweet accent is wonderful. Try it. Dear. It's a treatment the woodpeople use on their own food."

Silla knew Bas'ta didn't like to fight in front of the slaves. But, it felt hypocritical to her to pretend not to be arguing. She didn't think that "dear" sounded convincing at all. How could anyone miss the distance between them at the table, each drawn into her self? The dish, which she sniffed at, smelled like soap. To Fryn, she said, "I don't want it. Bring me one without tyzl, and don't take all night."

Fryn took her plate back to the kitchen. His shoulders looked tight against the green tunic. Bas'ta's eyes flashed.

Silla said, "I just had one of the worst days of my life. I have Dranna on my ass. I trained hard with those sweaty students. I'm tired. I'm famished. It's not a good time for a lye-flavored herb ruining good food. I don't want woodpeople's food. I want something I can eat!"

Bas'ta took in a sharp breath, and raised her chin. She started to respond, then stopped herself, and asked. "What's going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"This isn't like you, yelling at the slaves, demeaning your students, intractable with me. Did something happen, today?"

"Besides the usual abuse at school? No."

Bas'ta looked unconvinced. Silla tried sitting in silence. Bas'ta was equally still, her dark mouth stubborn, and her attention focused on her lover.

Silla looked at the set of her partner's broad shoulders. She knew from experience how long that hardheaded woman could sit. Bas'ta usually won these contests of will.

The swordwoman looked at her own hands; they were long, and thin, calloused between the thumb and forefinger from her art. Her skin was tan colored. Her hands spread out as if trying to take over the surface of the white wooden table.

Bas'ta's fingers were shorter, muscled from playing the leenio. Her skin had the bluish cast of the people who come from the Mejian peninsula. Her hands grabbed the edge of the table, to dig deeply into the argument. How many disagreements had they woven and eventually untangled there?

Silla's tight muscles started to relax a little in the face of her lover's knowing look. "Something did happen today, but I don't want to talk about it."

"Why not?" Bas'ta's voice was more curious than angry, now.

"I want to protect you, in case there's any trouble." If it came out that they had let a slave practice sword, they could all three be turned out of the city. Better for Bas'ta to

be able to honestly say she didn't know.

Fryn came back through the door with the re-cooked dinner. Silla's hands gave up the territory they had been holding on the table. Bas'ta's hovered over her fork and knife.

The cook waited, while Silla hungrily swallowed her first bite. The sauce on the blend of fowl, root vegetables and noodles had the spices she was accustomed to. The taste was reassuring, the texture filling. He watched her chew with an expectant look.

She smiled, and said, "Thank you."

His gait, returning to the kitchen, was slightly less stiff than it had been before. The woodsbead necklaces he wore clicked softly, as he walked.

"Trouble for you is trouble for me, whether I know about it or not." Bas'ta picked up the topic, while Silla tossed forkfuls of the hot stir-fry into her mouth. "Be fair. Tell me what it is. Why don't you give me a chance, and see if I can help?"

Silla watched Bas'ta eat her now cool dinner. The smell of the tyzyl root from Bas'ta's plate was still disorienting to Silla.

The point her lover made was right, of course. If Silla were exiled, the city would hardly wrap its arms around the Belurian partner she left behind. Also, the very fact that Bas'ta came from another land gave her insights about Highwall City society. There were many things the swordwoman took for granted that the musician would take another tack on. Silla did want to turn the problem over with her partner.

She retreated to a story, "They say there was once a bermouse who learned the secret dances of the weels. When they caught him, he said, 'don't blame me, you knew I was watching all the time.'"

Bas'ta frowned. "One of the woodsmen has learned sword?"

Silla nodded.

"Which one?"

"Kyr. I found him doing the ninth form, here, this morning. I thought you had him rehearsing with you."

"I decided to work on a solo for Fryn, instead. We worked at the conservatory, then a little more at home."

"We surprised each other, when I came back, because I forgot my gloves."

Bas'ta let slip an ironic chuckle. "Isn't it funny to have all this secrecy about the teachings, and never notice a man who's always there."

"It's because we didn't think they were capable of learning it."

Bas'ta folded her hands as if she were trying to keep them under control. Her voice was resonant. "I hate those turning-outs."

"Me, too. And from the glimpse that I saw, he's pretty good. I've been wondering about it, all day, thinking, maybe we were wrong. Maybe they can do the art. It made me feel like the ground under my feet turned to water. Everything I'd been

taught was turned upside down."

"I've never believed the woodpeople were as limited as you Highwall City folk insist. I think you had to convince yourselves of that to allow yourselves to keep them as slaves."

Fryn brought in a tray with buzzle cakes and red bark tisane. He put them in front of the two women, and cleared the other plates. Silla watched him and wondered what more she didn't know about the two men who lived in her house.

When he had left, Bas'ta said, "They'd turn Fryn out, too?"

Silla nodded.

"That's not fair!" Bas'ta face grew darker red. "Your people are so callous with them. They bring such gifts to my work."

When Bas'ta had first moved in with Silla, she had come upon Kyr and Fryn dancing together, one evening. She had been so taken with the way they moved together, she started weaving it into her music. Including their performances had become one of her trademarks.

"We can find other slaves. They all know those dances."

"It wouldn't be the same, after all the years I've worked with Kyr and Fryn." Bas'ta frowned, "You know I have trouble understanding your courts, even after all this time. But, isn't there a chance they would change the law, if they saw the assumptions about the woodpeople they were based on were wrong?"

"I can only think of two cases, in my whole life where they changed the laws because their understanding had changed. If we couldn't convince them, we'd be exiled." Silla cut off a piece of the substantial pastry. She dunked it into her tisane and then into her mouth. Her fear made the food tasteless.

"There is a world outside Highwall City." Bas'ta's arms expanded. Then, her hands went to her hips. "Do what you think is right."

"You're not helping," the swordwoman said. She chewed more of the increasingly dense cake.

"I thought I was. There he is now."

Kyr was walking down the hall, away from them, toward the training hall. The night had grown dark, and the temperature was cooling.

"It wouldn't hurt to see how good he is, before you make your decision." Bas'ta reached up and out, entreatingly. "It wasn't your killer instinct I fell in love with, dear."

Silla had just popped the last bite of her dessert into her mouth by the time she heard that the old "dear" was back. She chewed. Her eyes misted, as she stood and closed the distance between them.

Silla ran her fingers through the cloud of curls that framed Bas'ta's face. How soft that dark blue-black hair had been when Silla had first touched it. With the years in between, it had been coarsened by the sprinkling of gray. The sensation still woke Silla's heart. She closed her eyes and let her lips melt into Bas'ta's. This quieted her troubled

thoughts. She felt like crying, as she whispered into her partner's ear, "I guess it wasn't, love."

As Silla walked down the hall, she heard Fryn baling the water out of the bathtub. The wind rose outside and threw a few raindrops onto the roof.

When she walked into the training hall, Kyr was kneeling to light a fire with a taper. He blew on the kindling, and the damp wood smoked and flamed.

The slave must have heard her come in. He turned toward her, but kept his eyes down. Seeing his mildness, she became aware that her own posture was unnecessarily overbearing.

Silla adjusted her weight back, until it was better centered. Tradition required the training halls not to have windows, because of the need for secrecy. It turned out not to have been enough protection. She was glad no one would see them, now.

The swordwoman hoped her lover was right, and no harm would come from seeing more. Silla did feel her worldview was at risk. She shut the door with a controlled, but definite click.

When Kyr turned to her, his gray eyes looked honest. His guilelessness made her soften her voice. "Where did you learn what I saw this morning?"

Kyr closed the distance between them. Without intending to, she admired his silent tread. She had always taken pride in his skills. His face was pale and level with hers. He said, "I'm here, day in and day out."

"Everyone says the woodsmen can't do the sword art."

"I'm afraid everyone is mistaken, ma'am." His tone was one of correcting fact quietly, without escalating to the point of judging those who had misjudged him.

"You've served us for us for many years." Silla thought about how much she would hate to lose him.

He inclined his head, mutely. Silla felt certain of his loyalty. But his ability to watch and learn secretly complicated her view of him.

She said, "We could all be turned out for this."

"I'm sorry I endangered you."

"Why take this chance with your life?"

His gentle face looked deeply into Silla's, "The sword interests me."

Silla heard a slight shaking in her voice, as she said, "I'd like to see you do that form."

Kyr hesitated.

Silla said, "I'll take responsibility."

She took the sword she had caught him with, earlier, from the rack. The hilt in one hand, and the tip in the other, she circled it toward him. He smiled shyly and took the weapon.

Silla noted the care Kyr used, as he reversed the ratty blade. He straightened his back into the ready position. It was odd to see the familiar ritual done by someone wearing a starched tunic and bracelets of woodsbeads that whispered as he moved.

Kyr shifted his hip slightly behind the hilt, so the first sweep seemed to come from his round belly. Two more sweeps followed, equally well centered. He bent his knees, which grounded his turn into the low crosses. She felt a ghostly chill that was not relieved by the fire in the fireplace. This was accompanied by a sensation of recognition. When his back was to her, she let her lips form a silent whistle.

Silla knew she had time to regain her combat face by the time Kyr turned for the high circle and drop. When he did, he wasn't looking at her. It was as if the practice had wrapped its arms around him. The delight in his stance burned away his servile attitude. It took her a minute to place what was so familiar about his manner. He must have been studying her movements through the years of training she had done in front of him. It was strangely like looking into a mirror. What was more, in places, his form was better than hers.

Everything she had learned about the woodmen was wrong. This man's art rattled the foundations of her beliefs.

"Holy gods," she thought. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

Kyr's four feints were like feathers on the air. His low circle had a flat bottom, but most people's did. With his final raise and lower, she was thinking, "I can't send him away."

She said, "Very good."

He beamed, bowed, and returned her sword. She couldn't resist bowing, a little bit in return.

"How long have you been doing this?"

"All my life."

Silla nodded. She sighed, and handed him the sword again. "Please put this in the rack." She watched the smoothness of his motion as he returned the weapon to the wall.

"Now that I know, I'm complicit. For all of our sakes, I have to ask you not to do the art any more."

He stood in silence for a moment, then, said, "I won't."

Silla believed him. She also sensed how hard it was going to be for him to comply. How would she feel if someone asked her not to do the sword forms? The thought made her realize that she loved those ritual movements in a forgetful way like a fish loves water. Why had the gods given such a talent to a man who was forbidden to practice it?

She asked him. "Do you have a sword in your possession?"

Kyr pulled from his pocket a hilt with a broken piece of wood on it. Silla recognized it as the remainder of a sword that had cracked in training, a year earlier. She

had told Kyr to throw it away. “I used this to practice in our room at night.”

The swordwoman held out her hand for the contraband. Kyr didn’t resist surrendering it. She ran her fingers around the smooth blade to the jagged place where it had broken off. Silla slipped it into her pocket. She walked out of her training hall without looking back.

“*Now what?*” she asked herself. Bas’ta still sat in front of the last of her cakes and tisane. The musician looked up from her contemplations, and pursed her full lips in what looked like a question.

Silla told her, “He’s good. It’s troubling how polished he is.”

“Polished enough to convince the court?” Bas’ta asked.

“I don’t know. It would be a huge risk to let them see him. I need time to think.”

“Of course,” Bas’ta said, and put up her mouth up to be kissed.

The swordwoman brushed her partner’s lips, thankful for way they steadied her.

The night had grown cold, as nights in the season of hot rains did. After the sun went down, the wind turned to the south, and grew chillier, blowing across the sodden land. The swordwoman went to the doorway. She pulled on her cloak. As she walked out her door, she paused and looked more closely at the household god.

It was a clay figure of ambiguous gender with a primitive blade drawn over its head. Silla had inherited the god along with the house from her adoptive parents. The icon’s stance and weapon had always made her feel safe, as if threatening strangers would be held at bay. The slaves had also come to her with the house. For the first time, she thought the danger might come from inside the household. Silla touched the protector, thoughtfully. Smooth clay could only do so much.

She wandered through the stormy night. Likki tree roots had broken through the paving stones, in this part of town. The streets left mud on her shoes. Her face was chapped by the bluster. Silla walked down the steep hill, past the lavender houses. Her feet took their favorite route, the path beside the river. The cloudy darkness and the sound of rushing water might have soothed her any other time. Tonight she felt too restless for that.

The swordwoman followed the river downstream to the place where it widened and the trees gave way. The black docks of the city’s port were there, busy, even at night. Silla liked the smell of fish and fresh varnish that hung there, and the sound of boats slapping against piers. The ceaseless activity around the ships suited her mood.

She stood under the eaves of a warehouse and watched through the rough weather. One woodwoman, in boat loader’s leathers, was putting boxes from the mine on an outbound freighter. A woodman was unloading crates marked “fruit” from a large, blue ship Silla had never seen in port before. Neither one bothered to try to keep the rain off their scuffed red hair. The work made their pale skin look hot enough to sizzle the cold downpour

While the sword school was the jewel of the city-state, its exports of teachers, and weapons and clothing for training didn’t support its expensive habits. Silla liked to see

the work of the farms and the mines and the merchant center, here, whose taxes fed the class of martial artists. The sensation of fortunes gained and lost in the solid roll of a keg up the gangway appealed to her. She liked the contrast with the politics of the school at the top of the hill.

Silla watched the slaves work until the midnight. Giving a weary groan, the woodman put on his raincoat and hat, and slipped into an alleyway. Though she looked tired, too, the woodwoman had a little more spring left in her step. She stood watching through the window of the Two Trees tavern, across the street from the dock. Dance music could be heard. Silla saw the movement of arms in the air, inside.

Silla smiled, remembering meeting her partner for the first time, there, in the distant past. Bas'ta had been an entertainer on a gambling ship. The boat had pulled into port for repairs that had lasted half the flower season. Kei'la, the owner of the Two Trees, who came from the same country as Bas'ta did, had hired her to perform there, during the ship's stay. The name of the tavern referred to two trees Kei'la had had shipped from Beluria to build the tavern. Consequently, the small building was chartreuse, in contrast to the purple colored houses and businesses throughout the town.

For some reason, Silla's first impression of the stranger, with her complicated face was fresh with her, even though it had been thirteen years. There had been a soothing scent of glow flowers in the air. Silla remembered wondering at the odd-looking instrument Bas'ta had removed from its case.

When the outlander had started to play, Silla couldn't help closing her eyes. How other-worldly the Belurian tunes had sounded. The melody had brought behind her closed eyelids a daydream of mountains so high the streams were sun-splashed and the woods were almost silent.

Then, the musician had opened her mouth and sung a ballad. Her lush low voice had made Silla shiver so deeply she had had to ask Kei'la to put more wood on the fire. The publican had chuckled knowingly. Pel, who had only been only five years old, had been fascinated, too, and had insisted Silla invite the compelling woman home for dinner.

Luckily, the swordwoman and her daughter had persuaded the leenioist not to rejoin the ship, when the keel had been patched. Over time, Highwall City had taken the woman, her odd instrument and the Belurian music she made to its heart. In her turn, she had adapted the precise sounds of Highwall City's native music to her own intuitive tradition. She developed a blend that was very popular.

Before long, Bas'ta had a growing calendar of concert dates, partnering and coming-of-age ceremonies and teaching. She still played, once a season, at the Two Trees, in appreciation of the crusty old tavern master who had gotten her started here.

Now the gay rhythm of the bouldoon that pulsed through the Two Trees invited Silla. She would like nothing better than to walk through the door, and play a game of lab'bet and trade gossip with Kei'la.

But that wasn't going to help her with the decision that rode her back like a babuset. She turned away from the tavern, and let the music linger behind her. Across the harbor, she could see both of the city's hills. One had her house on the side, among the homes of other teachers and students. The sword school dominated it from the top.

The southern hill was slightly higher. The temple stood on the peak, approached by steep steps. It looked like a golden bird about to take off into the billowing wind. Silla thought about its prayers and processions, suited to each season. She sometimes found them stiff and unfriendly, which made her feel as if even the Highwall City gods saw her as an outsider here. But, there were times that the lamps that flickered there seemed to light something inside her, and make her feel at home.

Halfway up that same hill were the barracks of the city guard and the hall of justice. Silla felt the wooden hilt in her pocket. The heavy purple stone of the circular court building had never looked so daunting before. But then, she had never considered contradicting one of its edicts before, either.

She asked herself why she hesitated to turn Kyr in. It was because there was a feeling of spirituality in the way he did the sword that spoke to her, more than all the words she had ever heard in the temple.

“Wasn’t the temple at a higher elevation than the court because it was supposed to connect us to something bigger than law?” she thought. What still resonated with her was a sense that the place that religion brought her to at the best of times had opened up in front of her. And lingered with her, suggesting that it was only the beginning.

Seeing a woodman do the sword art, and do it so well, took her out of all the predictability of her life. That was exciting, but also exhausting. Silla circled her steps toward home, feeling the storm beat against her body.

As she crossed the bridge between the two hills, the rain increased its wet pounding so it felt like there was as much water rushing in the air as in the river. On the other side of the span, she was surprised to see lights on in the apartment beside the children’s school.

The prospect of shelter beckoned to her. Silla’s chest eased its tightness a little, when she pulled the bell rope and heard the muffled but familiar voice invite her to come in. She pushed open the heavy doors and felt even more relieved when she saw the thin old woman.

The teacher sat in a chair. Beside her, a flame flickered in a small hearth. She looked up from the book she was reading. On the entryway table stood Ovul’s household god, bent over a book, much the way the old woman was.

Silla wanted to run to Ovul’s lap as she had when she was a child, spelling words out on an alphabet board. Instead, she stood a moment and touched the icon respectfully. She remembered how big and all-seeing it had seemed, when she was young. Not unlike Ovul. Now, she saw from her adult perspective that Ovul had never been a large woman, and was now shrunken by the years.

“Silla,” Ovul said. Her voice quivered, but was still powerful. “What a nice surprise.”

“I didn’t come too late?”

The woman’s face held the same combination of regard and formality Silla remembered from those school days. The short, rumped hair that had been rich brown, when Silla was a student, was almost transparent, now. Ovul gestured to the chair next to

her. “The older we get, dear child, the less sleep we need. It’s rarely too late to come by here.”

The swordswoman shrugged off her sopping cloak and hung it on a peg. She moved the straight-backed chair closer to the fire. There, she rubbed her hands. The front of her body warmed up, while her back stayed cold.

The room was as plainly appointed as it had always been. The walls were painted the same pink most interiors in the city were, but were bare of hangings. Likewise, the floors were without rugs, which made the room hard to keep warm. Still, there was something about being in the place where she had learned so much as a child that made Silla hopeful that she would be able to find a solution to the night’s puzzle.

“You look cold,” Ovul said. “Would you like a tisane?”

“Please,” Silla said, feeling comforted even by the offer.

Ovul stood creakily. Her walk, as she went to the fireplace and back, was much slower than it had been in the past. Silla could see her whisking something into a cup, adding water from the fire-blackened pot, then, straining the herbs out. The teacher handed her guest a beverage that warmed the younger woman’s fingers. Then she asked, “What brings you here?”

Silla breathed in the sweet steam. She let the glass cool for a moment before she sipped it. This gave her time to think about all the big questions that had followed her, in her wanderings. She retraced her own footsteps back to the original one that had sent her out of her training hall, into the stormy night. She wasn’t sure how to approach it without giving Kyr away.

“I realized there were some points of history I never was quite clear about.”

Ovul looked at her closely, cloudy eyes searching. “I’m surprised you would be overtaken by an attack of diligence this late in your life. But I’m happy to help in any way I can.”

Silla knew she wasn’t fooling Ovul, but she blurted on anyway. “How did the woodsmen come to Highwall City?”

Ovul looked at the fire for a moment. The log sputtered. She said, “They came during the fierce era, many years ago, when our city expanded over a wide range, because of our skills at war. Our ancestors brought their forbears home as prizes.

“Then, there was a long period during which our focus shifted to commerce, and we found we needed alliances more than we needed territory. We stopped defending our boundaries so fiercely, because we wanted to trade rather than do battle across them.

“Now, our position in the world is much less grand than in the past. With that loss, we’ve gained a wonderfully long period without war. Better yet, we brought peace inside the walls. The court started that golden era by forbidding live weapons in the city.

“The contest you went through and your daughter will go through to establish mastership of the school is the major exception to that rule. Otherwise, ritual battle with metal swords is the very rare last resort. All that’s left of our warlike past is the celebration of combat as an art.”

“And the woodpeople.”

Ovul nodded. “Our economy depends on their labor. Imagine what it would cost to pay for the work they do in our homes and shops and the farms and mine. The walls around the city were originally built to protect us against attack from the outside. I think the only reason we control the gates any more is to keep them in.”

“I’ve always thought the woodpeople were gifts from the gods to us.” Silla said. “But, tonight, for the first time, I wondered if they have different gods.”

Ovul put her light brown fingers together forming a peak and looked at them. She said, “I’m sure they do.”

“Do you know what their gods are like?”

“I don’t, but you could ask one of the slaves. They would probably appreciate your interest.”

“Why would their gods have delivered them into our hands?”

Ovul said, “That is a good question. It can take a lifetime for any one of us to learn what designs, if any, the gods have for us. The same is true of the woodpeople.”

Silla asked, “If sword training is only ritual, why are woodsmen forbidden to do it?”

“That law has been justified by the idea that they are less capable because of their slave status and the disease that runs in some of their families.” Ovul smiled wryly. “The reality may be that they are forbidden weapons because they lost a war long ago. And if our ancestors had lost, we would be cooking and carrying water, while the woodpeople perfected their crosscuts and lunges.”

“Why does the court banish swordpeople who even know about woodpeople practicing sword?” Silla’s cold back shivered, as she asked this.

“All the pride Highwall City used to take in its power abroad has become concentrated on breeding excellent swordpeople, and defending the secrets of the art. The law sees a swordperson who lets any of the secrets out as turning over the keys to our gates. Because the woodpeople provide us intimate services, and maintain our weapons, we allow them close to the art. The law has seen any practice of the art by them as a betrayal of that trust. A swordperson who allows it partakes of that treachery and is punished as vigorously.”

Silla hesitated. She couldn’t think of a way to circle in on her next question, so she was forced to lay it out directly. “What would you do if you found one of the woodpeople had become very skilled at the sword?”

She saw no surprise, but something like cool amusement in Ovul’s eyes. The old woman seemed to ponder for a moment. She said, “I would take that person to the court, and have him show them what he can do. The lack of precedent might be a problem. But, don’t forget the judges come from the sword academy. They admire good sword art as much as everyone in Highwall City.”

Ovul continued, “I think that would create a discord between their belief and what

they saw, just like the one you are experiencing. I would hand on to them the puzzle that must be undercutting your universe. Let them see what you saw, and find out if the law changes.”

Silla was about to agree when Ovul added, “I don’t have as much to lose as you do, though. How would your daughter feel if you made this hypothetical decision?”

The thought weighed Silla’s face down. “I had better talk to her. Thank you.”

The assistant to the master stood, and started to leave. Ovul opened her door and pointed to the scratch in the weathered wood. “Remember when I accused Dranna of doing this and you confessed it was you?”

Silla felt a wave of nostalgia. Behind the open doorway, the curtain of rain had softened.

The old teacher said, “I think that’s when she started to fall in love with you.”

The swordswoman started. Ovul continued, “I know you thought your schoolgirl romance was a secret. It was hard for someone who saw you both every day to miss. Her parents had already arranged a match for her with Chescu, whose background was impeccable. It must have felt tragic for an orphan girl of 14.”

Silla leaned against the wall for a moment. She had assumed no one knew. But it seemed laughable, now, to think Ovul wouldn’t see. The old teacher’s patient expression let her confess the feelings from long ago. “Of course it was, then. That was a long time ago.”

Ovul smiled softly. “It is clear to me that you are much more happily matched with Bas’ta than you could ever have been with Dranna.”

“Good gods, yes,” Silla said. “Working with Dranna every day is hard enough. Imagine if I had to go home with her.”

Ovul continued seriously, “I sensed that Dranna also resented being the recipient of your fair play. Even though she went on to beat you on the field, and she is the master now, she might still look for opportunities to prove that she is more righteous than you are. Especially with this contest between your children coming.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, if you have discovered this hypothetical woodperson practicing the sword, other people may find out. If they do, knowing the stakes are high, they may apprise Dranna.”

“If she finds out, she’ll report us?”

Ovul smiled sadly.

The assistant to the master said, “Thank you for sharing your insights.”

Silla held the teacher’s hand as long as she dared. The skin was light, and the bones felt brittle.

On her way out, Silla caressed the bent old icon in the entryway. She touched the scar in the door, as she passed it, and remembered how it had felt to be so young in her

body and so much in love. Maybe it was that old history that caused Dranna to have to prove her power over Silla at every opportunity. The past passion did intensify their disagreements. It made everything Dranna did feel bigger than life to Silla.

When she turned, Silla noticed that the black-and-white alphabet boards she and Dranna had spelled on still hung on the wall behind Ovul. She said, “Thank you for watching over us so fiercely, when we were girls.”

Ovul’s eyes brightened. “It was an honor.”

Silla walked home. The rain had lightened to a petal texture on her face. She took down her hood and let it dampen her short curls. Tree branches moved in a softer wind. The merchants’ and teachers’ houses she passed were dark. She paused to look down the hill she had come up. She could see just a few distant lights still lit around the docks.

The night was dark blue, and Silla was tired, when she opened the door to her house. She let her cloak drip from the hook. The entry god sat atop the green table. Silla caressed its face, whispering, “Maybe you’re not just here to challenge outsiders, Naawe. Maybe you also challenge me to be the best person I can.”

She could almost hear the clay mouth say, “Mm-hm.”

From the strong smell of the muscle-easing herbs the slaves had put in Pel’s bath, Silla knew her daughter had been training hard with Tay. She shook her head at her daughter’s willfulness.

When the assistant to the master entered the sitting room, Pel and Bas’ta sat, there, the older one in an armchair, the younger one on a bench. They were drinking hot tisanes. The short, round woman and the angular young one shared what appeared to be a watchful silence.

There was a roaring fire in the fireplace. It crackled and sparked. The lushly carpeted floors and tapestried walls made the room warmer than Ovul’s had been.

It was unusual for Pel to stay up so late on a school day. Silla thought her daughter must suspect something, though she knew she could trust Bas’ta to keep her counsel. Pel’s red-brown hair was unbraided, and looked sleek from brushing.

Silla sank into the sofa, and closed her eyes. When she opened them, her daughter’s face was focused on hers. She recognized the square jaw Pel inherited from her father.

Silla sighed and explained, “Kyr has taught himself the nine sword forms by watching us. I caught him doing one in our training hall this morning.”

Her daughter’s voice was as swift and definitive as her sword work. “You stopped him, of course.”

Silla tried to keep her own voice calm. “At first, I did. But I was haunted by what I’d seen him do. He had been moving as softly as a breeze. I was curious, so I asked him to do the rest of the form, tonight.”

“Curious?!” Pel rose to her feet and towered over her mother, dark gray eyes

fierce. “I can’t have a slave doing sword forms right in my house. Why didn’t you turn him in?”

Silla looked up at her daughter, wondering when she had gotten so tall and forceful. “Watch him do the art and you’ll see how hard that is to do.”

“I will not watch him! It’s bad enough that you did.”

“Well, I can tell you, it’s spooky. It’s like looking at one of us in the body of a woodperson. In fact, he’s better than a lot of us. His movements are so graceful it makes me think our whole attitude toward them is wrong.”

“There’s a law against them doing the art. You don’t get to decide which laws to obey and which not to.”

“This man’s technique makes me want to applaud! Should I let them drive him away when he’s been able to accomplish that?”

“Take him to the court and let the judges decide that.” The fire spit in the hearth. Pel paced, the large vein in her throat pulsing.

“If they’re going to decide based on the quality of his forms, I’d like to teach him -- help him improve it, first, just to strengthen the case.”

“Oh, that’s very nice. My mother courting banishment to teach a son of a quiverer the sword!”

Bas’ta asked, “Where did you learn to talk that way?”

“From Mom!”

Silla was embarrassed to recognize that her daughter was right. “If I used language like that, I was wrong.”

“What if teaching him isn’t enough?” Pel’s voice intensified. Silla was afraid Kyr would hear them. “What if someone else finds out? They’ll know we knew.”

“He’s kept it a secret all his life.”

“How hard was it for you to find out?”

Silla couldn’t argue with that.

Pel seemed to be everywhere in the room at once. “You’ll get us turned out before I get my chance. After all the work I’ve done. How could you undo me like this? What’s more important? My life or this anvil man of yours?”

“There’s nothing more important to me than you.” A log split into two pieces, trailing a row of embers. Bas’ta looked from mother to daughter and back again.

“Then why would you even consider doing this?”

Silla searched for the words to explain why it felt so important to her. “There’s a beauty in his work that makes me feel like I’d be betraying the gods.”

She saw understanding in Bas’ta’s eyes.

Pel was blasting back, “The gods? The gods teach us to follow the laws. There’s

no such thing as choosing between the two. I don't have to wait for you to decide. I'll tell the court myself."

"Baby girl –" Silla said, but when she looked at the stubborn set of her daughter's body, she knew that name wouldn't work any more. "Pel, just give me three fortnights to work with him."

"One! Then we let the judges judge!" Pel strode out of the front room.

Silla heard the door to Pel's bedroom slam. She said to Bas'ta, "Where did I get such a strong-minded child?"

Bas'ta smiled knowingly. Silla took her hand, and said, "Oh, yes. I see. That doesn't make me feel better."

Bas'ta said, "You push each other hard. You also love each other hard."

"Now, that does help." Silla felt herself relax a little. She squeezed Bas'ta's hand, then got up and went in search of the barrel-chested weapons man.

She found him in the obvious place, her training hall. Silla expected to see relief in Kyr's gray eyes when she told him her plan, but his gaze was unruffled. She said, "I'll tell the household I'm meeting with you every evening about Pel's contest."

"That's very brave of you."

"Maybe I can learn to be as brave as you are, Kyr." She reached into her pocket and thumbed the broken hilt there. She gave it back to him. His hand moved so smoothly his braceleets stayed still. "But I'll feel a little better if we put a lock on your room, first, so no one will walk in on you practicing there."

"With your permission, I'll put the lock on tonight."

"With my permission." Silla felt her face fold into a weary smile. She nodded.

Chapter 2

When Silla got to her bedroom, Bas'ta sat on a bench, looking out the window. Silla looked over her partner's shoulders. In the alley, a bowl of food sat on the back step. A bibbet stuck its furry head around their neighbor's wall. It slunk to the food, looking over its shoulders. The animal's tongue enveloped the noodles in one gulp. It pattered back around the wall it had come from.

As she turned toward Silla, Bas'ta's smile looked satisfied. "She is such a shy one. I am glad she trusts us enough to eat our food."

The two women stretched out under the covers. Silla brought her lips to her lover's, and lingered there. Bas'ta's tongue pushed into Silla's mouth for a long moment. Then her lips closed and separated from Silla's.

"I love you," Bas'ta said.

"I love you, too."

Bas'ta lay her head on Silla's shoulder. Silla put her arms around her partner, and stroked the smooth back. Then, she let her arms relax in that position. Just before she drifted off, Bas'ta said, "I think that was a wise decision."

The moment of harmony was like a soft creature, curled up beside them. It soothed Silla's heart.

The musician began to snore softly. But, Silla found it hard to let go into sleep. She worried about whether someone would discover Kyr doing the forms. Or, as Ovul had suggested, someone might tell Dranna. Silla gently twisted out from under Bas'ta's head and mane of hair. The snoring continued, so she knew she hadn't wakened her lover.

Silla repositioned herself on her headrest, and tried to calm her breathing. The sound of the raindrops, on the wooden roof quieted a little. A picture came upon her of Kyr doing his sword form before the judges. She could only envision them frowning at the sight. She heard the city clock tower mark the four a.m.

She moved to lie on her other side, and prayed to her household gods for sleep. Adrenaline flooded her body, as if she were in a combat. She tried another position, but only found a vision of herself and her whole household, including Pel, being turned out at the gate. A cartwheel squeaked out on the street.

Silla tried lying on her back. The blankets rose and fell, with her lover's peaceful breaths. She was envious, but couldn't find the release of sleep. The rain stopped altogether. The silence sounded louder than the pattering that had preceded it.

In the darkness, Silla decided maybe Pel had been right. Maybe it was unfair of her to take this risk with her daughter's career for a man who didn't come from the same people as she did. She knew Bas'ta would be disappointed, but she could find other slaves to use in her work.

That resolution allowed her to drift off into a dream of traveling over hillside after

hillside to another city she had never seen before. The gates in this dream place were like the ones in Highwall City. But the guards were billowcats. She was thirsty, and there was water inside the city. The swordwoman sat outside the walls, trying to remember the names of the people she came to visit there. She pounded her head in frustration, but the names evaded her.

It seemed like it had only been a few moments, since she had finally gotten to sleep. Now the light was rising behind the window shades. The smell of tisane and gruel emanated down the hall from the kitchen.

Bas'ta rolled over into Silla's arms, with a reassuring embrace. The dark eyes opened. She said, "You look awful."

"I couldn't sleep. I've been thinking I owe it to Pel to turn Kyr in. It's too risky to try to work with him. Not with so much riding on her contest."

"And I was so impressed with your kindness."

"I have to be kind to Pel, too, don't I? She was right. My loyalty to her is more important. I have to protect my daughter's chance to reach the highest position in the school."

"Look how loyal he is to us. Doesn't he deserve for us to return that? We'll lose Fryn, too. It will take me a long time to train new dancers. Don't you think it will be disruptive having to find another cook and weapons slave just when you're preparing for the contest?"

"It would be more disruptive if I got turned out. They might turn her out, too, and there would be no match at all. She has such a good chance. I'm so proud of her. We need to line up behind her to help her make the best of this."

"Do we have to sacrifice Kyr and Fryn to do that?"

"It's too big a chance that Kyr will get caught, and they'll get turned out, anyway."

"There's a middle position that doesn't sacrifice either of them," Bas'ta said.

"What do you mean?"

"You could ask him not to do the form until the contest is over."

Silla felt relief flood her tired muscles. Bas'ta had done it again.

"Oh, what a clever woman you are. That should work. Once Pel wins the trial, and becomes the apprentice, it won't matter what we do."

She kissed Bas'ta warmly, and then slid her legs out of bed. As she put her weight on one foot, it did a little misstep. Tired body, she thought, regaining her balance with a jerk. She felt Bas'ta's arms come around her from behind. She stroked the hands that grasped each other in front of her belly. She said, "I love you."

Bas'ta said, "I love you, too."

Silla heard the soft tempo of the rain starting up again. Her eyes burned. The day felt warm already. The assistant to the master fumbled through breakfast. But felt

content with the filling gruel, and the feeling that she and Bas'ta were working well together.

When Pel came in to join them, Silla could see she had had a hard night, too. Her daughter's face looked harsh, as if she was about to carry the argument forward. The young woman drew a ragged breath. Silla cut in, before she could start, and told her what she and Bas'ta had decided.

The rain increased to a battering rhythm. Pel's exhausted-looking face brightened a bit, and she said, "That's fair. Once the contest is over, the risk would be yours. Thank you."

"Thank Bas'ta," Silla said. "She's the one who came up with a compromise, as usual."

Pel smiled in Bas'ta's direction with eyes that looked weary and appreciative.

Silla sought Kyr out in her training hall. His gray eyes looked at her evenly. She knew he would be able to see that she hadn't slept. He appeared concerned.

She said, "I was worrying about my daughter's contest. I can't take the risk of having you do the art while that is at stake. I need to support her by not letting the household be vulnerable to accusations. Your work with her weapons is so important now. This would be the worst possible time to lose you."

He blushed a little, and nodded.

"After that, though, I'd like to work with you to make your forms the best they can be, and let the judges see what you can do."

Kyr turned his face down.

"Are you afraid you'd be turned out?"

He smiled strangely. "No. I just don't like to make a display of myself."

She matched his smile, though she didn't understand its meaning. "Thank you."

He said, "Thank you."

Silla wheeled around and walked to the music room, where Bas'ta had taken her instrument out, and was tightening the pegs. The leenoist looked up from her couch. "How did it go?"

Silla had a feeling she was forgetting something. But she couldn't say what.

"He agreed. He didn't even seem disappointed."

Bas'ta reached up her mouth for a kiss. Silla kissed her and whispered, "I wish you had solved that at the beginning of my restless night, rather than the end."

"You didn't ask."

Silla walked to the front hall, feeling exhausted. She put her hand on the chest of the icon there, and felt her energy increase, a little. The swordwoman picked up her rain cloak and shook it out. Pel was right behind her, touching the god, and striding out into the rainy morning.

Walking up the hill to school beside her daughter, Silla felt creaky. The two of them moved slowly, after their hard nights. They didn't refer to their argument. Warm rain pattered through the sharply defined spaces in the likki boughs.

The girl talked quietly about the techniques she needed extra practice in before the contest – the cross-body strikes and the ones to the knees. Silla was surprised how accurately her daughter analyzed her own abilities. The assistant to the master's boots grew sodden. She felt a little lonely about how little Pel needed her now.

The young woman asked, "When Dranna became the new master, how did she make the transition from student to teacher?"

With a pang at the memory, Silla thought about the early days, after she had lost the contest. "They assigned her to teach the youngest class of children, first."

Pel shook her head. "Was she good with them?"

"No. She was stiff and imperious, and she scared the kids. Several parents took their children out of the class until her year with them was over. She seemed to be enduring it, until she could have some power over someone her own size. Later, when she had Tay, of course, she celebrated and indulged him. But, except for her own, she doesn't like children"

Silla remembered, but didn't describe the snotty way Dranna had praised Tay's sword skill, as soon as he was old enough to hold a stick. And how she, herself, had been unable to resist setting Pel into competition with Tay continuously, since that time.

Pel said, "I think I'd like to work with the young ones."

Silla thought about her daughter's warmth with the two girls in the neighborhood who idolized her so much they couldn't wait to join the sword school to be like her. Pel had a patience with those kids that she didn't have with adults. She seemed to really listen to them, and be interested in finding out what they needed at different ages.

"You are good with kids. You'd bring some heart to the school that Dranna hasn't."

"Thanks."

They reached the school and walked together through the wide door. The older woman touched the school's icon, slowly. She saw that her daughter's gesture was breezy, as if she expected to be indulged by the god.

Silla had to make her self focus. Her body felt heavy doing the solo forms. When Dranna rang the gong for paired practice, and called Silla up to demonstrate, the assistant could see the master take stock of the face that felt like it had sagging eyes. Dranna signaled to Silla for a thrust that was a particularly difficult attack to do.

Silla complied. Her muscles felt slow. The parry and slice Dranna responded with were swift and punishing. Dranna made Silla and the students work that technique hard, all day. Silla wrapped herself up in reacting to the attacks so much she didn't have time to think about Kyr.

When the last class ended, Pel told her she was going to train more with Tay.

Silla didn't have the energy to argue. She said goodnight to Pel and Tay and Dranna.

The assistant to the master looked back at the three of them, as she picked up her rain cloak to walk out the door. She noticed the intimate way Tay stood, and leaned his cheek close to Pel's. His long brown hair fell easily around her.

Silla thought, Pel's gifts are probably transparent to him, anyway. Who do I think I'm kidding, trying to hide them from him? Or from Dranna.

"Should I let that idea go?" she silently asked the school's clay god. He seemed to nod his head an infinitesimal bit. She said, "I'll try to."

Silla's muscles were so beaten up she just barely had the energy to drag herself down the hill home. She felt calmed by her decision not to fight the irresistible drawing together of her daughter and Dranna's son. It seemed that the only thing that was going to get hurt was her pride. She could survive that, as long as Pel had a chance to show everyone her best effort.

The rain was still warm, when she left the school. But, the south wind rose earlier than usual, that evening, and whipped the water around in the air. It started to cool down, uncomfortably. By the time she got home, the rain had turned cold, and Silla only had enough energy to plod through the frigid water that splashed up from the cobblestones.

It was comforting to walk into the fire-heated house, and touch the icon, there. Soothing energy flowed from it's face into Silla's exhausted body. She was thankful for her home and the god that guarded it.

Silla heard Bas'ta playing something that was strangely soothing. The water Fryn had put out for her to drink was cold. The bath was the perfect heat. Silla must have dozed off with her head against the side of the tub, because she felt herself wake with a start when Bas'ta opened the door.

"Tired," she said, as she pulled herself out of the tub.

"I'm not surprised," Bas'ta said.

Silla sat on a bench, cooling, while Bas'ta bathed. She didn't have the energy to talk, so she closed her eyes and listened to the swishing of her lover's sponge.

The dinner Fryn brought in smelled and tasted delicious. From the slight smile on his face, Silla surmised he was pleased with their decision about his partner.

Bas'ta asked, "Would you like to see the dance we've been working on?"

Even though she was exhausted, Silla enjoyed these peeks at her lover's work. Kyr brought a chair into the studio for her. Bas'ta opened the case and drew her leenio out. It was a wide instrument with strings, a percussion surface and a mouthpiece. Bas'ta drummed a bantering rhythm with her right hand.

Fryn started across the raised floor behind her. His movement was like a lithe animal's. Bas'ta plucked on the long low strings a theme with the sound of moonlight. Fryn began to turn in slow circles with his arms describing arcs around him. For a moment, his dance reminded Silla of a fight in slow motion. But, that impression was erased when his partner, Kyr, began to shadow him. The harmony between the two was

the opposite of combat.

Bas'ta put her mouth on the mouthpiece. She blew the wind part of her instrument, and the music turned lush. The men moved together, with an erotic playfulness, their woodsbead jewelry clicking softly. The music quieted into silence, and their steps slowed down. They ended up leaning together, affectionately.

“Hoorah,” Silla said. “That is beautiful work!”

When Silla came into the bedroom, she saw Bas'ta looking out the window, as usual. The musician said, “The bibbet hasn't come, yet, tonight. I hope she's all right.”

Silla flexed her lover's shoulders. “Maybe someone else is feeding her, too.”

Just at that moment, there was a familiar flash of yellow across the alley. The bibbet ate in a rush, and disappeared, again.

As she eased into her bedclothes, Silla said, “That is an exquisite dance. You should be proud of yourself.”

“Fryn and Kyr get the credit,” Bas'ta said. “I just blend my music with improvisations they do. Their culture is very physically expressive, and dance seems to have great meaning for them.”

“I can understand why you don't want to lose them.” Silla slipped under the covers, relieved to finally close her eyes.

Just as she was about to fall asleep, Bas'ta asked her, “When will you and Pel go to the mountain?”

Silla's eyes eased open. “Nuzilday is the only day that will work. No school.”

“That's just two days away. Are there ritual clothes you'll need to wear?”

“Oh, blast. I forgot to arrange for those. With the argument over Kyr, I completely forgot.”

Bas'ta said, “I'll have Fryn take a rush order to the tailor tomorrow.”

“You are a wonder. They're supposed to be new silver pants and a tunic. The lightest and strongest weave. It's quite a climb.”

“It is possible to get those in the time we have, if I call in some favors.”

“I'll find some way to make it up to you,” Silla said, and then she drifted off with Bas'ta's arms around her.

The swordwoman's sense of well being continued into the next day. It gave a cheerful music to her training with Dranna and the students. Every move seemed to fall into place. And the master's usual digs flowed off of her, powerless to ruin her good mood.

When the gong clanged at the end of the last class, she saw Pel stride across the room to join Dranna and Tay for the evening, as usual. Silla watched Tay drape his arm around Pel's shoulders. She took in his tall big body and her slender one, her tan-tinted skin and his rich brown complexion. The assistant wondered, for a moment, what blend of these things their children would have.

Silla waved to them, and picked up her rain cloak. Her feet did a little bouldoon, stepping through the warm raindrops on her way home. She thought about a gentleness Tay had, when he wasn't sparring, that would be good with kids. The whole city expected an engagement after the upcoming contest, whatever its outcome. Silla carried the image of the grandchildren she would like to have with her as she walked.

The wide trunks of the trees, along the road, seemed to echo back her satisfaction. The leaves turned in a soft wind that showed her their golden undersides.

Silla tiptoed past the music room, where Bas'ta was deeply wrapped up with her leenio. She could hear the slaves' feet dancing in there. Silla drank her cool water, and settled into the bath.

Bas'ta came in and started to undress. She said, "I got those clothes made for you two."

"Thanks a lot," Silla said. "Where would I be without you?"

"Hiking naked up the mountain, I'm afraid."

"I hope Kyr is ready." Swordpeople were forbidden to touch the metal blades, except on ceremonial occasions, so the slaves created the weapons, maintained them and carried them. "What do you have planned tomorrow?"

"Tiline asked for an extra lesson. I think she's coming to her senses and wanting to make up for being so distracted, these last few fortnights."

"Do you think her affair is over already?"

"At least she's gotten past the stage where you can't tear yourself out of bed. I should also work some more on Rupa's music. I'll have Fryn work on some dance improvisations to go with it."

Silla asked, "How is it coming?"

"I can't seem to get it right."

Silla said, "You always say that. But you always do."

Bas'ta's smile made Silla's mouth fold into its own smile.

After dinner, the swordwoman went into her training hall, looking for Kyr. He was there, sweeping the floor. His gray eyes looked at her evenly.

Silla said, "I've been thinking about Pel's sword."

"So have I," Kyr said. The wind rose, outside, and rattled the tiles on the roof. The night grew colder. Kyr started a fire in the hearth.

He said, "I took yours from the wall to polish it, today. I thought about how much heavier it is than the wooden ones."

"It's not just the weight. When you touch it, does it feel like the energy of the alloy could overwhelm you?"

Kyr shook his head. "It's different for us. But it does feel powerful."

Silla went on, "When I picked up the sword for my contest, it felt like fire in my

veins, burning away my focus. I tried to warn Pel, but it's hard to make her understand. She knows how strong she is. She doesn't know how strong the metal is."

"I know the usual blend of yellow metal to blackrock is seven to three. I'd like to suggest we use the same amount of each, instead, to make a less entrancing blade."

Silla said, "That's a wonderful idea. I've read the history of all the swords made for these combats, and I've never heard of anyone changing the recipe. They've all just assumed it was a given. That could be a brilliant stroke. If we wind up with a blade that is less obsessing, it would have to give her a deeper grounding. Thank you for thinking about this so creatively. I wish I had had you there for mine."

Kyr blushed and bowed slightly. "How about an unadorned hilt for Pel? She doesn't need a redgem like yours."

"Good idea." Silla pulled out two books she had borrowed from the school library, and opened them to drawings of victors in contests, long ago, and the swords they held aloft. "Can we create a blend of these two shapes?"

Kyr took out a pen and inkbottle. Silla ruffled things on the desk and found a piece of paper to hand him. He drew a blade, and asked, "How about this?"

"Would you carve wood to cover the handle, instead of leather? Wouldn't that make it feel more familiar?" Silla asked.

"Yes, I can do that. I'd like to try fastening coins onto a wooden sword until it has the same weight and action as the alloy one, so her practice will prepare her better."

"Excellent!"

Rain rattled coldly on the roof. When Kyr turned to put more wood on the fire, Silla thought about how important his skills would be to Pel's contest. He was good at his work. She sensed that he wanted the best for Pel. What he was suggesting might revolutionize the contest. She felt lucky to have him.

Her trust in him was returning. Now, she had new respect for the abilities he had kept hidden. She was looking forward to working with him on his forms, when this was all over.

Silla noticed a difference in her voice, when she spoke to him. Before, for example, she would have ordered him to come with her to the mine in the morning. Tonight, instead, she asked, "Do you feel ready for the forge?"

He nodded, with a confident look that warmed her.

She said goodnight to him, walked down the hall, and crawled into bed, where Bas'ta was already sleeping. Silla looked out the window, and saw the food bowl was empty.

In a quick moment, Silla's day clothes were off, and nightclothes were on, and she had slid in beside her partner. She curled up in the warm sheets. Soon, she was matching her lover's deep breaths.

Chapter 3

The swordwoman heard the sound of horns. She was at her daughter's contest, but something was wrong. A fence was blocking her vision, and she could only see Pel and Tay's faces. Their long braided hair was slick with oil. It looked like disembodied heads, moving swiftly toward each other and away. Silla ran and ran, along the fence, but couldn't find her way around.

Silla saw the tips of the combatants' swords flashing in what must have been strikes, counters and reversals. Gin birds swooped across the sky. The action was obviously intense. How could the battle have started without her being in her seat in the stands? When she got her hands on Dranna, she was going to pound her blasted face in!

She woke up, and realized she had been dreaming. Her muscles were tired from trying to run. She told her dream to Bas'ta, and said, "I looked everywhere for you, but I couldn't find you."

Bas'ta wrapped her arms around her and whispered, "I was right beside you, all along. I didn't go anywhere."

Silla remembered it was sword day. She sprang out of bed. Adrenaline hummed through her body. Bas'ta slipped into her robes and handed a package wrapped in paper to Silla.

"Thank you so much!" The swordwoman ripped the paper open and pulled out the new silver-colored tunic and pants. "They are perfect."

She rushed into them, and stepped swiftly, following Bas'ta out of their bedroom. The rustle of the ritual clothes heightened her excitement.

Bas'ta took another packet down the hall and into Pel's room. Silla looked in to see her daughter's lean body, sitting on the bed in her nightclothes. When Silla's eyes met Pel's gray black ones, she recognized the sizzle of anticipation. Pel put her ritual clothes on, and emerged.

Meanwhile, Bas'ta had carried a third package into Kyr and Fryn's room. The weapons man came out, after a moment, wearing a fresh white version of his usual uniform. His bead bracelets had a purple glow, in contrast. The woodman carried a rucksack, which he set down in front of his feet.

Pel sat on the sofa in the living room. She laced her hiking boots on. Silla joined her, and did the same. The young woman strode to the entryway, touched the household god, and closed her eyes. When Pel had finished, her mother touched the icon, and started her own silent prayer for success.

Bas'ta had circled to the table by then. She called out, "You're not leaving without breakfast."

Silla said, "Oh, yes, we are. We have miles to cover!"

Bas'ta's voice made it clear the issue was not open to discussion. "It will be a better hike, if you eat your gruel, first. You, too, Kyr."

Silla shrugged, and turned back into the house. Pel followed her to the table. Kyr put his rucksack down. Silla sat in front of the warm bowl that sat on the dining room table, waiting for her. She gulped down the gruel. Kyr went in to the kitchen; with a look toward Bas'ta that Silla took to be gratitude.

The swordwoman stood, but the flash of her lover's blueblack eyes made her sit again. Silla made short work of a tisane almost hot enough to scorch her throat. She rose, and walked quickly to Bas'ta's side of the table.

"You sure are stubborn," she said, and kissed her.

Bas'ta said, "Fortunately, I'm also stubbornly in love with you."

"Fortunately, indeed," Silla said, and walked as fast as she could to the entryway.

Kyr came back through the swinging door. He picked up the pack. Silla touched the protective god, again. She returned to the wordless prayer that had been interrupted, picked up its thread of longing again, took a deep breath, and finished it.

Pel bounced out the door, grabbing a light cloak, and throwing one to her mother. Silla half-turned to notice Kyr doing a small bow toward the god, as he passed. She wondered again what his gods were like. She resolved to ask him, when she got a chance.

Outside, the early morning was drizzly and warm. They walked down the hill and along the river. Silla felt a song rise inside her, something like one of Bas'ta's wedding compositions. The leaves of the likki trees were a wet scarlet that shone under the layer of rain.

She told Pel the suggestions Kyr had made about ornamenting the sword. Pel nodded, and looked happy with all she had to look forward to.

They passed the docks, which were deserted because of the holiday. The sailors and longshoremen were all in the temple. A handful of unattended boats bobbed on the water. Pel whistled loudly a tune she seemed to be making up that harmonized with the one in Silla's chest.

There was a period when all three of them walked silently through the quiet streets. Silla thought forward to the coming contest, and found herself in a patch of sadness she couldn't understand, at first. She was thinking about her parents, who had helped her through her sword day so many years ago. And realizing that Pel was going to grow away from her, no matter what the happened in the contest.

Letting go of her daughter was a harder challenge than crossing swords with Dranna, in her own day had been. Especially when she envisioned the smirk of ownership Dranna would use, if she made Pel her apprentice.

There was a black-uniformed guard at the south gate of the city, with a heavy body and a trim brown beard. He moved slowly to let them through, without asking what their business was. Everyone in town knew of the upcoming trial, and the tradition of going to the mountain to have the contest swords made.

The guard locked the gate behind them. The purple woods that covered the whole area south of the wall looked strange and threatening to Silla. She had never entered

them.

The three crossed an expanse of muddy ground, circling outside the walls. On the east side, she found the track winding to the mountain. The movement of cartwheels, over a long time, had created it. Wild bushes grew on either side.

Reaching that road made Silla more comfortable. She had followed her tall quiet father up it, with great anticipation, many seasons before.

Silla stopped walking, and said to Pel, “Your grandparents hadn’t known much about weaponry, when I was growing up. They tried to learn fast, when they saw I was going to need a sword for my contest. Your grandmother interviewed everyone of rank at the school to get the information she needed. I remember watching her draw the design she had developed, in her imagination, of the best of the swords of the past she had heard about. She went over it with my father, and then sent him up here with me.

“They had been new to the sword art. Not an old family, like Dranna’s. They gave me the best they could create. But, my sword and my training never had the power Dranna’s had. After I lost, I buried myself reading the school histories, to try to figure out what I had missed.

“Then, you grew up, and I saw that you were going to need a contest sword. I started reading the histories, again. I studied hard, so I could give you things my parents couldn’t give me.”

Pel smiled. “I know you did. I may not always seem like I appreciate that. But I do.”

Silla signaled to Kyr to bring the drawing they had made out of the rucksack. The weapons man unrolled it. Pel said, “Nice. That’s very nice.”

After that, the young woman led the other two in silence, making good time along the wide road. The bushes on either side grew higher, their branches cut away from the road by the passing wagons.

Silla pointed out the turnoff, when they came to it. The path that circled to the foothills was narrower. Pel loped ahead, up the gentle rise. Her silver pants shimmered, under her blue cloak. Silla found herself warming up, in the mid-morning rain, as she followed. She turned, every so often, to see her short weapons man beaming behind them.

They started up a muddy trail. The trees alongside it were tall with thin trunks and spade-shaped leaves. Before long, the path turned steep, and densely switch-backed. Silla found herself thanking Bas’ta for having made her fill up with the cereal.

The swordwoman’s heart pounded. In spite of the sizzling late-morning rain, she took her cloak off, and tied it around her waist. The light weave of the ritual clothes was designed for climbing this mountain. Her body was wet with sweat, anyway. The muscles in her legs were stiff. She had been a much younger woman, the last time she made this trip.

They took a rest stop, looking at the lower hills. The landscape rolled out like a rumpled carpet to the horizon. Silla caught her breath, her chest heaving.

“I would like the blade to be thinner,” Pel said, taking a stick and drawing it in the dirt.

Kyr looked at her design, and said, “I don’t think it will have the action you want, if you make it too thin.”

He drew a compromise shape. She said, “Yes, that should work.”

Silla suggested the wooden covering for the handle.

Pel thought for a few minutes, and then nodded, “Good idea.”

They walked on through the lightening woods and brush. Silla signaled the other two to stop at a wide rock they could sit on, overlooking the increasingly dramatic view.

She said to Pel, “These swords have always been made of seven parts blackrock to three of yellow metal. They have a tendency to overwhelm the swordperson’s focus. Kyr suggested we make yours one part to one, instead, to calm the feeling.”

Pel said, “I don’t want to calm my sword down. I want every bit of power in it possible!”

Silla said, “I think a quieter sword will give you a better kind of power. Remember the third master stored his blade in salt to counter the way it cuts inside you when you pick it up? They say his contest sword almost glowed without changing his breathing.”

“It’s too risky. This is not time to try something we don’t know anything about.”

“When I picked up my sword, it felt like it was going to tear my arms out of their sockets.”

“I’m stronger than you were.”

Silla nodded. “I know you are. What these swords do is beyond your strength. I’ve been trying to figure out how they work. I think they take your willfulness and channel it back to you. It’s just because you are so strong that you need a gentler sword.”

Pel stamped along the mountain path with energy that surprised Silla. Kyr didn’t attempt to enter their discussion. Vegetation grew sparse, and the three picked their way over boulders and then through loose gravel.

It was mid day by the time they reached the mine at the top of the mountain. Silla’s thighs and calves were sore from the climb. The air was thinner, and the light was pale. She watched her daughter bend over to stretch her hamstrings with apparent ease.

The workings of the mine rumbled, under a low, purple building. Next to it was a smaller structure with the forge in it. Silla could see the fire glowing, there. At the back of the house was the blacksmith’s quarters. A smell of game cooking wafted out.

The blacksmith was an auburn-skinned Hatarian woman named Blandell. She was finishing the bowl she had dipped from a pot of gin bird stew. She offered some to her customers. Silla usually didn’t care for the bitter taste of these birds but she was so hungry, after the hike, that she chewed the thick texture, gratefully.

She watched as her daughter asked Blandell about the workings of the smithy.

Silla noticed an unusual deference in her daughter's manner, and wondered whether it was because Blandell was the source of the weapon she prized.

The muscles in Blandell's arms flexed, as she dug a trench in sand to propose the shape of the sword. Kyr made adjustments in it to make it look more like the drawing he and Pel had settled on.

Pel nodded, her eyes looking intent.

Silla said, "Kyr has a suggestion."

Pel's expression grew angry. Silla carried on anyway, "What would happen if we alter the alloy from three to seven proportions to one to one?"

Blandell whistled low. "That's brilliant. It would counter the hypnotic quality of the usual metal and give the swordwoman more depth."

Silla asked, "Is it hard to let go of these, after you make them?"

Blandell said, "The reason my people are blacksmiths is because we aren't as vulnerable to the power of the blade as yours are. Otherwise, this work would drive us mad. But, they still fascinate, especially when they are new."

Pel strode off into the brush, kicking up rocks in her fury. Silla watched her go, hoping the outcome of her daughter's struggle with herself would be the best one.

While she waited for Pel to return, Silla asked her slave, "Do the new swords feel more powerful to you, too?"

Kyr said, "This is the first time I've made a new one. I have talked with the other weapons people, and they don't describe any difficulty. They say they feel the energy, but they seem to be able to let it flow through them."

A cloud crossed the sun. Pel returned up the path she had gone down, walking more quietly than she had when she left. She looked at Blandell's expectant face, and said, "Please, use the new blend."

The blacksmith clapped her hands and leaped up, looking much more enthusiastic than she had to this point. She took the cover off her cauldron and scooped chunks of blackrock and filings of yellow metal into it. Blandell seemed about to hum, as she mixed the new blend. She looked admiringly at Kyr. The blacksmith pumped the bellows to make the fire hotter.

Pel sat, looking a little defeated. Kyr watched the melting metal, without his face betraying any joy in victory. He seemed fascinated by the process in front of him.

Blandell stirred the luminescent liquid, carefully. There was a smell of burning ore. She said something in the direction of the molten metal. It sounded like an ancient language, and seemed to have meter and rhyme. With a movement that looked like a celebration, she tipped the pot to fill the mold.

The weapons man waited for the blade to cool. Then, he poured water over it. He disappeared into the steam it made. When the top part of his body emerged from the cloud, he had a pair of blue tongs on the sword. He held the new metal in the fire.

He and Blandell handed tools to each other as if they were doing the steps of a

dance they both knew. The small man stared intently into the glowing forge. His contemplative air made Silla feel that it was possible that he was creating a more peaceful sword. This would give her daughter's contest a grounding her own hadn't had, which could make the essential difference.

She hoped she wasn't making a mistake. That the sword wouldn't undercut her daughter's edge too much. Pel's posture was back to its usual straightness. Her eyes were trained on the red-hot brand and the man who was truing it. The fire made smudges on his uniform. Silla saw sweat dripping out of Pel's auburn hair. Blandell freed up one hand to wipe a cloth over Kyr's face and her own.

Silla grabbed a fresh cloth and wiped off the river running down her face. She handed the cloth to Pel, who ran it across her face, quickly. Both of their faces filled with sweat again, instantly.

The weapons man laid the edge of the metal on the flat green forge, and beat it with a hammer. Then, he turned it over and did the same thing to the other side. The bracelets on his wrists bounced with each stroke. This process went on for a long time.

The heat from the fire began to overwhelm the older woman. Her clothes were drenched. She stepped away a pace, feeling guilty about the effect it must be having on her slave. His flushed forehead sweated as he showed the cooling blade first to Pel and then to Silla.

The deep contentment on her daughter's face looked exactly like what Silla felt. The mother was delighted at how close to her vision the sword came. It was better than what she had imagined, because of the changes Kyr had suggested, and those that Pel had drawn. The changes in the alloy did seem to make its power a bit less fearful.

Even so, watching the blade form brought back the feeling that had coursed through Silla's body, when she had held her own sword for her contest. The desire to touch this one almost made her hands hurt. She looked at Pel and saw the same longing in her eyes.

Blandell took the blade in tongs, and put it in a cooling bath. When the steam died away, the color of the metal had changed from red to a greenish yellow. The blacksmith took it out with her bare hands. Her mouth wrinkled into a deep smile. To Pel, she said, "Young lady, you will bring something revolutionary to your school's contests. It's better if you don't look at this again, until that day."

She wrapped the warm-looking blade in a cloth, tied it with string, and gave it to Kyr. Blandell bowed to him with a broad smile. He tucked it in his rucksack.

The slave pulled an unfinished block from another section of his pack. The wood had the color of the blue tree it came from. Silla was soothed watching his knife give the handle form. He sanded it finely. When he had finished, he handed it to Pel with a shy look on his face.

Pel swung it through the air, as if imagining the steel attached to it. Her expression was so rapt it scared Silla.

Pel said, "Very nice. I think it needs a bit of a curve, though."

She showed him where to trim it down, and watched as his knife carved the excess wood away. His meditative air, as he worked the surface with rough paper spread to Silla.

He handed it to her next. She tested the handle, while Blandell swept the chips into a pan, and into the fire.

“Very nice feeling. This sword is going to glow like the third master’s did,” she said, smiling fully into Kyr’s serious gray eyes. “It already feels calmer to me. How does it feel to you?”

“Strong without being dominating,” he said. His voice sounded satisfied. He sat down, looking exhausted.

“Thank you both for making this creation,” Silla said.

“Yes, thank you,” Pel added.

As the excitement of this process died down, Silla’s stomach grumbled. The cool gin bird stew she could smell on the back of Blandell’s stove had an appeal the dish had never had before.

The blacksmith offered to warm some up for them. Silla said, “Oh, don’t go to any trouble. Would you just dish me a ladle full of it cold?”

Blandell waved them back into her kitchen and served them dishes. The gamey flavor suddenly became Silla’s favorite.

The bag of coins Silla handed Blandell held many months of her salary at the school. She shook the blacksmith’s hand, gratefully, and felt like letting her tired feet do a few steps of a bouldoon.

The three started back down the mountain trail, as the sun set. A cold wind came from the south, and battered them. Silla put her cloak on and turned her collar up against the bluster. The thought of what they had made burned warmly at her core.

The sun was low in the sky, so they had to hurry. Pel took the lead, her steps looking confident to Silla. None of them spoke, as they negotiated the darkening switchbacks. The shadows from the tall trees created a treacherous dusky light. Sunset flashed across the sky, as they reached the more level foothill road. The full moon was rising, and Silla could see they were going to be able to walk it safely.

Relief warmed her heart. She called a halt so she could rest, for a moment, between Pel and Kyr. She said, "They say there were once two brothers who were separated when they were small. They met many years later, and didn't even know they were brothers."

The weapons man gave her a searching look

"I'm just upbraiding myself for having believed the woodsmen and the swordsmen were so very different."

Kyr smiled softly. The increasing respect Silla felt for him welled in her chest, another new discovery on top of the day’s wonders

Pel’s face showed satisfaction with the day. Silla pulled herself to her aching feet

to continue through the evening. She noticed her daughter's pace slowing down, on the foothill track. When they went through the town gate, again, Silla thought about how bedraggled they must look to the guard in contrast to their fresh beginning, that morning.

Once they were inside the wall, Pel said she wanted to go see Tay. The young woman hugged her mother and nodded to the slave. She became a silver and tan flash disappearing into an alleyway.

Silla was happy to see peace between her daughter and her slave. Her legs felt like water, as she and Kyr walked toward home. They had gotten as far as the docks, when they heard gongs ringing at the south gate they had just come through. His face grew serious. "Tyrn. The first sentator's cook."

Silla hesitated, because she was exhausted. Kyr started to run back toward the gate they had just come through. She followed him on complaining legs.

Guards in black tunics escorted a gray-haired woman. Silla saw one of her arms fling out in uncontrolled movement of the tremblers. Silla stood back as Kyr joined the woodpeople saying goodbye to Tyrn. They each gave woodsbead necklaces or bracelets to her. Tyrn clutched the jewelry. The gesture looked awkward. The trembler's red-haired daughter cried. Other slaves reassured the girl.

Finally, the escorts in black directed Tyrn out the opening in the wall. The heavysset gate guard pulled the door shut

The woodpeople climbed to the top of the wall, and waved. Silla saw that Kyr's white uniform stood out among the green ones the other slaves wore. She followed them, her calves hurting at each step.

Silla stood at a distance, and watched the old woman linger, outside the city. The trembler crossed the clearing. Tyrn's steps tacked from side to side, but her progress appeared calm. Silla shivered at the sight of the woods, its mossy limbs as impenetrable as death.

She had never liked these turning outs. This one made her sadder than they ever had before. Her growing friendship with Kyr made her care for his people more. The physical demands of the day made her more vulnerable. She felt like something was cracking in her chest.

Silla's eyes misted. She noticed that, except for Tyrn's daughter, the woodpeople were dry-eyed. The old woman disappeared into the forest. The woodpeople dispersed back to their homes. Kyr walked around the wall to where Silla stood. She eased her sore thighs down each step. He followed her, soundlessly.

When they reached the stone-paved ground, he walked beside her. She said, "I'm sorry about Tyrn."

His eyes were peaceful. He said, "I will miss her. The woodpeople aren't afraid of the woods."

Silla nodded, but she wasn't sure she understood. As they started back to her house, she asked, "Why is it that some of you develop the trembling, and some don't?"

"It's born in some of us. We call it 'szyszy,' which means 'the melting,' because

the loss of control begins very slowly."

The word Kyr had used sounded unpronounceable to Silla, so she used the translation he had offered. "How did you know it was Tyrn who had the melting, when we heard the bells?"

Kyr walked through the purple night in silence. Silla asked, "Am I being rude?"

Kyr shook his head. "We can tell who is going to have it, many seasons before it comes to your people's attention, because some crockery gets broken."

Silla was startled by the bitter edge in his voice. When she looked at him, his eyes had their usual serenity. She pushed on and asked, "How can you tell?"

After a few more steps, Kyr seemed to come to a decision. He stopped and turned to face her. "There's a triple pulse that appears from time to time. The easiest place to see it is at the base of our throats."

Silla put her hand on her own throat and felt the steady pulse there. "Do you treat the sufferers differently among yourselves?"

"No. We all know it could happen to any of us. Or any of our children. Our fates are all tied together."

Silla could see Kyr's sad smile in the moonlight. She said, "I guess ours are, too. We don't have as powerful an expression of it."

The hill up to her house was the final challenge of the long day. Silla drew some strength from the broad trunks of the likki trees. She saw the bibbet quiver between her house and her neighbors, and disappear into the alley.

Once inside her door, Silla touched the icon, grateful to be home. She saw Kyr incline his head toward the god with something that looked like weary appreciation.

The rest of the household was fast asleep. Kyr lit two candles in the bathroom. He added herbs for sore muscles to the water he was running into the tub.

"Do you need anything more?" he asked.

She said, "Wait a minute."

Silla peeled off the sodden silver clothes. She passed them out the door. "Please burn these, and yours, too."

She slipped into the tub, relieved to soak the sweat off and melt her stiffness. The excitement about the sword, and the strain of the day floated away in the hot water. She felt sad about Tyrn, in a deeper way, as she unwound.

In the steamy room, Silla fought off tears. She turned to thinking she had missed her ritual of bath time conversation with Bas'ta. The swordwoman reminded herself to ask her lover in the morning about Tiline's lesson, and the composition for Rupa's ceremony. She hoped the dance was going well.

Every step ached, as Silla walked down the hall to their bedroom. She slipped into bed, and curled up quietly beside Bas'ta. The dream she drifted into had her trudging up a mountain path toward a place where clouds obscured the way. She

wondered whether the path gave way to the sky, there, or was only temporarily covered by the mists.

Before she could find out, there was a violent pounding at the door. The exhausted swordwoman threw on her robe and stumbled toward the sound. Bas'ta had reached it ahead of her, and opened it.

Two guards stood on the threshold. The sky was pre-dawn purple behind them. The man in black brushed past Bas'ta.

Silla put her arm protectively around Bas'ta's shoulder. She asked the first guard, "What is this?"

The man's voice was like the one a person would use to gentle an animal. He said, "There's been an accusation."

His female companion's strong hands moved Silla aside. The assistant to the swordmaster had an impulse to grapple with the brusque guard, but decided to bow to the authority she represented.

The guards went to the door to Kyr and Fryn's room, next to the training hall, and pushed on it. It was locked.

"A lock on a slave's door," the man asked. The woman threw her shoulders against it, and the door flew open.

Kyr and Fryn sat up, in their bed, with their red hair ruffled and sleep still in their eyes. Fryn wore his necklaces. Kyr wore fewer bracelets, since he had given some to Tyrn. The guards searched the room, thoroughly. The woman in black found the broken sword hilt in one of Kyr's drawers.

She said to Kyr, "Come with me to the court."

Kyr put on his green uniform, and let the woman lead him out of the house by the arm. Fryn dressed quickly, too. He slipped his feet into his shoes and followed them, silently, his face drained of color.

The man said to Silla, "You are called, too."

Silla kissed Bas'ta, and went into her room. She pulled on a tunic and pants, feeling foreboding. Her lover followed her, and said, "I'm coming with you."

The swordwoman nodded, happy to have her partner's support, but feeling badly that Bas'ta stood under the same threat she did. The musician got dressed, and circled through the house, blowing out candles, and turning off lamps.

The four walked out of the house and across the sleeping city, ahead of the guards. The hill to the court was steep. Silla looked at the streets, full of purple houses, below.

As they walked, the sky lightened, imperceptibly. The branches of the likki trees looked like a puzzle she didn't know how to solve. A few lamp lit windows sprinkled the city. She prepared herself to say good-bye to it.

No more walks along the river to the port. No more holy days, in the dazzling temple. No more companionship and intensity of the academy. How would the unknown

world outside the city treat her if she were turned out?

Silla squeezed Bas'ta's hand and smiled to encourage her. Bas'ta's dark eyes were more angry than afraid. Silla watched her cook treading beside her weapons man. His posture had the quiet intensity of a billowlion's. She could almost feel the connection that heated the air between them.

Inside the court, the three judges were arranged behind opulent, elevated desks. Their navy blue gowns shimmered in the lamplight. A metal sword hung on the wall above them. A young woodman sat at a writing stand, prepared to record the proceedings.

Silla wasn't surprised to see Dranna sitting at a table, with her arms folded and only a slight lift of her eyebrows giving a clue to her intentions. Beside Dranna was her gardener, Jyn.

The first judge, a short, gray-haired woman, waved Kyr, Fryn, Silla and Bas'ta to another table.

Silla whispered to Kyr. "Does Jyn know?"

Kyr nodded. "I thought he was my friend."

The first judge said, "Jyn has accused Kyr of possessing and using a sword."

She held up the sword hilt and looked at Silla, "Two guards have found this in Kyr's room. How do you explain this?"

A door opened in the gallery, above and behind Dranna. Pel walked in, with her face dark and her mouth set. Silla smiled at her, trying to be reassuring, but her daughter's expression only grew angrier.

Silla thought about Pel's coming contest, and was tempted to deny everything. She hesitated. What kind of career would Pel have if her mother launched it with a lie? Silla said, "I knew Kyr had that sword. I discovered, a few days ago, he had been learning the sword forms."

Pel's back retained the straight posture that was characteristic of her. She turned her face toward her own knees, and wouldn't look at her mother.

Dranna said, "Nonsense, woodsmen can't do sword."

Silla said, "That's what I thought until I saw Kyr."

The second judge had heavy jowls. He didn't smile as he looked down his long nose and asked, "Didn't you know it was your obligation to report this?"

Silla said, "I'm sorry I neglected my duty. Our ancestors wrote the law against woodsmen practicing sword, because they believed they weren't fit for it. His abilities confound our conceptions of his people. When I saw how much Kyr had learned, just by watching us, I wondered if the assumption behind the law was wrong."

Dranna said, "The reason for the law is to protect the secrecy of the art. Unless we can control who has access to the forms, the glory of this city can be swept away by the first wind that whistles over our walls.

“I have dedicated my life, and everyone else at the school has, to developing the most beautiful sword work possible. That’s what motivates us all to train hard, day in and day out. The teachings were refined over generations, and passed down to us. We have the honor of learning them, and passing them on. With that comes responsibility for selecting carefully who embarks on this path with us.

“Every day, when I begin to teach, I ask myself how are we living up to the gift we inherited from the masters who preceded us. Our goal is to perfect the forms. Before we can do that, we have to perfect the students who learn them. That requires pure breeding.

“The woodpeople are the opposite of purity. They are dirty and uneducated and given to the trembling illness. The gods didn’t give them the sword art. They gave them a life of service. They aren’t capable of the focus and dedication required to be martial artists.”

Dranna’s small-mindedness startled Silla into eloquence. “If the woodpeople are dirty, it’s from cleaning up after us. The only reason they don’t have education is because we care for them so poorly. The sickness they have is a burden we should pity, rather than blame them for. You have cut off your compassion in your efforts to reach perfection. The only thing that keeps them from being able to do the art is the fact that we keep their noses pressed so far into taking care of our needs, they have no time to train and develop their abilities.

“Even given the constraints we put on him, Kyr has an intelligence he can’t deny. He watched us do the training, as we required him to, and he couldn’t help learning it. How could he stop his eyes from seeing and his hands from practicing what he saw? He hasn’t neglected our household in the process. In fact, he serves us better with these abilities.”

“He is of a people who lack the delicacy to perform the art,” Dranna said. “The very fact that he has broken the seal of secrecy proves that. We need to exclude them to keep the training unadulterated.”

“No one ever told Kyr he lacks delicacy. He has learned a way of moving that belies that belief. He managed to keep what he has learned secret all his life,” Silla said. “At least until you pressured Jyn to reveal it. I trusted him.”

Dranna said, “You let your judgment be clouded by getting too close to this man. We all rely on personal services from the woodpeople. If a slave like Kyr violates our confidence, we have to turn him out.”

She continued, “We also have to maintain a distance from them. They are so intimate with us, we can’t afford to get close to them. Friendship is unacceptable. What’s next, intermarriage? We’d never be able to keep our line pure, if that happened. Because of Silla’s friendship with this man, she shares in his treason, and should be turned out, too.”

Silla looked at the gallery. Pel’s position had not changed. All her mother could see was her high forehead, still facing down. She understood her daughter’s fear that everything she had worked for would come to nothing. Silla knew she could distance herself from Kyr, and try to save her reputation. She believed the beauty of his work said

everything. She had come too far to turn back.

Silla said, "I feel Dranna's attitude is outdated. The woodpeople are not so unlike us. I'm proud of my friendship with Kyr. We can respect the contribution his people have made to ours, instead of being cold and angry about it.

"I ask you to watch him do a sword form, and see what made me change my idea about what they can do. The discrepancy between what we believe of him and what he can do will amaze you, like it did me."

The judges spoke among themselves for a moment. Silla held her breath. She knew she was taking a gamble. But she thought their curiosity would give her a chance.

The first judge nodded toward the third judge, a large woman with a scar on her face. The third judge took the alloy sword from the wall behind her, and circled the hilt ceremoniously into Kyr's hands.

Dranna said to the weapons man, "Show us the thirteenth form!"

Silla held her breath. Kyr's skills might evaporate with the unaccustomed metal sword and the scrutiny of the magistrates. Bas'ta's knee touched Silla's under the table. Fryn leaned forward with a rapt expression.

Kyr's manner, as he moved the sword to the ready position, and bent his knees to begin, calmed Silla. He didn't look like he was afraid. The slave looked like he was at home with every detail of this movement.

The form began with a sweep to a position, on one foot, with the sword held overhead. Kyr made the delicate balancing act look easy. He swooped slowly and smoothly to the convoluted series of interlocking spirals. Silla's face remained tight until the woodman had completed the low double spin near the end without a wobble.

The judges couldn't hide their astonishment. Silla started to breathe a little more freely, again.

The first judge appeared to be suppressing an elfin smile, when she thanked everyone for their testimony and dismissed them. Silla walked out of the courtroom, feeling nervous. She had no idea how long it would take for them to make a decision.

Bas'ta and Kyr and Fryn followed her. Dranna and her party came into the hall, and took up waiting positions, at the other end. The master scowled.

Silla could see that Jyn was quite short, now that he stood in the hall beside Dranna. The gardener averted his gaze from everyone.

Pel came through the door from the gallery, emanating frost. Silla rubbed her daughter's stiff arm, and said, "You know I want the best for you."

Pel's lower lip sulked.

Bas'ta said, "I'm proud of both of you. Surely they'll see the truth of your position."

Silla took Bas'ta's hand in hers, and said, "They looked impressed. But it's impossible to predict."

Still, she felt far more hopeful than she had walking up to the session. Silla paced back and forth in the space between her party and Dranna's.

She stepped outside a door, and looked up at the top of the hill. Dawn lighted up the sky behind the high temple. The familiar smell of the warming morning rain reassured her. When she looked down at the streets, she saw people starting to come out of their doors and move around. The city didn't seem to hold as much of a threat of closing her out.

She walked back in to see Kyr and Fryn and Bas'ta leaning together and talking, quietly. Dranna stood upright, at her end of the hall, with her eyes closed, as she waited. Pel had a similar posture.

Jyn risked a slight smile in Silla's direction. He touched his woodsbead necklaces, looking nervous.

Finally, a guard in black tunics appeared, to call Silla and Dranna and Kyr and Jyn back into the court. The judges were at the formal bench again. The first judge said, "We are not pleased that Silla has made her own decision to controvert our laws without conferring with us. However, her demonstration that there has been some error in the legal view of the woodsmen has been persuasive. Neither she nor Kyr will be punished for their transgressions, provided they commit to open communication with us in the future."

Silla nodded, seriously.

The judge continued, "We have not had time to decide the broader issues of whether woodsmen should be offered formal training. But we do give Kyr license to possess swords and practice the art. We thank Dranna for bringing this matter to our attention."

The judges left through a door behind their desks. Dranna shook Silla's hand and said brusquely, "You've won the first round."

Something about the chilly way she said it reminded Silla that there was always that recourse to combat with live swords available. And if Dranna called in that privilege, Silla would be as beaten as she had been, twenty years ago, in their first contest.

Pel's chill face grew a smile that looked like relief. Silla hugged Pel, and kissed Bas'ta with great delight. She shook Kyr's hand and said, "Thank the gods that secret is out. I wanted everyone to know what you can do."

Kyr quietly said, "Thank you."

The walk down the hill felt victorious to Silla. She looked at the city, and wanted to take the sprawl of houses below into her arms. The trees leaned over the sidewalk, protectively. Silla pulled Bas'ta toward her to dance a bouldoon.

The shorter woman pulled away enough that Silla could see her lover's broad grin. Bas'ta said, "Remember you first showed me that hall, when I was a newly landed, here? I couldn't understand why the people of Highwall City believed they could house justice in that large, formal-looking building. Back home in Beluria, we had no separate place

for justice. We resolved our problems between ourselves. I thought, “This city must be full of scalawags to need such a severe building to take their disputes to.”

“But, tonight, I understand the other side. If we were back in Beluria, and you had a series of disagreements like you have with Dranna, it would fester for a lifetime, just because there was no recourse beyond what any two people can find between themselves, there. In Highwall City, there is a court that considers what they think is best for the people, and makes laws. And they fit their justice to your experience as a city. You and Dranna both benefit from their wisdom. You are connected to a system so you aren’t stuck with only what two hardheaded women can think of. You have the harmony that comes from many voices singing together over the year

Silla considered telling a story about a man who learns to speak the language of his captors better than they speak it themselves. But her daughter’s tense face discouraged her from going that far.

Pel asked her, “Do you think you could avoid further controversy until after my contest?”

Silla smiled into those blazing eyes and said, “Of course, sweetie.”

Chapter 4

The three fortnights of the flower season followed, with the bushes growing greener and the glow blossoms scenting the air. It was a time Silla found soothing, even in this period, with the tensions of the approaching contest providing a counterpoint. She watched her daughter's preparations with a sense of pride. Pel's face carried a calmness that went with the season.

Bas'ta's leenio would make her smile. So would the taste of her partner's neck, as the Belurian got ready for bed, these nights. It was a time of peace between the lovers, too.

Then, the flower season gave way to the cold winds that rattled across the roof and under the door. The temperature dropped. Fryn put out warmer clothes. Silla bundled into them, appreciatively.

That first morning of the new season, Silla sat at the academy, and watched the training. She noticed, with satisfaction, that Porta had taught Reb how to do the round cut attacks she most needed to practice for her tunic test. The increase in his skill was visible. He rewarded Porta with a seemingly tireless assistant. The gong rang. The two raised their swords to each other. Porta shrugged what Silla took to be an appreciation in her direction.

A blue-coated messenger from the court interrupted class. The sweaty athletes sat on the floor. The page said, "The judges have decided, based on a recent case brought before them, that the coming session's entrance exams should be opened to interested woodpeople. City funds will be available to buy two slaves per session, if they qualify, from their masters, and support their training at the school, in hopes that they will serve the community as representatives of the art."

The students looked surprised. Dranna's only visible reaction was a subtle quiver of her jaw muscles. She thanked the messenger, and showed him out.

Silla ran home at lunch break, and knocked on the door to Kyr and Fryn's room. There was no answer, so she pushed it open. Their bed was slightly out of place. As Silla started to straighten it, she noticed a cut in the floor, underneath. She pushed the bed out of the way, and found the outline of a panel in the floor she hadn't known was there.

Puzzled, Silla ran her hand around the piece of wood and found she could scabble her fingers under one edge and lift it up. Beneath it was a dark space. She couldn't tell how big it was.

"Kyr," she called. There was silence.

"Fryn?" Still, nothing. Had the two escaped, she wondered, feeling her trust in them betrayed. Were they hiding something? She thought of all she had risked to defend Kyr.

Silla lay down, and reached as far into the hole as she could. All she felt was the underside of the floor. She went to get a lamp, and used it to peer into the opening. The

light flickered. There was a red clay floor, about six feet below her, and earthen walls forming a passageway. Against one of the walls lay a wooden ladder, too far away for her to reach.

Silla left the lamp beside the hole. She let herself through the opening and dropped a scary distance to the lower floor. The swordwoman set the ladder against the edge of the cutaway and climbed back up far enough to retrieve her lamp. With the light in her hand, she returned to the passageway and listened. All she could hear was a slight sound of running water. She walked in that direction.

After a few steps, the assistant to the sword master saw that the passageway extended beyond what would have been the walls of her house above her. She guessed that she was passing under the street and then her neighbor's house. Silla smelled the wet dirt of the tunnel. Her hands brushed cobwebs on the walls.

She walked several blocks toward the center of town. There were irregular rustles and clunks ahead of her. Silla hesitated a moment, and listened to the thump of her heart. The swordwoman told her self there was nothing to be afraid of, and continued.

Silla rounded a bend in the tunnel and found the entrance to a simple bedroom. There was a child in a bed making the senseless movements of the tremblers. The bed had rails around it that kept her from falling out. The mattress was covered with a sheet, but there were no sheets or blankets over the girl's body. She wore a nightshirt that twisted around her legs. Beside her sat the tall cook spoon-feeding the girl a bowl of noodles.

"Fryn," Silla said sharply. She felt suddenly cold.

Her cook looked surprised, but not abashed. In fact, his expression seemed to welcome Silla. Fryn turned back to feeding the child. Silla felt there was a violation of trust she should call him to account for. She was torn between wanting to comfort the girl and being afraid of her disease.

Fryn spoke to Silla in low tones. "There's nothing to be afraid of. You can't catch it from her."

Silla felt her face flush with embarrassment. Something in Fryn's soft voice made her believe what he said.

Silla saw that Fryn had one of the child's hands in his own. The movement of the girl's other hand was making it difficult for him to feed her. Silla stepped to the child's side, caught the dancing hand in her own, and held it while it quivered. It felt hot and sweaty.

"My name is Silla," she said to the child. "And you are?"

Red blonde hair stuck to the girl's damp face. Her mouth made a voiceless movement before something that sounded like "urd" came out.

Fryn said, "That's right, Gyrt. Now take another breath, and remember to slow down."

He put another spoon full of food in Gyrt's mouth and said, "Chew it all up."

Silla could see the child laboring against the movements that periodically twisted her mouth. She wanted to say, "Poor baby," but she took her tone from Fryn's and forced herself to say cheerfully, "What a good girl."

She couldn't help thinking of Pel as an infant, throwing food around, as she learned to feed herself. How it would have broken her heart if her own daughter had suffered this reversal to helplessness at the age of four or five. Silla felt a flash of gratitude that Pel was healthy enough to battle with her.

Gyrt's movements grew quiet for a long period. Silla let her grip on the child's hands relax. She used her sword training to find the center, where she was calm and focused and prepared for the unexpected. Gyrt's arm flung out like a whip, its small bracelet bobbing. Silla's arm echoed the motion, and kept the arm from upsetting Fryn's slow steady process of carrying noodles from the bowl to Gyrt's mouth. Silla used combat control to keep the tears in her throat instead of her eyes.

The silence was making Silla nervous, so she spoke, as she followed the child's buffeting hand. "Did you know there was once a bumber who hid in his burrow because he didn't want anyone to know what long ears he had?"

Gyrt shook her head, which was at a cockeyed angle. Silla wasn't sure whether the child was communicating "no," or whether her head was moving because of her disease. She continued, anyway. "When the other animals had a party, he wouldn't come out of his hole. The finbird sang to him that she wanted to see him, but he wouldn't budge."

Silla saw that Fryn was coming to the end of the food. She looked at the beads around his neck, as if she could read the rest of her story, there. "The tree cat roared that he had better get out from underground or else. The bumber was more afraid of being ridiculed than he was of the tree cat's teeth."

The child's sweaty hand made gyrations. Silla's hand stayed with it. "The yellow pig went into his hole and tried to drag him out, but the bumber's shyness made him very strong."

Silla saw Fryn's eyes crinkle slightly. Kyr must be coming up behind her, his tread as silent as the master's.

"Finally," Silla said, "A fibble dug into the bumber's burrow and asked if he could hide there with him. The fibble said, 'I hate to go out above ground because my ears are so small.'"

Fryn put the spoon in the empty bowl. He took a cloth from his pocket and wiped away the bits of food that had spilled from Gyrt's mouth. Silla had never seen Fryn move with such gentleness. She continued, "'so small?' The bumber cried. I wish my ears were as small as yours.'"

Kyr stepped into Silla's line of vision and continued until he was behind Fryn. There, he rubbed his lover's shoulders. The swordwoman held onto the child's bobbing hand and continued. "The fibble said, 'Why, if I had as handsome a pair of ears as yours, I'd be out there dancing and kicking up my heels.'"

"Really?" asked the bumber. "If I had such fine discreet little ears as you have, I

would never miss the festivities up there.’ So the fibble’s admiration of the bumber’s ears and the bumber’s fascination with the fibble’s convinced the two shy creatures to show themselves outside the hole, which made the animals’ party complete.”

Gyrt’s mouth formed something like a smile. A flush crossed her pale face. In a wavering voice, she said, “Ang oo.”

The child squeezed Silla’s hand in a gesture that felt deliberate to Silla, in the midst of all her uncontrolled movement. Silla let go softly. Her chest heaved, holding back a sob.

Fryn kissed Gyrt’s cheek, and said, “You get some rest now.”

Kyr whispered something in the child’s ear, and kissed her, too. There was a reassuring look in both men’s eyes. Silla bent over the bed and put her lips on the girl’s damp little forehead.

“You are doing beautifully,” the swordwoman said. She followed Fryn and Kyr out of the room.

When they had gone some distance back up the passageway, Silla said, “I left the panel open and the ladder propped up on it. Someone could find that!”

Kyr said, “I closed it again, when I came down.”

“Good. Can Gyrt hear us here?”

Kyr said, “No.”

“Then, would you explain this to me, here, rather than back in the house, where someone else could overhear?”

The two men sat on their heels against the tunnel wall. Silla paced, uneasy about her growing complicity in their secret.

Fryn’s face was serious, “When the melting comes to a child, it is more intense, and grows faster. Sometimes one is born with the triple pulse. When that happens, we hide them, so they won’t be turned out, where no one can take care of them. There’s not just the twitching movement you saw. There’s also a loss of thinking ability. Gyrt used to have a spark in her eyes, but it has been dulling relentlessly. She wouldn’t survive out in the woods.”

Kyr picked up the story in his soft voice, “All of us come down here, at different times, to keep her company. For the past year, she hasn’t been able to feed herself. We try to come in twos at meal times, so one of us can help hold her hands. I was supposed to be here. This morning, Dranna’s gardener Jyn came and told me th emaster wanted to speak to me.”

Silla asked, “She told you the decision?”

Kyr nodded. “She seemed to be congratulating me, but I sensed a tone of threat underneath it.”

Silla nodded. Fryn said, “I was nervous when Kyr was called away. But Gyrt counts on us. I didn’t leave the tunnel door open, did I?”

“The bed was awry. I moved it and found the panel.” Silla sighed. “Who are Gyrt’s parents?”

Fryn said, “Byrnn and Yngl. They serve for Humbel the Saldarian tavern-keeper.”

Silla said, “So the child is Humbel’s property.”

“He would only have turned her out,” said Fryn. “She wouldn’t have had any value to him once she started to tremble. We told him the child didn’t survive the birth, so we’d be free to take care of her.”

Kyr said, “Humbel took Byrnn’s other grief as following the death of the child.”

“Other grief?” Silla asked.

“The birth of a child with the triple pulse tells us that the mother will also be a melter.” Fryn explained.

“Oh gods, I wish I hadn’t seen this.”

Kyr said, “I’m sorry we’ve put you in this position.”

Fryn’s eyes were deep gray, as he looked at Silla. “I’m glad you came along. You were good with her.”

“Poor kid,” Silla said. “Of course you want to do anything you can to ease her illness. Will it kill her?”

Both men nodded.

“How long,” Silla asked.

Kyr said, “Six months. At most.”

“You’ll keep her down there that long?”

“We have done it before,” Fryn said.

“If she is discovered -- if they find out I knew -- I would be turned out this time.”

“Don’t you think the court could be made to understand?” Fryn asked. “Like they did with Kyr?”

“I’m afraid we’ve used up all the patience they have.”

Kyr said, “What sense would it make to let Humbel turn her out?”

Silla frowned, “I know it’s crazy. I need time to think. And I need to get back to practice.”

She walked the rest of the way down the tunnel to where the ladder lay. Kyr helped her set it against the opening. Silla hauled herself up the ladder. Pushing the panel aside, she climbed back into Kyr and Fryn’s room. As she wiggled out from under the bed, Silla felt some loss of dignity. She returned to the training hall, without looking back.

When she arrived late, her stomach was growling to remind her she had skipped lunch. Dranna gave her a look that would have withered a woman who had less

experience with her rages. The master was demonstrating a strike to the chest. Silla picked up a wooden sword, and provided the attack that made her heart vulnerable to Dranna's blade.

The movement of the master's sword was swift, and claimed the space between them. Leaning backward from the tip, Silla tried not to show her rebellion. After practice, she wiped her face with a cool cloth, and reminded herself that she had promised the judges not to hide anything from them again. She should tell them what she'd found. A child who was going to die anyway would probably be turned out. Might it be mercy to end Gyrt's struggle?

Fryn and Kyr were sure to be turned out, too. But, at least she would protect Pel. She looked at her daughter, who was polishing her wooden blade, her face serious. Didn't she deserve her chance? Silla had promised her she would stay out of trouble.

Walking home, she thought of the omniscient appearance of Dranna's smile as she had said good night. She felt as if the master sensed her own compromised position.

At first, Silla decided it would be better for Bas'ta not to know what she had seen and heard. When she got home, she didn't call Fryn to ask for a drink for fear of what his face would remind her of. But, she couldn't stop herself from spilling it all, when her lover walked into the bathroom and asked about her day.

The shorter woman's voice was angry. "This is one thing I've never understood about your city. I lose my respect for the symphony of justice, here, when I see that no one takes a stand against turning a child out."

"You are right. It is ironic this wonderful democracy doesn't extend to the woodpeople. So you don't think we should tell?"

"Not only should we not tell," Bas'ta whispered, sitting in the bath and trembling, "We should help."

Silla leaned her head against the wall, shocked at the suggestion, and exhausted by resisting that very impulse. "I know. You're right."

The next night, Pel told Silla she was going to start extra trainings in the evenings with Tay. Silla said, "Don't you think it would be good to train with someone else? The sharper you get, the sharper your opponent gets."

Pel said, "No one else pushes my edge as much as he does, now. If we both do the best we can, I'll be as happy to lose as to win."

"I don't think I've ever seen love and ambition so evenly poised," Silla said. But, she remembered the attraction and danger that had been in the air when she and Dranna had been preparing for their contest. "I could arrange some other training partners to work with you in the evenings."

"Let me do it my way, Mom," Pel said in a voice that made Silla back off, feeling irritated. And proud.

The three women ate cool soup together, before Pel stood up and strode off to the

central hall. When Fryn came in, to clear the dishes, Bas'ta said, "Pel will be gone for at least two hours. Let's make some mab meal and take it to Gyrt."

Fryn smiled sadly, but didn't look surprised. Bas'ta walked into the kitchen, saying, and "Wouldn't it be easier to swallow than noodles?"

"It might," Fryn said.

The musician added, "How about wrapping the pan with a towel to keep it warm, while we carry it there?"

Fryn and Kyr led the way through the opening below their bed. As they walked, Silla said, "I forgot to discuss with you the school being opened to woodpeople. Do you want to go, Kyr?"

Kyr said, "Yes, I would like to take the exam. Does your offer to help me practice still stand?"

Silla said, "Of course. I'm proud of you."

"Thank you for your support."

Bas'ta asked, "Fryn, would you want to take the test?"

Fryn said. "No, thanks. I don't have any gift with swords."

Silla watched her lover walk ahead of her. She admired the certainty in the steps Bas'ta's short legs took. The sight of the child's restless gestures was still heart-rending. Somehow, Bas'ta's practical plans eased the pain.

Gyrt was sitting up against some pillows. Her thin face had a vacant expression. It reminded Silla of the way Pel's father Rinnen used to look when he had downed too much wine. The child had a drunk's deliberation, as she widened her mouth. Silla thought she recognized this as a smile. And was even more sure of her interpretation when the child said slowly, "Zdo-ree?"

Bas'ta introduced herself to the child, who repeated the name as well as her mouth would let her, "Ba-da."

The leenio player sat in the chair beside the child's bed. She uncovered the bowl of meal she had brought. "Would you like to try this?"

"Esh."

Fryn and Kyr flanked the bed. They held Gyrt's hands, which flung around so much they made her bracelets rattle. Bas'ta spooned warm mab meal into her mouth.

Silla knelt on the floor beside Bas'ta, and tried to think of a story. "There was once a freshet that flowed out of the mountains."

The caress of Bas'ta's smile made Silla grateful that she had and her lover had the control over the muscles in their faces to express themselves. She returned to her story. "This creek loved to sing a song with the rocks as it flowed down the foothills."

Gyrt seemed to have less trouble swallowing the meal than the noodles she had been eating the day before. She looked at Silla, with her pale gray eyes.

“The rocks sang along with it. But, as it came down the hillside and into a valley, it widened and grew into a deep river. It tried to sing its song to the banks, but its voice had grown muffled, and the banks didn’t seem to know the song of the rocks.”

“Oh, no,” the child said.

The portly woman Silla knew was Gyrt’s mother arrived, followed by her lanky husband. Silla nodded encouragement to the couple.

Gyrt asked, “Ht hpps thn?”

The sword woman wondered where her story could go. She continued, “The river flowed into an ocean that was so large and quiet, she thought she had lost her voice all together.”

A tear slipped down Gyrt’s cheeks. Silla had to keep herself from crying as well. “But, then a tide picked the stream’s water up and threw it against the shore. The rocks there knew the song of water flowing over them. They sang along. And the creek was happy knowing that no matter how far she traveled, she could always find the song she was born with again.”

Bas’ta put the last bite of mab meal in Gyrt’s mouth. The child took a long time to swallow it. Her contented look was the best reward Silla had ever had. Fryn and Kyr did a little dance that looked like it spoke encouragement. The child’s mother said to her, “Don’t forget the practice.”

Gyrt’s face seemed to express agreement.

The adults walked in silence to the place where Gyrt’s parent’s way split off. Her father said, “Thank you so much for your help.”

“Your daughter is such a big-hearted child. We feel lucky to be here,” Bas’ta said. They all hugged.

As they walked back up the tunnel, Silla asked Kyr what Bryn’s words to the child had meant.

He said, “We have a practice we call tykyd. There is an outer version we use for self defense and moving meditation. It has an inner element, too, that comforts us when we’re sick and helps us die more easily. Bas’ta saw Kyr and me doing it, once, and took it for dancing. So, we have been weaving it into her compositions, ever since.”

Bas’ta looked surprised. Then she said, “I’m glad the child has something.”

Silla asked, “What are your gods like?”

Kyr said, “We just have one, the goddess. We call her Kyjy, which means ‘our sister.’ She created a compassionate universe, and gave us tykyd to help us learn to harmonize with it.”

“What do you think happens after death?”

Kyr said, “We lose the illusion of being separate from her.”

Chapter 5

Silla knew she was having dark dreams, but she couldn't remember them. The cold winds felt like a slap on her face every morning.

The day of the contest seemed to be rushing toward her. At the school, Silla couldn't help smiling at Pel's swordmanship. Her daughter's focused effort was making her more powerful every day. Silla could see strong-chinned Tay shining from their work together, too.

On her way home, she would begin to think about Gyrt, and her chest would hurt. Silla and Bas'ta took advantage of Pel's daily absences to visit the child. Every time they slipped through the trap door, Silla would wonder if they were going to get caught this time and be turned out. She would run her hand along the dirty wall of the tunnel, afraid she was going to find Gyrt worse.

The child was slowly growing more disabled. The movements of the trembling made her speech harder to understand. The battle of getting food into her took all their wits. But, when Silla turned the corner of the passageway, and saw Gyrt's eyes shine, and heard her mouth her name, she found the strength to help feed and soothe the child, and tell her another story.

The leenio compositions Bas'ta played in the house grew as heavy as the gray skies. But in Gyrt's room, she found another tone in the instrument that seemed to lighten the child's distress. And Silla's too.

Each evening would end with Silla and Bas'ta leaning close in their bath, whispering worries about the child. They cried together, a little, every night. As the child's strength waned, her hold on the two women's hearts grew.

The cold rains turned to the cold winds. For weeks, the blustery weather came out of the foothills and buffeted the city. Roof tiles clattered loose.

On the darkest night of that season, Silla walked into the kitchen and saw that Bas'ta had thinned Gyrt's gruel down almost to water. The reminder that Gyrt was barely able to swallow made Silla sigh deeply. Bas'ta turned and rubbed her tear-streaked face against Silla's shoulder.

"She can't go on much longer," Bas'ta said.

Silla nuzzled her chin across Bas'ta's head. "I know"

The two women walked, arm in arm, to the tunnel entrance. Bas'ta descended the ladder first. Silla handed the cup of gruel, wrapped in its towel, to her. Then, Silla climbed down, and brought the leenio through the opening. Silla stood, hesitating, not wanting to see how much further Gyrt might have slipped away. But, Bas'ta took the cup and hurried along the tunnel, as if getting the food to the child hot could save her life.

When Silla came around the bend in the tunnel, she felt as if she had been punched in the chest. Gyrt's face and shoulders had become almost skeletal. The child lifted her head from the pillow, and managed a tiny smile. Her skin was very pale. Silla put down the leenio, and sank to her knees beside the bed.

“How are you doing sweetie?” she asked.

Gyrt managed a syllable that sounded like, “Oagh.”

Silla had no idea what it meant. The child’s weakness slowed the trembling down. Her arms were so shrunken her bracelets looked huge. Her limbs still made random arcs in front of her, but they were smaller and more subtle than before. When Silla folded the hands in her own, the bones felt as fragile as lace.

Bas’ta’s voice was low and very soothing. “Can you open your mouth, Gyrt?”

Gyrt couldn’t manage to do that, so Bas’ta held it open lightly and poured tiny sips of the gruel into it. The process was slow, but Bas’ta’s stubborn focus continued until the bowl was empty.

Then, she sat down to play a piece of music that had the delicacy of a bird, making her way into the sky, one light wingspan at a time. Silla looked in Gyrt’s expectant face. She could not seem to think of a story.

Silla willed her voice into the dark space that yawned between her and the child’s lightly rising chest. “Once there was a very brave little girl.”

Gyrt closed her eyes, and Silla was sure she saw an infinitesimal smile of recognition among the slowing spasms crossing the child’s mouth.

“She set sail on a wide ocean all alone. Her parents and her friends were frightened they would never see her again. But she told them, ‘some day you will sail the sea beyond the sea, too. And you’ll find me there.’”

“And she was right. One by one, over the years, her parents and her friends learned not to be afraid, and found themselves on boats being rocked across the water. When they came to the sea beyond the sea, they saw that the little girl had grown up on her travels, and learned to weave the strong fibers of that land into beautiful houses that were waiting for them.”

Silla was alarmed when Gyrt’s hand relaxed. But she could see the child’s nostrils fluttering, softly. Bas’ta’s leenio strings kept lighting a deeper and deeper path through the dark.

The swordwoman said, “And they danced with their little girl, who had grown big. And they agreed that she had been right. There was nothing to be afraid of sailing the wide blue sea.”

Bas’ta let her tune quiver to silence. Silla could feel her own soul and her lover’s flowing together in the night. There was a rattle that troubled the child’s breath. Her eyelids flickered and then closed again.

The musician said, “Oh, god, go get her parents!”

Silla ran through dark branching tunnels that seemed to go on forever. She heard her own breath rushing, and remembered the sound of guttering in the child’s throat. The swordwoman came to what she had learned was the entrance to Brynn and Yngl’s room. She knocked against the panel, until she heard them move the bed over her head and pull the cover open.

“Come quick,” she said, “She’s dying.”

Brynn scurried down the ladder with her nightgown still on. Yngl followed with his red hair standing up in ruffled stalks.

As the two rushed past her, Silla, said, “I’m sorry.”

“Thank you, for coming,” Yngl called over his shoulder as he ran.

Silla followed, feeling hopeless, wishing there was something more she could do. The couple ran faster than she could keep up with. Silla made the best speed she could along the uneven dirt floor in the dark.

When she reached the room, Brynn was on the bed, rocking her emaciated child in her arms. Yngl had his face beside the girl’s, and was saying, “It’s all right, Gyrt. We’re here. Remember the practice.”

Brynn hummed a lullaby. Bas’ta picked the tune up, blowing on her leenio, softly. Silla rested her chin on her lover’s hair, with its stripes of gray. She wasn’t ready to say good-bye.

Gyrt’s eyes opened, a startling bright blue against her sallow cheeks. The child looked like she was seeing something surprising and delightful. Her chest rose ever so slightly, her light breath crackling in and crackling out again. It didn’t return.

The swordwomans’ heart broke open, overflowing with pain at the poor girl’s life and death. A moan came out of her throat and joined the weeping of the others. She felt as if an arctic wind had chilled the room. Bas’ta wrapped her hands in Silla’s, and held them against her chest.

The child’s face was growing even grayer. The deep peace in it was undeniable. Silla felt relief that Gyrt’s struggle was over, even as she was being wrenched by sobs. The sound in the room was like a storm raging through the passageway.

Silla heard Fryn and Kyr weeping down the tunnel, before she saw them. The men had their arms around each other and walked so close together, they looked like a single strange creature with four arms and four legs and two heads and two flushed faces. Their crying went on and on.

Silla tried to send them strength through her eyes. But, she could only look at them for a moment, before the well of grief pulled her to her knees and closed her eyes. She huddled for a long time with her head on Bas’ta’s lap. There was a touch on the swordwoman’s back that she supposed was Kyr’s. Quiet warmth flowed through that hand, and melted the ice that had filled her.

When Silla finally opened her eyes, Brynn was still holding Gyrt. The stricken mother slowly removed Gyrt’s dress, and folded it, and set it aside. She put the now quiet bracelets on top. Yngl took a cloth, dampened it in a bowl of water, and washed the child’s body with great gentleness.

Still with his arm around Fryn, Kyr stepped forward, and handed a brown weaving to Yngl. The father wrapped the shroud around the child, as the mother held her pale limbs. The four woodpeople stood together, in silence for a long time.

Moving very, very slowly, Brynn brought the child's face so close to Yngl's that it touched. The man whispered something to the child. Brynn held the body against her chest for a long time, and then she moved the child's face until it touched Fryn's. The cook seemed to have quite a bit to say to his patient. Tears were flowing from his face, when Brynn softly pulled the child away.

Gyrt's face looked white, when Brynn laid it against Kyr's tawny one. The weapons man put his hand on Gyrt's other cheek and spoke a message that was clearly heart felt.

Brynn moved the dead child away, slowly. Yngl reached under Silla's elbow, wordlessly urging her to stand. Silla took in a deep breath, both longing for and fearing the touch of Gyrt's face. When Brynn put the tiny cold cheek next to hers, Silla felt the same uncertainty she had always felt with the child, trying to find what would be helpful to say. She whispered, "I'll never tell another story without thinking of you, spunky sailor."

Silla cried when Brynn gently moved Gyrt's face from her own. She watched the slow dance of the mother's movement toward Bas'ta. Her lover smiled a reassuring smile the child could have felt through their joined faces, if she had been alive.

Softly, softly, she sang, "You are in our hearts forever, dear."

Brynn held Gyrt as close as she could, again, and began a slow procession out of the room and down the passageway. Yngl followed, his chest on Brynn's back. Kyr and Fryn took equally slow steps behind them. Kyr motioned to Silla and Bas'ta to join them, the bracelet on his arm giving a soft echo to the gesture. The two women followed him.

Silla let the deliberate pace carry her far into tunnels as mysterious as the death of the child. She had never traveled this sequence of passageways. The walk gave her time to let the loss reverberate through her body. Finally, they came to a place where Fryn and Kyr moved a square of rock, and exposed a tomb with twenty small skeletons laid in circle.

Yngl knelt, and made a space for his child, among them. Brynn held the child's face against her own, and spoke at length to her. Gently, gently, she laid her down. Yngl kissed one of Gyrt's cheeks. Brynn kissed the other.

The six adults stood in a semicircle around the child. Silla let her breathing go almost as quiet as the grave. They stretched the final moment there out as long as they could. Finally, Fryn said, "It's almost dawn."

Silla and Bas'ta withdrew first. The cook and the weapons man joined them. The parents came out, looking drained. Silla and Bas'ta put their arms around Yngl and Brynn. Kyr and Fryn pushed the rock back, slowly.

The group walked in silence to the place in the tunnel below Brynn and Yngl's room. Bas'ta said, "Let us know if there is anything we can do to help."

Yngl said, "You've already done the most important thing."

Brynn murmured, "Thank you for your kindness."

Silla said, "Gyrt was like the little bird that flew into the sky, and woke up the

moon. She taught us what our hearts are for and how to be brave.”

Brynn swung up the ladder, her bracelets shaking with her movement. Yngl followed her.

The others returned to their home, without another word.

Silla went into their bedroom. Through the window, she saw Bas'ta standing on the kitchen step, looking overcome. The bibbet came to the edge of the circle of candle light, and sat, looking in the musician's direction. The musician bowed toward her.

It was almost dawn. The bibbet seemed to fade away, as the sky grew pink. Silla wanted to lay down her head and sleep for months. But she had the advanced students to teach. She knew Bas'ta had another lesson with Tiline that morning and a concert to prepare for that night.

Kyr went into the kitchen with Fryn. The door stood ajar, and Silla saw them doing their gentle dance.

Her tall, bright-eyed daughter, came in, wakened by their return. Seeing Pel made Silla smile, in spite of her bone weariness.

The young woman said, “You two look like hell.”

Silla touched her daughter's muscular hand and didn't want to let go. She said, “We had a hard time sleeping.”

The cold winds gave way to the season of ice. Silla's heart was as brittle as the icicles that formed on the windowsills. The branches of the trees were bare and frozen purple.

The observances of the Highwall City temple had always had more formality than feeling for Silla. After Gyrt's death, she found the gestures of lighting fires and melting water felt even hollower. The military cadence of the music there grated on her ears. The faces on the statues of the gods looked heartless. Silla felt like the orphan she was, homeless inside the tall walls.

Silla tried to cover up how lost she was and how much her heart hurt. She couldn't afford for Dranna or even Pel to intuit what she had seen. Her senses felt frozen. She could, at least, talk to Bas'ta, when they were alone. And sharing that secret created a protected place between them. In contrast to her isolation from Highwall City, Silla felt closer to her lover than she ever had before.

There were two fortnights when the only meaning she could find was the one growing in her relationship with Bas'ta. Then, she found herself talking with Bas'ta, quietly about the light she remembered shining over Gyrt's last days. Silla started to feel a quiet sense of comfort breathing into her from the universe. The swordwoman didn't understand what the source of that was. Each evening, she found some moments in the bath with Bas'ta when she could try to put the combination of loneliness and peace into words.

One of those nights, Silla heard the sounds of cartwheels sliding across the ice,

outside. An altercation in the house rose over that. Silla and Bas'ta came out of the tub, and wrapped themselves in large robes. Pel's shouts carried to them from the kitchen, so they rushed into the hot smoky room.

“How many times do I have to tell you I need something more sustaining than soup when I get home from training?”

Fryn slapped a pan onto the stove and threw some raw meat into it. The food sizzled.

Pel wheeled around on Silla and Bas'ta. “Why is everyone acting so numb around here?”

Silla tried to soothe her daughter; “These last few months have been a stressful time for everyone.”

“You guys act like you are at a funeral. Why aren't you happy for me?”

“We are happy for you, baby girl,” Silla said. When she put her arm around Pel's shoulder, the memory of touching Gyrt, as she faded, arose, and made her sigh deeply.

Pel said, “I think you're jealous, Mom. You liked it when you were bigger and stronger, and I looked up to you. Now, it's hard for you to see me surpass you and do what you couldn't do!”

Pel pulled away from Silla's touch and slammed out the door.

Silla sank to a chair and said to Bas'ta, “Maybe we should tell her about Gyrt.”

Bas'ta asked, “Do you think that's going to help?”

Silla shook her head. “No, you're right.”

A trickster storm shook the windows, most of the night. When it died down, in the darkest hours, Silla heard Pel open the door to the house and slip in quietly. Morning ushered in the hot dry season. Over breakfast, Pel said she was going to take the rest of her meals at Tay's house until the contest.

After Pel strode from the house, Silla said, “She's a hard one, isn't she?”

Bas'ta said, “She's tough, like her mother.”

Over the next fortnight, the warm wind came out of the mountains, and drove the ice away. Its buffets became the rhythm of Silla's days at the sword school. With the rise in temperature, she found herself gradually returning to the living.

Pel was so absorbed in her training she seemed to look at nothing but the task before her. The assistant to the master tried to respect her daughter's distance from her and from everyone. The mixture of prickles and fondness she felt, as she watched, always opened into the part of her heart that was breaking over Gyrt.

Silla was restless in this last season before the contest. She could hardly bear not knowing the outcome. One evening, she called Kyr to the training hall, and asked him to show her the sword forms he had taught himself. She helped him round out the low circles.

The next evening, as the wind rattled the walls, Silla took Kyr back to the hall and coached him on the cross strikes. The evening after that, she started doing paired practice with him, to the sound of branches scratching the roof.

Soon, it was understood that they would meet after dinner and train together. The assistant to the master liked the freshness of Kyr's sword work. It gave her a new perspective on her own training. They never spoke about Gyrt, but having shared that battle and loss made her feel closer to her weapons man.

After four fortnights of that, the hot dry season arrived, at last. The slaves put the heavier clothes away. Everyone wore as little as they decently could. Eventually, the likki trees dried out and turned gray.

Demenseday would come at the end of the season. Silla watched Pel practice, until sweat ran down her body. Her daughter honed her focus even sharper.

Usually, the hot dry season was relaxing for Silla, but, this time, the tension of anticipating the contest grew, and took over her thoughts. She wanted to stamp her feet in impatience. The assistant to the master longed so much for her daughter to succeed. The fortnights seemed to stretch on endlessly. Working with Kyr on his sword work gave her moments of respite.

The afternoon before Demenseday was so hot, the stone walls shimmered. Silla walked into the courtyard, and splashed water from the fountain on her face and neck.

She was surprised to see Pel, there, sitting in the shade. The young woman rubbed her calves. The smell of the herbal liniment prickled in Silla's nose. Her daughter looked up and smiled at her for the first time in fortnights.

Silla smiled back. She squeezed some purple fruit juice into a glass of water, and handed it to Pel. "I hope you didn't over train."

Pel shook her head. The red-brown braid snaked across her back. "I'll rest, now."

Silla sat and took her daughter's hand. Hadn't it been an infant hand just yesterday? She just said, "Pel."

The young woman said, "I'm sorry I've been so cranky and difficult."

"I'm sorry I have been, too."

"I appreciate all the support you've given me. And the space."

Silla swallowed the months of aggravation, and nodded. She asked, "Is the contest what you really want?"

"Why else would I be working till my head fries? It's everything I want."

Silla leaned against the wall and closed her eyes. "Once, when I was a young woman, I heard that traders from the coast had brought some strange new fruit up the river. There were only twenty of them for sale, so I went to the docks, the night before, to stand in line to spend a month's pay on one of those samis. It tasted like green mud. But I ate it, anyway, because I'd gone to so much trouble to get it."

"And the point of that story is?"

Silla spoke in low tones. "Do you really want the prize? Are you willing to apprentice yourself to Dranna? You know she'll demand obedience."

Pel disengaged her hand. She set her legs as far apart as they would go and started to stretch, bouncing her body over one leg. "I can work with Dranna. I don't confront her head on like you do. I get around her."

Silla nodded, and massaged Pel's shoulders. "You'll be a good balance for her. The school will benefit."

"If I win."

The music of Bas'ta's voice came into the courtyard from the kitchen, "Oh, you'll win."

Bas'ta brought out a tray with blue plates on it. Pel and Silla each took one. Silla recognized the aged yobin cheese Bas'ta had been saving for a special occasion. Pel's dark gray eyes looked appreciative, as she tasted the treat.

Bas'ta sat on a bench beside the young woman and said, "I have one suggestion you might take into your preparations, tonight."

Pel smiled slightly, "Everyone's been giving me advice."

"Just try this out," Bas'ta said. "See if it helps. I watched you and Tay training, here, last night. He loses focus, for the briefest moment, whenever he strikes you. It's because he loves you and doesn't want to hit you. That's when your advantage is."

"Don't you think I love him?"

"Yes. But you aren't afraid to go to the edge with him. Maybe you can expand his dead space."

"That might be all it takes. Thanks."

The sun settled into the notch in the mountains, shooting bright pink rays. Pel looked at Silla expectantly. "Any parting stories?"

Silla put her plate aside. She closed her right hand as if around the hilt of a

sword. "The most important thing I didn't understand in my bracelet match was how the live weapon would speed me up. I committed myself, too soon. I only had to do that twice, and the contest was over. I think Tay will do the same.

"The change we made in the sword should help. But, I'm afraid you'll still feel a surge of energy. If you do, close your eyes, and slow down against it. You've trained your reflexes until they are marvelous. Don't be ruled by them."

Pel hugged her mother and then Bas'ta. She eased to her feet and did a final stretch, bending over with her hands locked behind her head. When she stood, she asked, "Where's my tunic?"

Bas'ta slipped into the house. Silla said to Pel, "Don't pay any attention if he calls you names. Dranna called me a trembling woods-hag, and a few other things in our contest, trying to off balance me. She's probably coaching him right now to say something equally harsh. It's just part of the battle. It doesn't mean anything."

Bas'ta returned with the white package. Silla said to Pel, "We'll see you after the fight. I know you'll do wonderfully."

Pel kissed them both and was gone.

Silla could still feel Pel's kiss on her cheek. Then Bas'ta's hands were rubbing her tired head. Silla said, "What a sad victory it will be to have to let her join Dranna's family."

Bas'ta put her soft face against Silla's. "Even if she didn't win, you'd have to let go."

Silla stood up and took Bas'ta's hand. "You've been so good to Pel."

Bas'ta smiled sadly, "I'm having to let go of her, too."

"I know." Silla let her lips brush her lover's cheek

She picked up the tray with the blue plates on it. As she started toward the kitchen, the tray slipped in her hand, and the plates clattered and smashed on the ground. She gasped and started to pick up the pieces. Bas'ta helped her and carried the tray into the kitchen.

Her lover returned, and called to Fryn and Kyr, "Time to get dressed for the concert."

Silla slipped into a formal tunic. Bas'ta wore her concert robes. Fryn and Kyr emerged, wearing luminescent black costumes. The two women chattered, excitedly, on their way to the Two Trees, while Fryn carried the leenio and Kyr looked lost in thought. Kei'la, the tavern owner, greeted them, with his blue hair oiled. The house was full, except for a seat he had saved for Silla. She sat back, delighted to see Bas'ta's new creation.

Her partner and slaves disappeared backstage. The room was noisy with excitement. Then there was a hush, as Bas'ta came onstage. She sat down with her leenio, and began to play a tune that matched the rowdiness of the festival mood. Fryn and Kyr danced onstage as lusty as a pair of river marrals.

Fryn moved his arm toward Kyr as if it were a sword. Then, Bas'ta quieted her music down to a peaceful place, breathing softly across the strings. Tears came to Silla's eyes. Kyr moved with Fryn in a way that made the aggressive action seem to soften. He flowed so gently, his bracelets didn't move. Silla thought, "This tykyd must be powerful stuff."

Bas'ta's music started to soar and expand. The two men looked as if they were going to leave the surface, and fly along with it. The crowd applauded madly.

Then, there was a commotion in the front. Dranna rose, and turned to her weapons woman, Lyg. She shouted at her, "You are trembling, you quivering wretch!"

Indeed, Silla could see the woman's arms twitching in the way the tremblers do.

Dranna's balding partner, Chescu turned toward her. He put a hand on her shoulder, as if to calm her. The master would not be quieted. She called to two guards who stood at the back of the room, and said, "Turn her out!"

The black-uniformed men took Lyg by each arm and escorted her out. The weapons woman's legs were unsteady. Dranna sat back down again. A bell started to ring at the South Gate. Kyr and Fryn came out from backstage and followed Lyg and the guards, as did the other woodpeople in the room.

Another performer, a Hatarian singer, took the stage, after Bas'ta. Silla presented the appearance of paying attention, until she could extricate herself from the crowd and work her way through Bas'ta's admirers. She said, "You were wonderful."

She slipped her hand through her partner's elbow, and walked home, feeling distressed. Silla asked, "Why does Dranna hate the woodpeople so much?"

Bas'ta said, "I don't know. She sure has a passion about melters, though, for some reason."

"Fryn and Kyr were wonderful, tonight."

Bas'ta nodded. "They bring so much into our lives."

The night was warm and starry. Silla looked around to make sure no one would hear them, and added, "I miss Gyrt."

A tree branch whispered against Silla. Bas'ta said, "I do, too."

Chapter 6

Demenseday is bright and noisy. Silla is on the combat field with Dranna. "Wait, this is wrong," she thinks. "This is Pel's day."

But Dranna's sword is raised, and her face is flushed and contorted. She says "You have to get past me, first, you raggedy orphan girl."

"Don't let her take your center," Silla tells herself. Dranna's sword comes down. Silla's seems to lead her hands, rather than follow them. It arrives too fast. Dranna slips past Silla's block, and scores against her neck.

Silla wants to put the sword down, but she can't. "Slow down," she tells herself. But the metal is in her veins, and her body knows only speed.

"No breeding," Dranna says. "No killer instinct."

Before she can even tell herself, "don't respond," Silla's sword is trying to push the words down Dranna's throat. She knows she has given her move away. Dranna's sword reaches her belly first.

Silla woke with sweat on her face and Bas'ta asking, "Did you sleep at all?"

"Barely. I was fighting Dranna."

"Again?"

"Why can I never win it, even in my own dreams?" Silla saw that the sun was just lighting the sky. She could take the time to curl up against Bas'ta's round body. The swordwoman said, "Why don't you and I take a trip to Losopa Lake, after this is all over?"

She settled into Bas'ta's embrace for a moment. Bas'ta said, "All right, you've sweet-talked me enough. I can feel your heart is galloping, and not, I think, because of me. I won't be offended if you jump out of bed."

Silla took a deep breath, and sighed. "You're wonderful."

She kissed Bas'ta, and ran to the livingroom. Silla neglected the bread and fruit that were laid on the table.

Bas'ta stood in the doorway with her hands on her wide hips. She inclined her head toward a cup of thin porridge with milk and spices that sat on the entry way table.

"You aren't going anywhere until you eat your breakfast." The insistent set of the shorter woman's shoulders made Silla laugh, even on this nervous day.

"Poor me -- losing both my bracelet contest and the battle of the cereal, before I even get out of the house."

Bas'ta shook her finger in Silla's face. "It's good to lose to me, isn't it? You won't be any help to Pel, if you faint."

Silla swallowed the gruel. Bas'ta still held her position. "Isn't it?"

Silla tickled her until she gave way.

"Yes," Silla laughed, as they tumbled out the door together. "It is."

The festival field was at the center of town, overlooking the river. When Silla and Bas'ta arrived, the circle of raised wooden seats was crowded with people laughing and calling to each other.

The three judges, in their gold tunics, were in a stand. They overlooked the patch of bare earth that would soon be the center of everyone's attention. Dranna sat one seat below the judges, dressed in black. Her smooth-headed partner, Chescu, wore the gray tunic that indicated he wasn't part of the school.

If this were any other Demenseday, Silla would have been beside Dranna as her assistant. Since her daughter was contesting for the bracelet, Silla's position was across from the master. Bas'ta sat with her, also wearing neutral gray. Despite the cool design of the ceremonial tunic, sweat was forming on the swordwoman's forehead.

Bas'ta handed her a cloth to wipe her face with. "She'll do fine."

Silla tried to breathe through the constriction in her chest. She took Bas'ta's soft hand in hers. "Of course she will."

First, there was the introduction of the new class. Silla was happy to see a woodman and a woodwoman she didn't recognize included. Then, there were seemingly endless tunic tests to go through: students demonstrating their solo and paired forms and a few passes of free form battle. The least advanced ones went first, and Silla found the time this took excruciating.

The last tunic test was Porta's, the student Silla had remonstrated with about training with junior students. Porta's responses to the round cuts she had practiced with Reb were her best techniques. When she received her purple tunic, she nodded slightly toward Silla.

An expectant silence fell over the crowd. The first judge, stood and announced, "This is the bracelet contest. The winner will be the new apprentice to Dranna and, on her retirement, will become master of the school."

Pel appeared at the door of her retreat room, the shine on her fresh purple tunic matched by the one in her eyes. The crowd cheered. She bowed to them, then, started stretching, bending and circling from her waist.

When she heard the crowd applaud again, Silla forced her self to look away from her lanky daughter, and watch Tay entering the field. He had gained muscle on his tall body from the training. He weighed thirty pounds more than his opponent, but Silla was sure Pel would make it up in mobility. Like Pel, he wore his long hair in the formal braid. His bow was confident, and his stretches were furious. Pel didn't seem to notice this. Silla thought "Let him spend himself on intimidating gestures. They don't cost us anything."

Kyr approached Pel, carrying her sword wrapped in a red cloth. She removed the cloth, folded it and put it on her bench, before putting her hand on the hilt. Pel hefted the sword for the first time, and winked discreetly at Kyr. Silla wasn't sure whether this was a recognition that her practice sword had helped; or, more importantly, that the change they had made in the composition of the sword was working.

It dawned on Silla that Dranna's household would be in disarray after turning out the weapons woman the night before. She wasn't surprised when a nervous young woodman appeared holding Tay's sword tightly. Tay whipped off the red cover and dropped it on the ground. He seemed to have a little struggle dislodging the bejeweled leather hilt from the young man's grasp. Tay's flourish reminded Silla of the energizing feel of the live blade. How it had crackled through her body, at her own bracelet contest. She noticed a subtle frown on Tay's face, and suspected he had not had as effective a training sword as Pel had.

Silla looked up at the sound of wings rustling. A mass of gin birds had settled on the tree behind the field. She remembered hearing them, the day of her own trials, and wondering why. She looked at the scene on the field, and realized it was the flash of polished metal that attracted them.

The first judge rang a bell. Tay and Pel held their swords, with the tips straight up, and bowed their heads toward each other. Silla could see that Pel never lost eye contact with Tay in the process. Tay seemed to lose himself for a moment in the bow, then dropped his sword to his side, and raised it toward Pel's stomach too fast, as if to make up for his inattention. The metal was seducing him. Would Pel resist it?

Pel brought her sword down smoothly, with Tay's under it. She looked calm enough. Only as Silla began to relax her grasp on Bas'ta's hand did she realize how powerfully she had been squeezing it. The response the students had drilled a thousand times was an uppercut across the thigh. Tay shifted in anticipation. He arrived in the parry position too soon. Pel wasn't going there. She lunged for his unprotected chest.

Everyone gasped, including Tay, who ran a few steps backward before he regained his balance. Silla whispered to Bas'ta, "Where did she learn that?"

Bas'ta said, "Isn't that what you told her to do?"

"Who knew she would listen?"

Tay returned a cross cut, with startling speed. Pel responded with the upper cut everyone had been waiting for, the pass before. Silla could hear Tay's goading tone but not his words. Pel just smiled, as if it were love banter. They made a dozen exchanges that were predictable, but accelerated.

Pel flipped the hair that was slipping out of her braid off her face. Tay pushed through Pel's softened guard with a cut to her throat. Silla noticed his eyes seemed to glaze over for a moment, at the point of impact.

"I see what you mean," she whispered to Bas'ta.

Pel seemed to be waiting for that second. She turned her body, just before the sword reached her, and touched the back of his neck with her blade.

The judge rang the bell. The crowd roared. The first fatal touch was Pel's. Silla was on her feet, "What a girl!"

Bas'ta said, "Just one more."

Silla shouted, "Stay calm," in Pel's direction, even though it was impossible to be heard over the other spectators' voices. She was gratified to see that, after Pel wiped her

face and took a drink, she sat and closed her eyes as if to keep the crowd from her thoughts.

Bas'ta imitated Silla and said, "Your mother, too," in Pel's direction.

Silla could feel the smile wrapping her face. "I'm calm!"

"You'll look a little calmer, if you sit down."

"Oh, yes." Silla lowered herself onto the bench. She kissed Bas'ta. She didn't want to let the moment go. Sunshine warmed her shoulders. Low thunder rumbled in the distance.

The bell rang. The combatants tipped, again. Pel dropped her sword, then, cut across the space between them, in a move that puzzled Silla, but seemed to establish a spherical territory. The assistant to the master imagined what the sword with the new blend might feel like.

Tay tested Pel's responses, with a series of high and low feints. Pel's sweet demeanor, as she met them, reminded Silla that the young people had that thrilling mixture of love and contention. Maybe the whole school, at its best, had that, as well.

The two battled back and forth for what felt like a long time. Finally, Pel launched a slice at the top of Tay's head. He met her cut with an upswing, and then pivoted around the point where their swords crossed. The tip of his sword fell across her throat.

The bell rang; the point was Tay's. Silla buried her head on Bas'ta's shoulder, a peaceful space, in the midst of the noisy voices. She looked across at Dranna. The master's face was unreadable. Tay sat on the bench, red-cheeked and sweaty, with the sword still in his hand. Pel glanced at him, and appeared to remember Silla's advice. She put her own sword aside, and looked at the ground in front of her.

The audience grew quiet enough that the rustle and caw of the gin birds could be heard. Distant thunder sounded, again. The bell rang. Pel picked up her sword, and limped onto the field. After the tip, she swooped into an upper cut. Tay banged his sword down on hers, and lunged at her chest. She backed up, stepped to the side, and entered with her tip toward his shoulder. He parried, and cut toward her throat. She parried, and wheeled toward his thigh. He raised both of their swords together, twisting, so that her sword would come out of her hand. She let go of hers, but put her hand over his on his own hilt and brought his blade down, with a speed that looked maniacal, on top of his head.

The bell rang. The crowd bellowed. Tay put his arms around Pel, and whirled her off the ground. He kissed her. Silla kissed Bas'ta's cool mouth for a long time. Dranna and Chescu disappeared from their seats, and then reappeared on the field. Dranna waved Silla and Bas'ta to join them. The assistant to the master was on the field, in a flash, wrapping her arms around her lithe sweaty daughter. Dranna embraced Silla in a stately manner, and Silla remembered there was love underneath the battle between them, too.

Dranna kissed Pel. She took the wide black bracelet from her own wrist, and wrapped it ceremoniously around Pel's. The master put her arms around both

contestants. She said to the judges, "The old master adopted me when I won the bracelet. But these two young people love each other."

Pel's battle flush grew even darker. She smiled at Tay. Dranna continued, "With Silla and Bas'ta's permission --"

Silla looked at Bas'ta's beaming face, then nodded.

"-- We'd like to announce their wedding, on next Demenseday."

The audience exploded with delight. Pel twirled Tay around, and kissed him. Tay found his balance, and did the same to her. Dranna signaled her cook to bring out glasses of rare blue fruit wine for the small group. When wine was poured for everyone, Dranna raised her glass, and said with an exultant laugh, "Think of the swordsmen our grandchildren will be!"

Silla leaned over and kissed Bas'ta, proud of her partner and her role in their good fortune. The sunset filtered through darkening clouds. A wet wind swept in from the west. It was just at that moment that Silla first felt the strange triple pulse in her throat. She leaned against Bas'ta, and sank into a pit of recognition she could not put words to.

The thought she found, when she surfaced, was: I never knew my parents. Maybe one of them was a woodman. Am I a trembler? Could Pel be? After all her work to get this far. I can't let anyone know.

Bas'ta looked troubled. Silla held her hand out, to keep her from coming too close. To give herself time to think, she couldn't let Bas'ta know. Silla gazed into her lover's searching eyes for a moment, and broke away from them. The swordwoman said, as normally as possible, "I need some rest."

Bas'ta smiled, "I'm not surprised."

Pel was surrounded by a wave of well-wishers. Silla kissed Bas'ta lightly, and said. "I'm going to go lie down. I'll meet you, at the feast."

Bas'ta frowned, and said, "I'll go with you."

Silla said, "No. Please, stay, in case Pel needs anything."

She forced herself to part from Bas'ta in a way that didn't draw attention. Silla felt trapped in the pelting rain.

Everyone she passed called congratulations, as she walked away from the field. Silla covered her shock with a smile, as smooth as the controlled face she would use in a match. Treat this like a contest, she thought. Fake and regroup. Look for a hole you can slip through.

Underneath, she felt panicked. How could she hide this? Could she become a hermit? Never leave her house? She would have to keep Pel from knowing, too.

The thought of being snubbed and turned out was bad enough. But, letting that happen to her daughter? She couldn't allow it.

How much time would it take before Silla would be exposed? She had to find a way to protect herself completely from being seen.

The only way she could think of was to disappear. People would think she had gotten drunk, and drowned in the river, as Rinnen, Pel's father had. Let them think it's anything but what it is. Then, they won't know it might happen to her daughter.

Pel, she thought. My beautiful warrior daughter. How could I bear not to see her again? If I stayed, it would mean watching her life and career ruined. She'd grieve. But, it would be better than for her to lose everything, before she's had a chance to enjoy it.

Never to lie next to Bas'ta again. That might just kill me. If only I could take the risk to tell her, I could make her understand.

When she walked into her entryway, Silla touched the icon, quickly, afraid it would try to dissuade her. The stone didn't speak.

The swordswoman didn't light any lamps. In the kitchen pantry, she found some green uniform pants and tunic. Starch made the clothes feel stiff, against her strangely chilled skin. She put her old clothes in the stove, and burned them, crinkling her nose at the smell.

A woodwoman's kerchief hid her red-brown hair. Silla's experience with Kyr had taught her how little attention the swordpeople paid to anyone in this uniform. And anyway, she was a woodwoman, now.

The new slave threw some dried meat and bread in one of the woodsmen's yellow duffel bags, and filled a water bottle. The kitchen could spare her a knife. She didn't have time to even look at the swords in the training hall, the weapons she had tried to make music with. It was disorienting to leave all that paraphernalia behind, and it was a relief.

Rain rattled the windows. Silla went to her desk, and took out a piece of paper. She wrote a pass for a woodwoman named Styyf to leave the town gates at ten o'clock, and hunt for tyzl root. Silla signed her own name. Her rain cloak caught her eye. No, that wouldn't fit her disguise. She looked around the slave's quarters for one of their slick rain garments. They'd also find a pair of boots missing in the morning. She did not think they would connect them to her.

Almost everyone in the city was at the feast in the great hall. Silla imagined the candlelight, trays of food and wine, boisterous laughter. She knew Pel would still be surrounded. Bas'ta would soon be playing her leenio, and Fryn and Kyr would be dancing. Her partner would start to look around nervously for her. How long would it take Bas'ta to figure out something was wrong? Tonight, Silla had to stay ahead of that quick mind she knew and loved.

She stroked the foot of rock icon in her entryway, and thought about the many years she had been making this gesture. "Give me luck. I'm going to miss you. And everyone here. Please protect them."

Silla walked out into the street, battling to control the tears that welled up in her throat. She had better complete her escape, while she could. The newly created character, Styyf, walked as fast as she could without drawing attention to herself.

Branches whipped in the wind. The barrel-shaped guard at the South Gate huddled into his uniform jacket, against the cooling storm. She handed her pass to him

He unfolded it, read it slowly, and asked, "Why go looking for tyzl root in the rain on a feast night?"

Silla bowed her head. "They need it in the great hall kitchen. This shouldn't take long."

The guard opened the gate. Silla hoped he would forget her, once she was gone. When they discovered her missing, who would connect her with the cook who never came back from herb gathering?

A great wind rose up. The plants that grew on town's wall shivered. Silla shrank back into its protection, involuntarily, so close to it her hands touched the muddy bricks.

"Run along, now," the guard said, pushing her through the gate, abruptly.

The wind must have sucked the gate closed, because Silla heard it slam behind her. The sound of the bolt turning was almost buried by the rising moan. The rush of air, outside the town, was wild and cold. Silla appreciated how well lined her slicker was, but wished she had brought her gloves.

All the light of the city was closed behind the walls, now. Silla had never seen such a black night. Her first steps into it were tentative. She remembered how Kyr had said, "Woodpeople are not afraid of the woods." She took a deep breath, and hoped that was true. Silla could make out trees across the clearing. They looked dense and threatening.

With her hands jammed into the slave's sturdy pants Silla leaned into the buffets. Wet air slashed her face. She made slow progress. The air blustered. She crossed the rain-dashed clearing. The gate was closed. The guard wasn't looking after her. Once she entered the stand, she was sure she'd be invisible.

Rain began to dash from the sky. Silla wished someone would come along, and call her back. She wanted to be in front of the fireplace, in the feast hall, watching Bas'ta's fingers and mouth move along her leenio. Why had she taken that sight for granted, even gotten bored with it?

The desire to protect her baby outweighed the temptation. Bas'ta loved Pel, too. Silla felt that she would have agreed with this plan, if she had felt safe enough to tell her. Feeling like her heart would break, the former swordswoman ran through the pelting rain. She slipped in between the first craggy tree trunks she came to.

Inside the woods, the night took on glow of its own. One tree had an underwater blue ambience. Another had that same quality with a red tinge. A rock gave out a soft yellow shine. The meaning of color was different there. Silla navigated by this dark light, without understanding what it was. She walked deeper into the woods, feeling strangely safe. The sound of rain beating on the treetops sounded far away.

The trunks of these trees were thinner than the likki trees. The leaves were needle-shaped and closely-packed.

Before this, Silla had only looked at the forest from the outside, and with trepidation. She wouldn't have expected the looming branches to protect a space from the storm. The forest held back the flood of rain. The former swordswoman pulled the

hood of her slicker down. The wind was just a distant rattling, here. Her hand was drawn to a bush that was glowing with a light golden light. Its lush branches were dry.

So much had changed in that day, that the once daunting forest was now a better shelter than her home. She noticed a low silver glimmer, in the piles of leaves under her feet. Silla sank down onto the soft ground. The tree trunk she leaned against had a low glow.

Silla's combat face relaxed a little. Her lower lip was numb. A hot tear slid down her cheek. She hardened her visage again, and then realized there was no point in that. No one was watching. A sob spurted out. Wind whispered from a distance. The city was too far away for anyone to hear her. She let her chest collapse into wracking weeping that seemed to go on and on.

She had lost everything: Pel, Bas'ta, her place in the community, her trust in her body, and her sense of herself. The night was cold and lonely, and she couldn't stop crying.

Silla wept until she was exhausted, and then fell asleep, on the ground. She dreamed the night was bright with colors. When she woke, a little while later, she remembered her dream was true. The storm was still raging. It was still night. The colors of the forest lit up even more. She rubbed her eyes and opened them again. Every leaf in the woods was illuminated.

There were paths among the trees she hadn't seen, before. The forest no longer looked foreboding. She started along a narrow trail into the woods. The deeper she went, the brighter the colors were.

She thought of Kyr's shy smile, when he had tried to explain. No wonder the woodsmen weren't afraid of the forest. Her hidden blood might make her tremble and stumble. But it gave her vision through the dark, as well.

Silla took a long, slow breath. She touched the mossy boughs, as she walked. Everything she'd been taught had been reversed. The city was not security. The forest was not danger.

At first, she pushed herself to cover ground. Then, it occurred to her that there was no rush. The other reason the woodsmen don't fear the woods is because the swordsmen do. There was no danger of pursuit there.

She felt an ironic smile on her face when she realized there was nowhere she needed to go. Tears came behind her smile. Safety meant she had time to grieve. She almost wished she had some geographic goal to protect her from the vast emptiness she felt.

Silla walked, slowly. Each footstep made her miss the things she had left behind, more. After about an hour of this, she found a glade with a gentle waterfall and a pool. The ground on its banks was spongy with old leaves. She put her face on this forgiving pillow. Sleep wouldn't come. But, she made herself rest in her wakefulness.

Chapter 7

When the sky began to lighten, Silla didn't want it to dawn. Somehow she felt she could stand the longest night possible without her home and the people she loved. Morning meant the last night she had slept with them was too far away. Day meant going forward into life without them. She had to do it, but she couldn't stand to.

Closing her eyes didn't hold the daylight out. And her full bladder wouldn't let her stay lying there. She compromised with necessity, stood up, and walked to a spot in the trees.

Silla decided if she at least didn't eat in her homeless home, she'd still be a creature of Highwall City. She sat by the pool, and tried to remember every detail of the life she'd left behind. Rain pattered high in the overgrowth, but neither warm nor cold made its way through to her awareness.

She felt a pang, reliving her childhood delight in the smell of hot street food and sound of cartwheels on stone. How she had chafed at her foster parents' rule that she couldn't leave the block their house was on, alone. She would pace to either end of the street, and crane her neck to see as much as she could of what lay beyond.

Finally, one day in the hot dry season, her mother and father had rewarded her for a good year at school with permission to walk as far as she wanted, by herself. She woke up before dawn, and walked the whole town, in one proud day, claiming everything from the judges' mansions, on the hill, to the rowdy waterfront docks. Silla had walked to each gate that marked the extent of her territory. She hadn't wanted to go through them. But, she had wanted to know they were hers. How she had slept, that night, exhausted and filled with joy at having explored every inch of the city.

She remembered Rinnen, the laughing student she had loved, when she was a young woman. His big hands and strong chin. How they would walk home from the school, together, and lose themselves among the feather-leaved likki trees, making love. Her grief when they had told her he had gotten drunk and fallen in the river and drowned. The pain, beyond that pain, of giving birth to Pel, the echo of her heartbeat. How she had sworn to the helpless baby to protect her twice as much, since Rinnen was gone.

Images of her daughter growing flickered in front of her, including all her struggles with the child's stubbornness. She knew that willfulness had made Pel the young woman she had seen the day before, confident and beautiful, winning her decisive point from Tay. If she had known, when she had hugged her daughter, then, that it was the last time, she would have stopped to appreciate every sensation. How could she have let go, if she had known? Losing her was like another childbirth. The ripping separation of flesh from flesh. The blood commitment to do anything to keep her safe. Even leave her.

And her lover, too? That was the biggest loss. She remembered Bas'ta as she had first seen her, playing her leenio at the Two Trees. The fascination she felt had then. The way it still remained under the arguing and dailiness of their lives.

What passion could make Silla leave that passion behind? The ancient promise

that pounded in her heart. Protect the little one, even though she wasn't little any more. Her daughter was at the beginning of her brilliance. Weep as she might, she would not go back and endanger what her child had accomplished.

The air cooled, and the musty smell of the forest grew more subtle. The reflection of the trees Silla had been contemplating became a darker purple. She realized it was evening. The day had passed. The only hunger she had felt was for memories. And the touch she could never reach again. Silla imagined her mouth on her lover's neck and collarbone. Her heart started a slow collapse. She almost voiced Bas'ta's name, out loud. The sound of footsteps on the path stopped her.

She listened. They sounded like Bas'ta's. She thought, Gods, don't let me be hearing things.

The steps continued, convincingly real and coming closer. Silla asked herself, *Is someone trying to drive me crazy?*

A screen of branches hung next to her. Silla hid among these, and waited. The woman, who plunged through the brush, a moment later, had torn clothes and a wild tangle of blue black hair. Her face was flushed, and her eyes were swollen. But, it was Bas'ta.

Silla wanted to cry out in terror and delight, but she held her breath. She made herself stay hidden among the leaves.

Bas'ta slowed her steps when she came to the clearing. She looked at the mark on the bank where Silla's body had lain the night before. Silla half wanted her to recognize it.

The Belurian walked around Silla's sleeping place, carefully. She reached over and picked up an auburn hair.

Silla wanted to applaud. She didn't dare. If Bas'ta found her, and learned why she'd run, there would be no way of hiding the truth from Pel.

The leeniosit sat on the bank. Silla needed to outwait her. Bas'ta had always been the more stubborn one. Everything depended on Silla's ability to win this last contest.

The quiet between them went on for a long time. The night darkened. The moon rose, as far as a low branch, and hung there. The brook babbled. Bas'ta looked as if she was never going to move.

Silla was ready to wait longer than that. She'd starve in her hiding place, and if Bas'ta found her from the smell, she could take apart her bones, and never find out her secret.

Bas'ta started to sing a few sad notes. Silla's heart could never resist that liquid voice. She wanted to shout, "unfair." Bas'ta's song changed to "Shadows on the Hills," the one she had been singing when the two women first met.

The former swordwoman thought, *'too much, too much.'* But her longing for Bas'ta only made her more determined to protect her as well from the change that was happening to her.

Bas'ta stopped singing, and sat quietly, for a few more moments. Then, she said, "I know you're here. I'm not leaving."

Silla held her silence. Bas'ta added, "Weren't we supposed to be together for all our days? Not just when things were easy?"

Silla closed her eyes, and tried to close her ears. Bas'ta said, "I know why you're trying to protect us. I was there when you dropped those plates. I watched you sleep, and saw the triple pulse in your neck. I understand what you're doing. You don't have to do it by yourself, love."

"To tell you the truth," she continued, "I never liked that city much -- the way everyone tries to be ever more perfect. Did you think I was going to be happy there without you? I wanted you. It was always you. Half woodwoman, I don't care. Maybe that's what made you you. I want the woman who's hiding somewhere very near with her face dirty and her nose about to sniffle and her hands uncertain and her heart full of love."

"It's safe to trust me," Bas'ta said softly. "I'm never going back there. They think I wandered away stricken over you -- and that's true. Even if you never let me see you again, I'm not going to give Pel away."

Silla let her breath out, silently. She didn't want to be alone. Her old promise to stay with Bas'ta resonated in her whole body. Her hand was only inches from her lover's. Silla stretched out, and touched her partner.

Bas'ta's hold on Silla's hand was like a tree cat's. She drew her out of hiding swiftly. The leenioist threw herself against Silla's body, crying, "Don't ever do that again."

Silla sobbed, too. She stroked Bas'ta's leafy hair crooning, "No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. I won't."

Their lips found each other, tentative, like the first time. Their mouths stayed together to relive all their kisses since then: the urgent biting, young love kisses; the staying up all night talking kisses; the quick, secret kisses; the sassy kisses; the frustrated kisses; the heartstring-plucking kisses; the quiet good-night kisses, when the child was only lightly sleeping; the long tongue-searching kisses; the ceremonial kiss, when they had sworn their bond, and the kissing games that had followed; the tub soaking kisses; the laughing kisses; the diplomatic kisses that had ended spells of anger; the wrestling baby bibbet kisses; the sleepy kisses over breakfasts; the thousand absent minded kisses, at the end of the days when they took each other for granted; the slim blade straight to the soul kisses; the soft, comforting kisses; the hammering kisses; the sweaty, messed-up, dirty, hot and tired kisses; the dancing alone in the guttering candlelight kisses; the bright public kiss of victory they had shared the day before.

Silla had to touch every inch of Bas'ta's weathered skin before she was reassured that what she had lost and mourned had been returned to her. Then, she was able to take her time and caress and rock her lover slowly. She thought she had emptied herself of tears, during that long grief-filled day. But, she cried out and cried over and over again, through the night. Bas'ta's voice joined hers, until she couldn't tell them apart.

It seemed like months later that Silla whispered, "I'm so glad you found me."

And only then did it occur to her to ask, "But how did you do it?"

Bas'ta's hands stroked Silla's hair until it hung up on a tangle. Her low voice resonated in Silla's chest. "I grilled the gate guard for the clue. We're the only house in Highwall City that uses tyzl root."

Silla laughed a long luxurious laugh. "I guess I wanted you to find me. I left a trail that couldn't be missed."

"Not by me, honey. Not by me."

Silla settled her head on Bas'ta's comfortable shoulder. A few more tears squeezed out of her eyes, and ran down her cheeks. "What are we going to do now?"

"Sleep." Bas'ta said, folding her lover in her arms. "Sleep."

"I mean, where do we go from here?"

"I don't know," Bas'ta said. "It's going to be all right. We'll figure it out, in the morning."

Silla was one the edge of sleep, when Bas'ta asked, "How did you travel through the woods at night?"

"I could see in the dark. I must have inherited the vision with the melting. How did you track me?"

Bas'ta sounded as if she was slipping off, as she said. "I heard you keening for me."

Silla slept a warm, underwater sleep. She dreamed their bodies were strange instruments with melodies coming out of them. The music was so soothing, she slept even deeper.

When Silla woke, her heart was pounding. "*What have I done?*" she asked herself. "*I can't put Bas'ta through the pain ahead.*"

She thought of running, again, and got as far as easing up on one elbow, before Bas'ta whispered, "Don't you dare. Silla, you promised."

"Oh, love, I want to protect you from this. I'm afraid I'm going to change so much, I won't be the woman you chose to spend your life with. Is that fair to leave you sworn to a stranger?"

"It might be fun to have two of you. How do you know you aren't going to get better rather than worse?"

"You saw what happened to Gyrt. It's not just having a body that moves all the time. Her mind melted, too."

Bas'ta stroked Silla's back. Her voice was reassuring. "When we became partners, I swore by the thousand gods of Highwall City and the four of Beluria to stay with you. Did you think we weren't going to age and change, anyway? No one holds on to her abilities. All of our bodies melt, one way or another. My grandmother was no woodwoman, but she didn't know who she was in the end. Did my grandfather say, 'This

isn't the woman I swore myself to?' No, he took delight in reminding her of their love. And that's what I want to do with you."

Silla's heart crumpled in her chest. "This was so terrifying without you. Gods, I'm lucky you found me."

"Yes, you are. So, don't go running away from me, again."

"I won't." Silla put her hands on Bas'ta's face and gazed, insistently. "But, if there comes a time when this disease stops me from being able to be your partner, you think back to this time, and remember I wanted to protect you from that. If you ever think of leaving for your own good, don't wonder what I would want you to do. Remember I tried once to do it for you. I'm always going to want the best for you. If I can't keep myself from melting, I don't want to melt you with me. Is that clear?"

Bas'ta nodded, her big blueblack eyes filling with tears.

Silla wanted to cry, too, but she had to laugh a helpless laugh, instead. "I think we've been through the worst that could happen. Now, what's left to fear?"

"Nothing. There's nothing we can't face together."

Bas'ta nuzzled Silla's neck. Silla rediscovered Bas'ta's body, as they made love. Then, they ate the smoked meat and dried fruit her lover had brought, as hungrily as they had touched each other.

"Sh-h-h." Silla said. "I hear someone coming this way."

She still felt playful, as they both rolled into the hiding place, under the branches. The footsteps sounded familiar. She wasn't surprised when the two red-haired men, one short and one tall, arrived in the clearing.

Silla spoke Kyr's name at the same time Bas'ta spoke Fryn's. The woodmen wore warm season uniforms. The swordwoman pulled on the one she had taken, and realized it felt stifling. She rolled up the long sleeves.

The two women came out of their shelter. Silla almost expected the men not to recognize her, in her woodwoman's clothes and tear-streaked face. When she saw the warmth in Kyr's deep gray eyes, she knew it was for her. He touched her arm in a sympathetic way. She believed it, when he said, "I understand."

"You won't give us away?" She felt silly asking, but was reassured by his gentle head shake.

"We're never going back. We followed Bas'ta with her leenio, so the gate guards assumed we were with her. They'll think we got lost."

Silla felt shy with her newfound knowledge. "The woodman doesn't get lost in the woods."

"The swordman doesn't know that," Kyr answered.

That was when Silla noticed that Fryn still carried the leenio case on his back. Her heart opened in a deep place, when she realized what Bas'ta had left behind to seek her. And what Fryn had returned. He handed the case to the musician.

Bas'ta's biceps bulged with the weight. She thanked Fryn with damp eyes.

Silla asked, "If you were right behind Bas'ta, why did it take you so long to get here?"

"We were exercising discretion." Kyr put down the bag he carried over his shoulder. Silla recognized the shape of loaves of bread through the cloth.

Bas'ta pointed toward the food. "You're saving our lives. I was determined to stay in the woods. But I wasn't sure how we would eat."

"We brought cooking equipment, too. When the city food runs out," Fryn said. "We'll figure out together what to eat here. Our people used to be gatherers. The forest is different from the woods back home. But, we all learn the lore about how they foraged, there. That's how we survive the turning outs."

"You're going to stay with us?" Bas'ta asked.

"At least, until you know what you need to know," Kyr said.

Silla opened her arms to embrace the men. The old habit of formality stopped her. Then, she remembered there was no need for those roles, any more. She put her arms around them, and rested her face against Kyr's rough cheek and Fryn's shoulder. "We're so lucky."

Kyr said, "You told me the story before you understood it -- two men who didn't know they were brothers."

"You've known this all along?"

Kyr nodded. "Since before you were born."

"It's a good thing I didn't turn my protector in when I caught you with my sword."

"I think your heart recognized me." Kyr went on to explain, "Your mother was a swordwoman named Loul. She fell in love with her weapons man, Myt. She hid the pregnancy by going on retreat, and left you at the city gates. When your adoptive parents took you in, she watched you from afar. She died in the gogin epidemic. He caught it, taking care of her, and died, too."

Silla grieved for these parents she had never known. She felt relief, too, at hearing the details of something she had guessed at. Bas'ta's dark blue eyes were misting.

"Myt was also my father. I was seven years old, when you became my half-sister. After he died, they sold me to your family."

"Oh, Kyr!" Silla hugged him, harder than she had, before. When she let go, she looked into his eyes, and said, "I've been terrible to you!"

"You inherited the belief that you owned us. But, even without knowing who I was, you were starting to see we are human."

Silla put her face against her brother's, and looked at his lover. "I'm sorry I treated you both badly."

Fryn said, "Thank you."

Bas'ta said, "I apologize, too. I knew better. There is no excuse for letting myself accept the way things were in that city."

Fryn said, "Your eyes were so compassionate. And, you respected our art."

Silla said, "Tell me more about our father."

"Ahhh, he had strong, gentle hands."

"Like you," Silla said, holding Kyr's hand.

"And like you." Kyr smiled. "He trained me hard; and taught me to try to be as good at what he did as he was. His manner was reserved, but I knew he loved me. When he explained to me who you were, he told me he loved you, too, and that I should look after you."

"Since you inherited the melting from him, he must have had it in him, but gogin killed him, before it expressed itself. I try to remember whether I ever saw the triple pulse in his throat, but I wouldn't have known what it meant, at that time. I was only eleven, when he died."

"That must have been hard," Silla said. Kyr nodded. The exswordwoman said, "I'm sorry."

The forest sounds babbled for a moment, while the two sat together. Then, Silla asked, "What can you tell me about my mother?"

"She was a striking looking woman, with warm eyes. She liked to walk, when something was on her mind, the same way you do. Even though my father was her slave, she would tell me stories to help me sleep, when I was little."

"I wish I could hear those stories."

"I'll try to remember them."

Silla looked at her brother, recognizing their similarity. "I'm so glad I understand who you are to me, now. I think I felt it, before."

Kyr said, "You both need rest. We'll camp on the other side of this knoll."

Fryn added, "Tomorrow, your woods lessons begin. You have a lot to learn."

Silla took off her sodden clothes. She wrapped her arms around Bas'ta, and lay down. They didn't need a blanket, because the night had a cozy warmth. Kyr was right; Silla was tired from all the changes and tears. She closed her eyes, and slept the longest deepest sleep of her life. In her dream, she saw her parents, an old time swordwoman and her slave. Her mother put her mouth close to her head, and words Silla couldn't hear burred through the luminescent forest.

The smell of smoke and something unusual cooking woke her. She opened her eyes to a symphony of pink-leaved trees. Their trunks were thick, and their branches hung lushly, a short distance higher than her standing height.

Silla saw Bas'ta and Fryn, leaning over a fire, talking. After the way they had eaten, the night before, Silla had never expected to be hungry again. But her stomach

was alert again, and curious about the pot, hanging over the fire.

She saw that someone had left out clean woodwoman's tunics and pants for her. Kyr and Fryn must have brought them. Silla pulled the clothes on, and noticed that it was warm enough to go sleeveless. The woods must be insulating them from the cold rains she knew would be dashing the city, not far from them.

Her heart cheered at the confident way Bas'ta looked at the plants the tall, hatchet-faced man was showing her. It was true what Bas'ta had said about herself, the day before. She had never cared about the politics of the city. Her big honest laugh was not a good match for the shifting alliances of academy society. Bas'ta and Fryn seemed easy together in a way that made the musician's spontaneous heart seem to shine through. Maybe the woods would be good for her partner.

For that matter, Silla noticed that her own body felt more relaxed than it had in many years, notwithstanding her stiffness from sleeping on the ground. Grateful tears slipped out of her eyes. She turned her head away to hide them. Then she thought, 'why should I?'

She stood up and walked to Bas'ta and put her arms around her from behind, nestling against her back. Bas'ta touched Silla's face and found the tears there. She turned around, looking alarmed. But Silla smiled through them and said, "I'm strangely happy to be here."

Bas'ta dimpled agreement. Silla intertwined her fingers with Bas'ta's, and focused on Fryn's explanation of breakfast.

"These shoots sound like the ones our people called fyb plants back in Plyny. This one tastes bitter, like those did, when you harvest them. But, the ones in our home mellow as they ripen and are quite palatable boiled. Let's hope the same is true of these. The fyb roots had quite a range and a long season. They used to dry them so they would last."

Fryn continued, "Back in our country, they knew of nuts they would grind to sweeten their gruel."

Silla noticed some nuts hanging under the leaves of the tree nearest her. They were round and ruddy colored. She twisted off as many as she could carry, and took them to Fryn. "Shall we try these?"

Fryn smiled at her. "Yes."

He pounded them between two rocks, until they were granular, then, tasted them. He nodded, and offered some to Silla and Bas'ta. Silla found the powder tasted pleasant. Fryn added it to the pot.

Bas'ta stirred the pot. Fryn tasted it. As he nodded, his bead necklace rustled. Bas'ta dished up bowls of the gruel. Silla blew across the surface of the one Bas'ta handed to her. The first bite was almost too hot, but the flavor was so rich she felt reassured about life in the woods.

Bas'ta's appreciative groans attracted Kyr, who had been in the woods. He put one arm around Fryn before tasting a spoonful. He swallowed and said, "We are going to

do just fine here."

Silla looked at Kyr, and said the words, softly, "My brother."

That evening, they tried to cook seeds Fryn had found in a big flower, in the woods. The taste was bitter, so the four decided it was not a successful experiment. Bas'ta scattered the leftovers on the ground, at the edge of the clearing. Just as the light turned dusk, two goldbirds came and ate the food.

Silla put her arms around her partner's waist. In a delighted voice, the musician said, "I used to feed birds, when I was a little girl in Beluria. I stopped doing it at our house for fear the bibbet would get them."

At times, in the fortnights that followed, Silla would feel uncertainty in her step from a tremor rippling through her, or notice her arm flung out in a movement she hadn't intended. She would sigh, and thank the gods that she wasn't back in Highwall City trying to handle a sword with her subtly failing body. Her dreams were about secrets, hidden among tangled roots. In them, her father sometimes came and sat beside her.

Most of the time, she was wrapped up in the pleasures and challenges of learning to live in the woods. Fryn and Kyr told them volumes they had learned from their people. The four tried out foods they found, and named them by the first places they had found them, so the nuts Silla had discovered, the first day, became home camp nuts.

Sharing the process with Bas'ta felt like a second childhood together. The cold rains season seemed warm under the trees. Each evening, Bas'ta threw some of the big flower seeds out for the goldbirds, grinning widely.

Silla missed Pel so much she ached. She realized she would have lost her, anyway. If she had stayed in the city, she would have had to watch her daughter being taken into her old rival's sphere. The ex assistant to the master remembered the gestures of territoriality Dranna used with her star students. The master would have found every opportunity to best her assistant again as she annexed her successor into her own family.

She would wonder, from time to time, how Pel was doing, and hope she was satisfied with her accomplishment. Silla didn't miss the struggles she had had with her strong-minded daughter, or the arguments she and Bas'ta had had about her. She felt much closer to her lover away from her worries about her daughter and the school.

The skills that were required to live in the woods were so different from the ones she used in the city that Silla felt her past life fading away. The newness of life among trees and bushes sharpened her senses. She appreciated the sound of the wind through the leaves, and the touch of the dappled sunlight.

Kyr had found a hot springs, in a rock basin that was wide enough for them to bathe in. Each evening, the men would bathe there, first. Silla liked to hear her brother and his partner's voices murmuring together.

Then, the men would climb out, and the women would take over the bath. Silla would lean against Bas'ta's body in the medicinal-smelling steam. The multicolored trees seemed to glow in the night. The two would talk over the day's lessons, and laugh at how

far away the city felt. Then, they would curl up in their bower. Silla would drift into dreams that tangled brave children and the soft brush of branches on her face.

As a test, Fryn and Kyr withdrew, so the two women had to live a fortnight in the forest, without their help. At the end of the fortnight, they celebrated with a feast of the foods the men had taught them to cook.

The adventure of looking through the dense trees for home camp shoots lent excitement to the festivities. Silla was pleased with her success, finding bushes dotted with south meadow berries. These were days of mossy copses lush with east cave mushrooms. The rains the women heard beating on the trees must have been cold, as was usual in this season. But the forest sheltered and warmed the time.

The fortnight of surviving on their own ended. Bas'ta played a new composition on her leenio that spoke to Silla of the safe place they had found in the storm. The exswordwoman enjoyed watching her lover's hands beating time on the body and plucking the strings. The musician's eyes were intent over her mouth on the mouthpiece.

Fryn and Kyr improvised a dance to go with the tune. Silla smiled at the movements that found ways to circle battles into harmony. The men's art made much more sense to her here, with the flow of growing colors around them. She saw how they integrated the curve of the leaves and the depth of the pool into it.

Bas'ta's music seemed to be reaching into the heart of the woods, too. The interplay between her tune and the dance resonated into a place that sounded new to Silla. She thought it was too bad Bas'ta's fans back in the city wouldn't be able to see this. But, she didn't think her lover could have taken these risks, if she hadn't left Highwall City behind with finality.

"And what growing edge will I find here?" the woman who watched wondered, as she stood by the fire. She stirred the gin bird and tyzl root stew. The fragrance had become delicious in this new setting. Bas'ta's song and the men's dance made Silla sigh. The sun had set, and the forest was orange and green. The luminescence of the branches made her feel at home.

But, the meal they had cooked raised a disquieting question for her. Would their success mean they didn't need Fryn and Kyr any more? Would her brother and his partner want to be free of the women, after this? She had been hearing the pattering of the rain on the treetops slowing. That meant the season of ice was beginning. She had no idea how to protect herself from it in the woods.

She couldn't resist the hot ragout when it was cooked. Or the berry tea and the buttery tasting fyb root bread. The four laughed and ate into the night.

Silla said, "Once there were four burrowing creatures, who dug further away from their city than anyone they had ever heard about. They found a trove of gems, there. The four had traveled so far, by that time, that they couldn't find their way back to the city. This made them curl up with sadness, at first. Then, they realized the beauty of the journey they had taken was more valuable than the gems would be, if they could take them home."

Bas'ta played her leenio, its tunes growing wilder, as the night wore on. Fryn and Kyr broke into dance steps that reminded Silla of birds flying high together.

After the dance, Silla asked, "If the woodmen aren't afraid of the woods, why didn't you pretend to tremble, back in the city, and rescue yourselves by getting turned out?"

Fryn said, "We can't do that."

Bas'ta asked, "Do you mean you are too honest?"

"No, we have the same mix of honest and dishonest people among us as you do. The melting is an inborn condition. So is not melting. Those of us who don't melt can't pretend to do it any more than those who melt can pretend not to."

Silla wasn't sure she understood this, but it made a kind of sense to her. She had another question, "Why can I see in the dark in the forest, but not in the city?"

Fryn said, "The same thing is true for us. We don't know why. There must something in the city that suppresses our night sight. Maybe the high walls. We learn about it in the tradition that is passed down from those who had lived outside. But, it is hard to believe, before you experience it."

There was a moment of quiet, laced with the sounds of rain high up on the treetops, and the fire crackling. Silla was so happy to have these companions. How would she have negotiated this new world, and new understanding of herself without them?

Kyr sopped up the last of the mushroom sauce with a piece of bread, and ate it. He looked at Silla and sighed. "There's one more thing I want to teach you. I told you about the art of tykyd, our nonviolent fighting system. We all practice it, but our melters use it, in particular. It works well with the unpredictability of their bodies. It will take intense study, but I want to teach it to you."

Silla shook her head. "I'm through with fighting. Out here, we can hide from any trouble. I'm not going back to the city."

Kyr's gray eyes were sad. "I'm afraid you are going to have to go back, one more time."

Silla put her hand in front of her, and watched it until a slight tremor came. "And let people see this?"

"It's the only way."

"The only way to do what?"

"To break Pel's engagement."

"Break Pel's engagement? We've done everything we could to protect it."

Kyr put a calming hand on Silla's arm. "That was because you didn't know what I had seen, that last night in the city. She has the triple-pulse in her throat."

"What?" Silla's ears refused to hear. She tried to shut her mind down, so the meaning couldn't get in.

"Pel is going to have the melting, too."

"Oh, gods. I've undone her with my blood."

Bas'ta wrapped her arms around Silla and rocked her while she wept. "You've surrounded her with love."

"Better not to have had her," Silla moaned, "than to mark her with this terrible legacy."

Silla's night vision darkened, and the forest was as frightening as it had been when she first came to it. She spoke in a small voice. "When Pel was a baby, I used to have nightmares that someone had poisoned her. Now I find out I had already poisoned her, before she even tasted my milk. I am the monster that could destroy a child, before she has any strength."

"Sh-sh-ush," Bas'ta crooned. "You gave her your sassy courage, too. She'll come through this like you are."

"I'm not coming through this, love. It's too much to ask. Just let me lie here, and die. Everyone would be better off, if I were gone."

Kyr said, "What I'm trying to tell you is she needs you to stay alive. Pull yourself together and free her."

"Why?"

"Because, if the marriage goes through, and Dranna gets those fighting grandchildren she's been dreaming of, she's going to be twice as vindictive, when she finds out Pel is a melter."

Silla looked at Kyr, whose hand rested on Fryn's. She felt a cold recognition that he was right.

Bas'ta asked, "Couldn't we just explain the situation to Dranna?"

"She's vicious with the melters in her household," Fryn said.

Silla said, "To release Pel, she'd have to admit she made a mistake. In two hundred and ten seasons, I've never seen her do that. When she finds out, she'll feel robbed. And she'll take it out on my baby."

"Unless you fight her to break the engagement," Bas'ta said. "You can win, if you let Kyr teach you."

"No-o-o-o," Silla wailed. "I couldn't even beat Dranna in my prime."

Her foot flung out of its own accord. She pointed at it. "How can I do it, now?"

Kyr said, "You'll have skills Dranna knows nothing about. And you'll have the advantage of surprise on your side."

Bas'ta said, "You'll be tougher than ever, because you're fighting for Pel's life. Dranna's wrong about you not having a killer instinct -- at least when it comes to Pel."

Silla swallowed and wondered if she could possibly do such a thing. She shook her head.

Kyr asked, "Could you change your pain into anger?"

"What?"

"Is it really the disease you fear? Or the way people in Highwall City treat the melters?"

As Silla puzzled over this, Fryn ran his hand through Kyr's red curls. Silla finally said, "Both."

"You can't change the fact that you have it. But you can confront Dranna, and make her release Pel."

For a brief moment, Silla imagined the battle Kyr was suggesting. That only made her feel more desperate. "I can't do it."

Silla sobbed. She curled up in a ball, and closed her eyes tight. Her heart felt like it was shattering, slowly, into thousands of pieces. The pieces sank to the bottom of a deep, deep lake. Every fragment of will she had was buried, under a mile of mud, there. Some small ashes of caring lit up, like small embers, when she felt Bas'ta caress her back. She let them go out, one at a time, until she was too far away to be reached.

The season of ice must have begun, back in the city. Silla knew the forest was still warm. But, the idea of the weather she was accustomed to wrapped chilling fingers around her heart.

In spite of drifting in what felt like eons of muck, Silla only wished she could be farther away and colder. She had hated everything that had threatened her child. Now, she hated herself with that same fury. The best gift she could give Pel was to let herself starve, and never go near her again. She tried to make herself stop breathing, but her blasted breath kept coming back, a thin, taunting stream. She couldn't even defeat herself. What made Kyr think she could fight anyone else? Exhausted by the pain and nausea, she fell asleep.

Demenseday dawns, with glaring brightness. Everyone is wearing wedding clothes. Dranna approaches, with her arm slung casually around Pel's shoulder. Dranna's elbow circles Pel's neck, lightly, and starts to close. Silla feels the leather hilt in her hand. This is not blind anger. She is bathed in clarity. This is what she must do to protect that throat. Silla's lunge is faster than a thought and true. Dranna's belly is unresisting when the live blade pushes through it. The master falls away. Pel stands free with a face full of childlike confusion. Then, she smiles, lightly.

Silla woke, feeling the same soft smile, on her face. Bas'ta was touching Silla's cheek, and looking at her with compassion. The swordwoman felt her own eyes fill with tears of relief.

"I can do it," she said. "I can stop her."

Bas'ta wrapped Silla in her arms, and sighed a cavernous sigh. "You are going to have to. You're the only one who can."

Silla buried her head against Bas'ta's neck. She felt her brother's gentle hands on her shoulder. His voice was quiet beside her ear. "I know it's hard. You can do it."

Silla said, "I'm going to need so much help."

Kyr said, "Remember how much I learned from watching you?"

Silla nodded, her mood only slightly leavened. The Highwall City forms seemed so far away and useless.

"I believe I can show you more."

"That's the only way it's possible."

"Begin." Kyr said, and Silla felt a fresh wave of hopelessness drown her, because she barely had enough energy to keep her eyes open. "Begin with rest."

Silla smiled agreement, and let her self slip into a sleep, as soothing as the warm night. The dreams that winked through it were blurred fish bellies.

She woke to the sound of Bas'ta's leenio strings playing an old Highwall City ballad of a swordsman beset by a dozen enemies. A tear crept down Silla's cheek. She opened her eyes to see Fryn sitting beside her, with his arms wrapped around his long legs. He handed her a bowl of fyb root meal. The food warmed her mood a little.

Kyr's first words, when she was on her feet, chilled her again. "You'll have to forget everything you learned in Highwall City."

"Forget a whole life's work?"

"You were going to do that anyway. You've already started."

Silla had to agree that her past now seemed far away.

"They taught you to work hard, and to fear your weaknesses. In tykyd, we value effortlessness, and embrace our vulnerabilities. The swordsmen believe they can exert control over an exchange. In tykyd, we know control is an illusion."

"I'm sorry, Kyr, but I find it hard to believe that I'm going to get Pel out of Dranna's grasp by giving up control. I already know I have no control."

"You've let Dranna convince you that she has control. I think we can find ways to demonstrate her illusion to her."

"I really appreciate your wanting to help. But we didn't even bring swords with us. How will we practice?"

"In your system, you do everything to keep your hands on your swords. When you are disarmed, the match is over."

"And in yours?"

"Ours," Kyr said, as he pulled the broken sword handle he always carried with him from his pocket, "begins with losing your sword, and goes from there."

Tears welled up in Silla's eyes. "This is too hard."

Kyr handed her a cloth to wipe them with. "Not, if you take one little step at a time. Just like when you started the sword."

"I was seven years old, then."

"Do you have something better to do than begin again?"

Silla looked at the simple home the four of them had made in the woods. She was amazed at how much she had found, after she had lost everything. Maybe Kyr was right. Maybe there was a whole other way. What alternative was there?

She looked at his encouraging face, and said, "I'll try."

"The first element is to focus your attention without effort. Make yourself comfortable, and close your eyes. Observe your breath, coming into and out of your nose."

Silla found the trail of air, and felt it flowing through her nostrils. Her body seemed to lighten, a little, as she did this.

Kyr said, "Breathe more deeply, and notice the movement of your chest."

Silla suppressed an irreverent smile, and let her mind rest on the expansion and deflation of her chest.

Kyr said, "Breathe into your belly, and let yourself relax into new depths with each breath."

She followed his suggestion. The birdsong and rustle of the forest brightened.

"Breathe as if you could inflate your body all the way to your feet," he said.

A layer at a time, the armor of fear she always wore began to fall away. As it did, a quiet laugh began to bubble up. This was surely the strangest martial arts lesson she had ever had.

When Kyr touched her hand to end the period of silence, Silla said, "Are you sure this is going to help me in my struggle with Dranna?"

"The whole idea is not to struggle." Kyr smiled. "Trust me, it will help."

Silla knew it was the bitter cold season in Highwall City. With the insulation of the trees, those fortnights were toasty. The discrepancy between what Silla was used to, and what was happening in the woods unsettled her. But, the comfort of the season, there, was irresistible.

All through that time of letting go of the idea of ice, the only study Kyr gave Silla was daily breath-listening practice. In these meditations, she found she could sink into an ocean of peace. He suggested she try to keep that quiet core throughout the day.

At first, Silla's dreams were full of battles she couldn't win. And she woke, those nights, in a sweat, afraid for herself and Pel. But, that period gave way to another one, where she dreamed more of the time of fights slowed down to the speed of her meditative breath, conflicts she faced evenly, and won.

One day, Silla's hand twitched, as she was trying to string a net from a tree to dry fyb roots. She said, "Damn these fingers."

Kyr looked quizzical. "Why curse them?"

"I can't make them do anything."

"What if you accept them, instead of judging them?"

"I hate them."

"It's not their fault they're melting. They're doing the best they can. They deserve love. And so do you."

Tears filled Silla's eyes. "Why do I have to have it?"

Kyr took her hand in his. The woodbead bracelets he wore were silent. "Why are some flowers purple and some white?"

"There is no reason for that," she said.

Kyr nodded. "There is no reason for this, either. Wishing keeps you from dealing with what it is. Your hands are still a great gift. What if you fill them with your breath?"

Silla wasn't sure what this meant, but she tried directing the stream of her breath to her hands. They heated up. She felt calmer. Her hands still trembled. She allowed for that, and gave them time. The net seemed to dance into place.

Kyr said, "This is the first and most important lesson: let it be effortless."

"It feels great when I can remember that. But the old way is so ingrained, I find myself trying to not try."

"That's why we need the training."

As they ate dinner, Silla heard a low whistling, outside their woods. She knew the season of the warm winds had come, back in the city. The weather under the low, sheltering trees stayed the same as it had been.

She said, "Once there were two treebirds, who left the city they knew to wander the world. They weren't young, but they learned the new ways. The home they came to was more comforting than they would have expected. There were two river birds who came with them, and helped them find things that would have been hidden to them. The two treebirds mar – what's that word?"

The faces of her companions watched her. Bas'ta said, "I'm not sure, honey."

Silla hesitated for a long time. 'Mar – mar – mar - ,' she couldn't think of the word. "The two women were amazed at the things their companions revealed. Then, one of the birds started to forget words she had always known, and that made her shiver with grief."

She sat, feeling disconsolate. "This isn't like me. Words always came so easy."

Bas'ta said, "You'll find other words, like you did, just now."

"I'm going to end up like Gyrt, some day, with no words left."

Fryn said, "Remember that when the melting comes to a child it progresses much faster. The older you are, when it arrives, the slower it goes. Yours is a favorable age."

"We don't know what is going to happen," Bas'ta said.

"That's right. Don't assume you do," Kyr said.

Silla tried to be reassured by these words, and appreciate how untroubled the present moment was. She knew it helped to breathe deeply, and watch the glitter of the leaves.

Sleeping was game the swordwoman found hard to catch, that night. The memory of Gyrt plagued her. Bas'ta's arms around her helped, some. She woke with an impatience bred of her uncertainty about the future.

After they cleaned up the breakfast things, she watched Bast'a and Fryn settle into their daily routine. Her partner pounded fyb shoots into a leather she could dry. Fryn had found the seeds they made into the beads on their jewelry. He calmly carved patterns into them with a small knife, and strung them into bracelets and necklaces.

That morning, Silla almost fell asleep during her meditation practice. Then, she asked Kyr, "How long do I do just this?"

Kyr said, "You have a lot to unlearn. How often do you have visions of yourself losing your battle with Dranna?"

"I'm not sure."

"Watch yourself tomorrow, and notice."

When she woke in the morning, she knew she had been dreaming her usual dreams of defeat. In the ridge her spoon created in the pot of porridge, she saw shadows of the fight she feared. There were ghosts of it around the nuts she picked from the bushes. When she rested in the afternoon, looking up at the clouds, they took the form of the dreaded battle.

At the end of the day, she said to Kyr, "Those damn visitations are almost constant."

"What if we gently change that?"

"Try to envision victory?"

"Wrestling reality won't help. Can you grow a vision of a battle where you don't know what's going to happen?"

"Don't know?"

"Right," said Kyr. "Because the fact is that you don't."

The next day, as Silla roasted nuts, she saw the fateful image form in the smoke several times. Each time, she closed her eyes and followed her breath for a long time. When she opened them again, all she saw before her was smoke.

The day after that, she was spreading fyb shoot leather onto a net to dry. Visions of losing her battle with Dranna insinuated themselves into the sheets in her hands. At first, she tried to mentally muscle through it. That only made the vision more vivid. She went back to tracing the path of her breath through her body. Then, she found the scene was more malleable. She placed herself in it as she was growing to be, calm and aware of her uncertainty.

On the third day, Kyr showed Silla how to carve a branch into a sword. Her vision of defeat kept rising from the grain of the wood. When she closed her eyes and returned to her breath, she could re-form it. At first, she succeeded at changing the nightmare. Then, it came back, more insistently, not as an image she could escape behind her eyelids, but as a sensation of fighting and losing that was deep in her muscles.

"Tell me what it feels like," Kyr asked.

"She has her hand across my throat. I can't fight her off."

"What if you breathe?"

Silla doubted that could help. But, she tried it anyway. Closing her eyes, she managed a thin stream around the feeling of constriction. Then, a deeper breath. Then, one that expanded the muscles of her throat and chest until her body threw the sword off and she was free.

When she looked at her work again, she saw only a half carved piece of wood. She cleared her mind, with each breath, as she cut. Silla held the vision off, while she finished the task. Even when she put the sword aside and looked at the setting sun, it didn't return.

She looked at Kyr, and said, "It's gone, for now."

He smiled softly. "I knew you could do it."

"We never know how any given moment is going to turn out, do we?"

"Not even the most fateful-feeling one."

"And trying to make it into something is the surest way to miss its possibilities. I'd rather be enjoying that shining curve of the new moon."

He looked into the dark blue horizon, and nodded.

Silla woke, the next morning, with her arms wrapped around Bas'ta. She smiled so widely, she was sure Bas'ta could feel it on her shoulder blade. She crowed, "No nightmare! All I dreamed was dancing branches."

Bas'ta turned and put her arms around Silla. "No nightmare?"

"It's gone."

Bas'ta kissed her forehead and cheeks. "You are really doing powerful work. I'm proud of you."

Silla kissed her and whispered, "I'm so grateful you're here."

During the breathing practice she shared with Kyr, Silla listened to the babbling of the brook. She caught herself wondering what was next. The exswordwoman took another deep breath, and released it. Silla thought, "I don't know," and laughed at the sense of possibility in that not-knowing.

Kyr handed her the sword she had carved, the day before, and directed her to make a series of diagonal cuts, as effortlessly as possible. She applied everything she had

learned about breathing and relaxed movement.

The woodman said, "Good."

He pointed to a tight place in her right shoulder and asked, "What is happening here?"

"I guess it is fear."

"Fear of what?"

"Falling apart."

"Use your left hand," he directed.

"That's my weak side."

"It's the side that knows how to be powerless. Pay attention to what it has to teach you."

Silla switched to her left hand, and made cuts that felt like slicing through fyb meal. Her face filled with tears. "I've got to protect it."

She started to switch the sword back to her right hand. Kyr said, "No, stay in that vulnerable place. That's what we need. It's an illusion to think you can avoid weakness. Let that go, and use the crumbling arm."

Silla let her left hand take over, but the movement it made felt as unfamiliar as a child's first steps.

"That's what we're after," said Kyr, "Uncontrolled imperfect movement. Stay with that feeling as long as you can."

As she persisted, Silla heard many seasons of Dranna's voice saying, "Cover your left. It's falling apart." She cried at the frustration of not being able to respond to that urging.

But now there was Kyr's voice, saying, "Let it fall apart."

So, she made the collapsing cuts, and she wept, like a river.

"That's good," Kyr said. "Keep letting go of control."

Silla worked her left arm, until she was exhausted. When they finally took a break, she was stiff, but elated. "There's a whole side of my body I've been neglecting."

"Exactly," he said. "In the academy, they believe they can hold onto power by tightening their muscles. In our system, we relax our muscles to let the power we call tykyd flow through us. Because your left side is less expert in that training, it will be more open to this one. It has less ability to get in its own way."

That evening, over dinner, Silla recounted her lessons to Bas'ta. "Working from my left will startle Dranna plenty, since she's the one who beat the opposite rule into me."

Bas'ta said, "I don't think I've seen your eyes shine this much since we were young and first in love. You are going deep, aren't you?"

Silla nodded. Kyr put his arms around Fryn and grinned. "It's only the

beginning."

The next morning, Silla put her head on Bas'ta's warm shoulder and said, "I dreamed I could see my breath cycling through my body, in a loop of white fire, and the fire flowed down through my legs and into the ground. And there was an ocean of fire under the earth, and it fed back into my breath and my body in an endless circle. I can still feel it, there. I think it's what Kyr calls tykyd."

Bas'ta smiled, "That's a good dream. I dreamed you wanted to kiss me for hours."

"Hmmm," Silla said, kissing Bas'ta's fruit sweet mouth, "That was a good dream, too."

In the fortnights that followed, Kyr showed Silla the essentials of tykyd, in a playful manner. Where the sword art was angular, tykyd was circular. Where sword was aggressive, tykyd was embracing. Where sword was driven by ritual, tykyd was about discovering the surprising possibilities in a moment. Where sword tried to dispatch the enemy, tykyd took care of him. Tykyd was empty-handed and ambidextrous, and had a strong element of clowning in it.

Kyr would take the sword and repeatedly launch an attack Dranna might use in the contest. He and Silla would create as many possible responses to it as they could, the more preposterous the better. Or Silla would start with the sword and Kyr would disarm her. Then they would push beyond the traditional end of the contest, and find out what could happen if she didn't give up but kept engaging. At the end of each day, Silla felt energized instead of being exhausted as she would be at the end of a day of sword.

Silla would be interrupted, once or twice a day, by the unpredictable trembling or twitches of the melting. Every time it happened, she would have an aftershock of fear. If Kyr or Fryn or Bas'ta was there, they would remind Silla to breathe through the dark spell. If she was by herself, she would talk herself through it. Every morning, the dream of breathing fire would be stronger, and Silla would be fresh for the demands and joys of another day's training.

One day, Silla had a sore throat. Kyr said, "It is good to do tykyd, when you are feeling sick. You can slow it down. It will help you heal. If you are too tired or sick to move, there is an internal version you can do, while sitting or lying still."

Silla stood up and did her usual training, quietly. Her throat felt soothed, afterward.

Kyr told her, "You can do tykyd safely in any weather, except a thunderstorm. The practice draws lightning if there's any in the area. It doesn't usually storm on Demenseday."

Silla sat beside her brother, at the end of that day, swallowing with more ease than she had, that morning. Kyr asked, "What does tykyd feel like to you?"

Silla said, "When I'm really attuned to it, I feel it flowing through my body. It heats up my hands and feet."

Kyr said, "The next step is to pour that warmth into your opponent. Maybe you

can show Dranna what you've found here."

In the training sessions that followed, Silla played with expanding the stream of fire and directing it into Kyr's body, when they were wrapped in one of the complex forms. She also felt the tykyd flowing through him into her, like a peaceful stream. As they practiced, their work together seemed to form pools where the tykyd built up, and stayed with her through the day.

Silla knew the hot dry, cold rain and warm rain seasons had come and gone, though she couldn't feel them, under the trees. Demenseday was only two fortnight away. The pressure of knowing her battle was close undermined everything she had learned about effortless action and surrender. Worrying made the movements of the melting worse.

One morning, an unexpected jerk of her arm made Silla spill the porridge in the fire. She felt despair at the ruined breakfast, as if it augured ruin for all of her hopes. When she started to clean it up, Bas'ta tried to help, but Silla barked, "Don't crowd me!"

"You don't have to do it by yourself," Bas'ta said.

"I don't want help!" Silla elbowed her away.

Bas'ta's blueblack eyes flashed. She swallowed whatever she'd been about to say, and walked out of the clearing, with a stubborn set to her back.

Fryn said, "I'll start a new pot."

"Back off, damn it. I'm doing it!" Silla said.

"I'm tired, too!" Fryn said, throwing his hands up. He followed Bas'ta into the woods.

When Silla had cooked a new pot, Kyr joined her, silently. She was ready to crab at him, too, but he didn't give her any occasion. After they had eaten, she followed him to their meadow.

Kyr bowed to her, and handed her the sword. She made a pass and he took it away from her. She froze, unable to remember any of the reversals they had worked out. He went back to the most basic strike they had practiced a thousand times. She couldn't make her body do any of the turns they had devised. All she could seem to do was weep.

Kyr said, "You can breathe through this."

Silla took a deep breath, but that only made her sob harder. "I'm so afraid for Pel."

He spoke soothingly, "Of course you are. You've got the skills to set her free."

"I can't do it with this crumbling body."

"That's what the training is for," Kyr said. "This is what we've used for generations to deal with the melting."

"You don't know how hard it is."

"Yes," Kyr said with quiet intensity. "I do."

"You don't have this to deal with," Silla sulked.

Kyr took her hand and put it on his throat where she could feel the triple pulse. He repeated, "Yes, I do."

"No! Not you!" Silla was so stunned she couldn't believe it was Kyr's throat she was touching. Maybe her mind had gotten crossed up, and she had mistaken her own throat for his. They'd been training so intensely they sometimes got their hands tangled and she couldn't tell whose was whose. How could the body she'd come to feel so protected by be going through the same thing her body was?

Silla crumbled into his arms and shook with sobs. "No. Don't be my brother this way. Don't follow me there."

He was whispering in her ear, "I was already there. I've had it since before you knew me. I know it's scary. I'm sorry."

Through her cloud of numbness, Silla realized she had been seeing Kyr's hand or foot twitch and not wanting to believe it. She said, "I wish I could make it not be true."

She saw from the sad smile in his gray eyes that he was about to remind her of her lesson, so she added it herself, "It's a waste of precious time to wish things were otherwise, isn't it?"

He nodded. "I've needed the training, too. I haven't been doing this just for you."

Silla put her head on Kyr's shoulder and cried until she was exhausted. She sighed and said, "I don't want to lose you to this."

"I know."

"Poor Fryn," Silla said, "I had no idea."

"It helps him to have Bas'ta to talk to."

"Bas'ta knows?"

Kyr nodded. After they had sat in silence for a time, he said, "I'm grateful to the disease, though."

Silla asked, "How could you be?"

"It clears away resistance to that flow of the tykyd through us."

"That is a jewel in the mud pie, isn't it?"

"I'm grateful for how close we've become, because of it."

"I am grateful for that, too." Silla closed her eyes, and rested, as if after a long hike.

Fryn and Bas'ta came into the clearing, carrying a basket of mushrooms. Fryn put his long face against Kyr's. Bas'ta put her arms around them all.

Silla was too tired to do anything but curl up in a corner, and watch the others pull together dinner. The smell of the mushrooms stewing should have perked her up, but it couldn't get through her fog of grief. She ate a couple of bites, senselessly. And felt as if she were far away from the music Bas'ta played. The men did a slow dance, with Fryn's

lanky arms around Kyr's stout body. The way they moved together made Silla's heart feel like it was imploding.

When she and Bas'ta were finally in bed together, Bas'ta said, "I thought you knew. His movements have been getting bigger."

"I guess I didn't want to know. My poor brother." Silla closed her eyes, but couldn't sleep.

In the morning, Silla got up and went through the motions of training, hollowly. A chilling thought struck her. *"Strange things come out of the tremblers' minds. What if everything he's been teaching me is just a fantasy?"*

The thought made her feel disloyal. She tried to cover it up by working extra hard with what energy she had after her sleepless night. The possibility that she might be being fooled made her realize how much hope she had been placing on Kyr's training.

She worked the day's series of reversals with him, thinking, *"If he is imagining this, there will be no way to rescue Pel. I'll be stuck in that sludge pond of guilt."*

That night, Bas'ta asked Silla why she was so quiet. Silla confessed her fears. Bas'ta lay in silence for a few minutes. Then she said, "I know, I'll ask Fryn."

Silla curled up against Bas'ta. She still couldn't sleep, but she did rest.

After breakfast, she watched Bas'ta and Fryn make their usual jaunt into the forest, fearfully. In spite of her doubts, she forced her drained body through another day of tykyd. She had no other option. Her tired eyes made the colored trees behind her brother look bleary.

When she saw Bas'ta smiling over dinner that night she knew what the answer was. But, she was comforted to hear it in so many words when they crawled into bed later.

"It is their ancient practice. They had a teacher among them, in Highwall City, who held classes in the tunnels. Fryn has seen it work."

Silla's sigh shook the tree they slept under. "What would I do without you?"

"What indeed," her lover murmured.

Silla's sleep after two nights awake was like a fall into warm pudding. All night, her dream of circling fire had a golden tinge. When she woke up, she was resolved to take Kyr's training into her heart and prepare to walk into Highwall City on Demenseday.

A fortnight later, after a particularly sweaty and satisfying day of tykyd, Kyr suggested they all take their dinner by the river. There was a clearing in the trees, there. They swam and sunned on the flat rocks and ate sweet berry rolls.

Kyr took Fryn's long hand in his own short stubby one. He looked at the women and said, "You two have a big decision to make."

Bas'ta asked, "What?"

Kyr said, "There's a settlement called Ymyl the wood people set aside for the

melters. They do tykyd there, because we believe it slows the progress of the disease. And there are some herbs they grow there that also slow it. Some of our young people spend seasons of service there, helping us when we aren't able to help ourselves any more."

Silla said, "That sounds wonderful. Where is it?"

"Across the woods and over some mountains and a desert to the west. It takes a year to get there by kyly. There's a caravan passing through here the day after Demenseday."

"A kyly caravan," Bas'ta said, "I thought those were just a woodman's fairy tale."

"They are fantastic. But they are real." Kyr looked at his lover. "Fryn and I are going. You are both welcome to join us. And bring Pel, if she wants to come. Or you'll be all right staying on here."

That night, in bed, Silla and Bas'ta turned the decision over. Bas'ta said, "I'd miss this place. In spite of everything, we've had a wonderful year here."

Silla said, "But you'd be all alone with Pel and me melting. You wouldn't get any help from Highwall City."

"I'm strong. I might always feel like an outsider in Ymyl. You and Kyr and Fryn belong there."

"You might not want to be surrounded by melters."

"It could be scary," Bas'ta admitted.

Silla held her lover close, and put her cheek against Bas'ta's. "It would break my heart, if we took separate ways. But, maybe the best thing for you would be to go on without me. There may come a time when I melt so much I can't be your lover any more. I would want you to go on with your own life, then. Maybe you should start now."

Bas'ta lay quietly, the rest of the night. Neither of them closed their eyes. Silla knew her lover needed time to think. She memorized the pattern on the tree trunk in front of her, and tried to convince herself she'd be all right on her own.

Just before dawn, Bas'ta said, "Maybe I'd like to enjoy your tired old body as long as I can. Maybe I'd miss Fryn and Kyr dancing to my music, too much. What makes you think I'm going to pass up my chance to ride in a kyly caravan? And that's final."

Silla burst into a great big laugh of well-being. "I didn't want to have to be that brave, yet, anyway."

Deciding to go to Ymyl, and wondering what the trip there would be like distracted Silla a little bit from the stress of preparing for her contest with Dranna. She managed to spend most of the time that remained breathing into calmness, and enjoying the flow of tykyd in her practice with her brother.

Chapter 8

Silla had a restless night, on Demenseday Eve. The warm ruddiness of her morning dream of circling fire reassured her. Bas'ta looked up from the pot she was stirring, and said, "No one is leaving here, without eating breakfast."

Silla smiled, and didn't even try to argue, this time. The four walked through the woods to the South Gate of Highwall City, fortified with fyb root porridge.

The gate guard didn't recognize Silla and Bas'ta, in their slave clothes. He read the pass Silla had forged with Pel's name, and let the group enter. They joined the crowd of townspeople going to the celebration. Wedding music was in the air.

After their year in the quiet forest, the city felt jangling and fast to the exswordwoman. They made their way through the noisy streets to their old house. Fortunately, Pel had not changed anything in Bas'ta and Silla's room. They went to their wardrobes, and found formal tunics to put on.

Kyr brought Silla's ceremonial sword from the training hall, wrapped in a red cloth. As they walked toward the river, people began to recognize them, so a whisper rippled ahead of them and reached Dranna, Pel, Tay and the judges before the visitors reached the festival field.

Pel ran to Silla and threw her arms around her. "Where have you been? I thought you were dead."

Tears filled Silla's eyes, as she touched her daughter's green wedding tunic and smelled the glow flowers in her hair. Pel's body had grown even more muscular in her year of apprenticeship. "I'm sorry, sweetie. I had to get ready for this day. I love you so much."

"I love you, too," Pel said, looking puzzled.

Silla held Pel's hand and looked to the dais where the judges and Dranna and Tay stood. She called, "I'm here to rescind my daughter's engagement."

"What?" Pel pulled her hand away.

Silla whispered, "Trust me, Pel, it's for the best."

Tay started toward Silla. Dranna put a restraining hand on his shoulder and glared at Silla. "What are you thinking of? You know you can only do that by combat."

"I understand." Silla looked at the judges, "That is my request."

There was a gasp from the crowd. Dranna whispered to a woodman, who stood at the edge of the wedding party. He ran down the street in the direction of her house.

The first judge ran her hand through her short brown hair, and said, "Clear the field for a contest, please."

The throng parted around the center of the field.

She continued, "If Silla wins this match, Pel's engagement to Tay is broken. If Dranna wins, the wedding goes forward."

Pel took Silla by the shoulder and said, "Mother, stop this immediately."

"Please trust me. I'll explain later." Silla circled free of Pel's intense grasp, and walked to the space that had been made for her trial. Glancing back, she saw Bas'ta put her arms around Pel, and speak to her.

Silla bent over, and stretched her shoulders, with her hands behind her head. It was odd to look at the familiar purple houses, upside down, as she did. Dranna came to the field, and did her own ominously powerful stretches. Her weapons man arrived, with a package, wrapped in red. She ripped away the cloth, and flourished the shining sword.

Kyr held Silla's sword out to her. She removed the cloth, and could see that he had not polished it. Silla nodded to him. She put her hand on the hilt, cautiously. Dranna said, "You didn't even take the time to shine it? You always neglected essentials."

Silla could taste the cold power of the metal in her mouth. It started to lead her hands, as it had twenty years before. This time, she used her breath to warm it in the underground river of tykyd.

The bell rang. Gin birds shrieked. Silla tipped her sword to Dranna. The master struck, swiftly, slightly to the Silla's left, just where Silla expected her to. But Silla shifted right and entered past her, where she easily touched the back of her opponent's neck.

The crowd was as stunned and silent as Dranna was. The round had gone so quickly the combatants both waived a rest. The judge rang the bell again, and the two women tipped.

Dranna moved in a circle checking Silla's defenses. "You're out of your depth, you unbred rodent. You never had the instincts for this."

"You're right," Silla smiled, meeting her passes. "I never did."

In spite of her tykyd breathing, Silla felt the energy of the sword speeding up her movements. She cut too deep toward Dranna's thigh. Dranna answered with a crushing downsweep. Silla was relieved, when the sword tumbled from her hand. Dranna made a fatal touch on Silla's solar plexus. The crowd rumbled appreciatively. The match was tied.

Silla wasn't sure how long she had before her body would give its secret away. She let her sword lie on the ground, as long as she could, to allow that moment to surface. Dranna's face was chilling. Silla let the tykyd in her body flow into the space between them.

"You're beautiful, Dranna," she said. She could see the sweet vitality that ran through her opponent's veins. "What a miracle your aging body is."

"What?" Dranna was stopped by this for a moment, but then appeared to suspect a trick. "Well, you are as ugly as a milvan tree toad. Stop stalling and tip."

Silla picked up her sword. She locked eyes with Dranna and poured tykyd through the connection she formed. The master looked puzzled.

The bell rang. Silla tipped. Sweat dripped down her forehead.

Silla started an upswing. Dranna blocked. Instead of following through, as she had long been trained, Silla reversed directions halfway through and lay her sword down in the dirt.

Her lack of resistance unbalanced Dranna, who started to stumble forward. Silla moved in behind the master, put her arms around her and held on fiercely. Dranna couldn't shake her off. Silla's hand was on top of Dranna's sword hand, keeping her from slicing up toward Silla's head. She was so close she could see the mole on the master's cheek.

Dranna said, "You shuddering rootwife."

"That's a good name for me," Silla said. She sensed a tremor beginning in her left hand, so she put it in front of Dranna's face. When she felt the start of surprise in Dranna's body, Silla let go of Dranna's sword hand suddenly, and twisted free so that the sword scored against Dranna's own chest.

The crowd went into an uproar. The first judge called out, "Silla wins the contest."

Dranna's face was full of rage. "Take your daughter, and get out!"

Tay started toward Pel. Dranna grappled with him, and threw him to the ground. The flowers in his hair were crushed in the dirt. Silla took her daughter's hand.

Pel stood rooted and angry-faced, "What have you done to me?"

Silla said, "Don't you see it would only have been worse, if you had married Tay, and this had come out?"

"No, I don't see that."

"Well, pack anything you want to take with you, and meet me at the South Gate."

"I hate you," Pel shouted and stomped off. Bas'ta followed her. Silla walked with Kyr and Fryn to the gate they had come in. She saw faces of people she knew, who looked shocked and sad for her. Porta, who must now be a senior sword student, gave her a slight congratulatory bow of the head. Silla wondered if she would contend for Pel's position now.

The gate guard must have heard of the match. He stood back, a little, as if he were afraid of catching the melting from Silla.

When she was in the clearing outside the gate, Silla flung herself on the grass and wailed, "She hates me."

Fryn and Kyr smiled reassuring apologetic smiles. They looked as if they were about to say, "Oh, she'll come around," but were holding off because they weren't really sure.

Fryn said, "It's a lot for her to take in all at once."

"I should have told her first," Silla moaned.

Kyr said, "You needed the element of surprise to win the match. You were

great."

"What good does that do if I lose my child?"

"You've set her free. That's a great gift."

"What will she do if she doesn't come with us?"

"That part," Kyr said, "Is up to her. There is a wide world outside of Ymyl and Highwall City."

Fryn pressed a water bag on Silla. She drank deeply, but she was too despairing to enjoy it. Her dark mood finally lightened, a little, when Bas'ta came through the gate from the city.

Bas'ta put her small hands on Silla's face. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Silla smiled and kissed her. "How is Pel?"

"You were wonderful," Bas'ta said in the low tones that usually soothed Silla.

"What did my baby say?"

"She's not ready to talk to you. I explained everything to her. She's still in shock. Pel lost everything today. She's been mourning us a year. It's confusing to have us back. She's afraid of the melting. It's a lot to expect her be ready to leave for Ymyl, tonight."

Silla said, "We'll stay until she's ready."

"There won't be another caravan for a year. I don't want you to wait that long for the treatments. I think she can decide in time. Or, she can follow us later. Or, I can stay with her until she's ready."

"I don't really want to go without you, love."

"I don't want you to." The two women sank into a long embrace. Bas'ta said, "I told her where our home camp is. Let's go back there, and rest, as much as we can."

Bas'ta draped the taller woman's arm around her shoulder so her warrior lover could lean on her. Silla managed to keep her exhausted body walking back, through the forest, to the hut. Her tunic was sweaty and smudged. Her pants were torn.

Silla took off her rumpled, dirty clothes, and sank into the hot springs. The pain of the battle eased. Her worries about losing Pel would not let up. After a long soak, she pulled herself out of the water, and dressed in her woodwoman's clothes, again.

The sun set, bringing lavender tones to the sky. Bas'ta wrestled some mushroom stew into Silla, who chewed without noticing what she was eating, and closed her tired eyes, but couldn't sleep. She heard the sounds of Bas'ta scattering seed for the goldbirds, but couldn't manage to open her eyes to see them.

Bas'ta played "Shadows on the Hill." This raised a thin smile from her partner. Kyr and Fryn danced to help pass the weighty time. All four checked and rechecked the rucksacks they had packed for the journey ahead. The men went out for a farewell walk around the dark glade.

When Silla first heard a twig crack in the forest, she thought it was the men

returning. But when she looked up to see Pel, still dressed in her wedding tunic, she leaped up and took her in her arms. "I'm so sorry, Pelly."

Silla could feel the tears running down Pel's cheeks. Pel said, "I know you are. I'm so sorry this has happened to you."

Bas'ta put her arms around both of them. Kyr came out of the woods, carrying a rucksack and said to Pel, "Does this belong to the young sword master?"

"Ex-sword master," Pel said. She shook his hand and squeezed her mother's shoulder. "Bas'ta tells me you're behind the unbelievable match we saw today, Uncle. She said I would thank you after I thought about it. And she was right."

Bas'ta said, "I wasn't sure you'd come to it."

Pel looked at Bas'ta's face. "I had to imagine myself twenty years older with a daughter of my own, to realize I would have done the same and more."

Silla said, "I hope you'll still have that daughter after we ruined your wedding today."

Bas'ta said, "It may not be a complete shambles. I found Tay, locked up in his parents house. I told him where we were meeting. We still have an hour. He might find a way out."

Pel's warrior face crumpled. "That's a hard hour to wait."

"I saw his face. I think he'll come." Bas'ta smiled. Then her smile faded. "But how will he find his way?"

Pel said, "The same way I did."

Silla said, "You're taking your night vision for granted. It comes with your woodwoman blood. The swordmen don't have it."

Bas'ta said, "We can call to Tay."

Pel hesitated. Bas'ta said, "There's no shame in hoping."

Pel walked out of the house and started, tentatively, to call, "Tay? Tay?"

The others joined her, calling into the trees. When they paused, Silla heard a whistle in the brake. Pel called out, "Sweet boy, keep coming, you're almost here."

Silla heard running footsteps. She had tears in her eyes when she saw Tay, still in his wedding green, dash into the cabin and crush Pel with a big desperate hug. They kissed passionately with the remains of crumbled glow flowers falling from their hair.

Silla put her arms around Bas'ta and whispered in her ear, "You are wonderful."

Pel drew back to look at Tay and said, "You understand I'm a trembler."

Tay said, "Yes."

"And, if we have any children, they may be tremblers."

"Yes."

"And you still want to go with us?"

"Yes."

Silla put her hand on Tay's shoulder. She looked at his handsome face, so much like Dranna's, and said, "Son, I'm more impressed with your bravery, tonight, than with all your martial accomplishments until now."

He kissed her cheek and said, "Mother, you set the standard today."

Kyr wiped a tear from his eye and said, "We have to leave, or we'll miss the caravan. Pel and Silla, hold on to Tay and Bas'ta since they can't see."

There was little need for him to make this suggestion. The two couples were happily melded. Silla took one last look at the home where she had found surprising happiness, and the racks she had helped build with her sometimes trembling hands.

Fryn dashed in to say, "Someone's carrying a lamp in the forest. They're coming this way."

Kyr said, "We gave ourselves away calling to Tay. We've got to get out of here."

Silla kept her arm wrapped firmly around Bas'ta's waist, and ran, as fast as they could that way. Pel was also slowed by Tay. Fryn and Kyr ran ahead.

Tay stumbled on a root. Pel helped him get his balance. Silla slowed down, a little, so she and Bas'ta wouldn't fall. She heard their pursuer gaining on them. Branches were breaking, fifty feet back, and the distance was closing.

Silla was sure the stride she was hearing was Dranna's. And the master sounded furious. Silla said to Bas'ta, "Hold onto this tree. I'll be right back."

She turned to face Dranna, who came crashing through the brush with a bright, furious face. Dranna carried a lamp in one hand, and her live blade in the other. Silla was empty-handed.

Dranna said, "You gin bird slave, you stole my son!"

Silla circled the raging woman. "I didn't take him. He wants to be with Pel. You could come with us, too, if you want."

"And live with a bunch of quivering worms? That's not a life." On the last word, Dranna drove her sword so close to Silla's chest, she tore her tunic.

Silla turned her body aside as the sword went past. She grabbed the blade close to the hilt and swung it so that it broke the lamp. "It is our life, Dranna."

Silla's fingers were bleeding. With her night vision, she saw Dranna stumble forward. The master flailed around blindly with her sword. Silla put her arms around Dranna from behind. She said, "Stop that. You'll hurt yourself. I know it's hard to lose your son. I wish you would come with us."

Dranna said, "Never. You may get away now. But, I'll find you."

Silla embraced her. The assistant tried to calm the master's agitation by pouring tykyd into Dranna's body. "I'm going to miss you."

She separated herself from Dranna. The master couldn't see where she slipped away to, and pawed the air, fruitlessly. Silla walked silently to Bas'ta. They kissed

without making a sound. Silla wrapped her cut hand in a handkerchief, as they pressed on through the forest.

Silla and Bas'ta caught up with the other four. She listened, but couldn't hear any pursuit. The party walked softly, for an hour, stopping on high ground, from time to time, to see if they were being followed.

Kyr finally said, "I'm sure we're safe. I'd like to know how Tay escaped."

Silla walked, enjoying the weight of Bas'ta's head on her shoulder and the sensation of guiding her through the dark. She was also very curious to know Tay's story.

He said, "My parents forbade me to leave the house. Bas'ta managed to tell me everything through a chink in my window, thank the gods. The only door they didn't lock was the one from the balcony outside their bedroom. It stood open, because they were there, and they wanted the air. I slipped into their room, trying to figure out a way to get to it, unseen. I heard my mother saying the one thing she envied Silla was Bas'ta's faithfulness.

"She asked my father what he would do, if her fortunes changed, and she was turned out. Would he go with her? Just as she asked him this, he saw me, over her shoulder. I thought my chance was ruined. But he winked at me. He put his arms around my mother, so she wouldn't see me, and he said, 'Yes, I would. Wouldn't you?' And she said, 'Yes.' They started to kiss, which I took as my opportunity. And my blessing. My mother obviously doesn't see the parallel. But I hope, in time, she will."

The group walked, for an hour, through the overhanging trees. Silla found a rhythm to steer her nightblind partner through the woods. Tired, but elated, Silla reached out to touch Pel's hand from time to time. The forest grew so thick. everyone had to turn sideways to get through some of the spaces. Then, the growth thinned out, again, and allowed the party to walk side by side.

She heard the shuffling hooves of the kylys and smelled the mixture of sweat and dung, before she saw them in the clearing ahead. There were about thirty of the purple animals, whose wide backs were as high as Silla's shoulders. The females had large shovel-shaped antlers. They had been set loose to graze in the meadow. One of them had straddled a sapling to bring its top leaves in reach of her soft-looking muzzle.

When Silla managed to tear her eyes away from the kyly, she saw that Kyr and Fryn were speaking with a Hatarian who seemed to be in charge of the caravan. He showed them a covered cart that was sitting at the edge of the open space. Kyr nodded. Fryn opened a bag he carried, and lifted out what looked like a hundred necklaces and bracelets. The red-brown skinned leader gave them a harness, and they approached two of the kylys.

Kyr and Fryn were buffeted by the kyly's antlers, in the process of getting them rigged to the cart. After what Silla took to be woodland curses, they managed to drive it across the meadow. She stood back, feeling nervous.

Kyr wiped his cheek with his sleeve and said, "Look out. They have a nasty habit of spitting."

Bas'ta approached one of the kyls, cautiously, putting one hand out for the beast to smell. The kyly nodded, and let Bas'ta rub her furry cheek. Bas'ta turned to Silla with her eyes shining.

Silla approached the same animal, but got her hand nipped. She retreated to the back of the cart, where she helped throw their knapsacks inside. The cushioned benches reminded Silla how exhausted she was. She leaned on the side of the cart to get a look at their fellow travelers.

Gathered around a large fire pit were about forty people, of all ages. The majority were the pale hue of the woodpeople, but wore wide cut trousers and light brown shirts, instead of uniforms. There were some swordpeople. There were Hatarians, in their practical road clothes. A party of three Belurians wore pants and tops with long, soft lines. Silla watched Bas'ta approach her countrymen and talk with them animatedly, their ruddy faces close to each other.

Some of the woodpeople had occasional trembles like she and Kyr did. Others had more frequent twitching. A few were in almost constant movement. One man walked with a halting gait.

Some had none of the dance-like movements at all. Silla supposed they were loved ones like Bas'ta and Fryn and Tay. Or others like Pel who were melters but weren't affected yet.

"How is poor Pel handling this?" Silla wondered. She looked around to see her daughter, standing just behind her.

Silla reached out for Pel's hand, and said, "It's kind of scary, isn't it?"

Pel nodded. "But it's strangely comforting, too."

Silla hugged Pel, and couldn't keep from letting a sob for her daughter shudder through her. She said, "I would have done anything to keep you from having to go through this."

"It's not your fault, Mother. You have to remember that." Pel looked at her and said, "Did you know that I've never seen you cry before tonight?"

Silla said, "Over this past year, I've learned that holding back doesn't help. You hadn't cried since you were three, either. Look at your face, now."

She touched a tear on her daughter's cheek and said, "I wish we had cried together all along. I missed you so much."

They held each other, in a long tearful silence. Silla didn't want to let go. By this time, dawn was starting to warm the sky.

Kyr came up to Silla and Bas'ta, and said, "There are clothes for the trip in the cart. Our tradition is to burn our slave garments, before we leave."

He and Fryn slipped into the shelter on wheels, first. They came out dressed like the other woodpeople. Kyr threw the bundle of their clothes into the fire pit. They blazed, unevenly, and gave off an acrid smell.

Silla followed Bas'ta into the wagon. Her lover found packets, under the seat,

which she opened. The clothes inside were like the ones her brother and his partner wore. Silla pulled off her slave clothes, and tried on the short-sleeved shirt and pants. They were even cooler than the uniform she had been wearing for the past year.

Bas'ta took off her formal clothes, and put on the road outfit. Silla liked the air of unpredictability her partner had in them. Silla burned her slave tunic. Bas'ta held her old clothes, looking contemplative.

Pel and Tay followed them into the caravan, and came out in brown travel clothes. Tay carried their wedding clothes, neatly folded. He asked, "Should we burn these, too?"

Fryn said, "It is good to lighten the weight the kylys have to pull. It makes sense for us to burn our slave past. But, I wouldn't want you to have to burn your wedding hopes, today."

Tay said, "Let's say we're making room for a transformation of our wedding?"

Pel nodded with a quiet smile. He threw the clothes into the fire. The blaze flared and burned them fast. Bas'ta threw hers in a moment later, looking like she was celebrating the young couple's future.

The caravan lined up. Silla crawled into the back of the cart, and fell deeply asleep after the first few turns of the wooden wheels.

She opened her eyes, once, and noticed, through the opening in the rear of the cart, that the sun was high. Jogging sleep drew her back, and she didn't wake up again until the caravan stopped at sunset.

Chapter 9

By the time Silla crawled out, and stretched her stiff body, the kylys were voraciously munching the grass and shrubs. The forest growth looked much the same as in their home camp, just a little less thick. Someone had started a fire, and families were cooking dinner around it.

Silla saw her brother in a group, doing the familiar flowing postures of tykyd. All the melters participated, no matter how much their practice was punctuated by jerks. Silla joined them, and started to feel more herself in spite of the long day's ride. There didn't seem to be any master. Everyone made suggestions, and learned from each other. The youngest of the students was a boy with a shock of red hair, who looked about seven. He seemed almost completely disabled by the twitching movements. He wore no shirt, though the evening felt cool to Silla.

After a soothing hour of practice, Silla followed the boy to his campfire and introduced herself to his mother, who was only a little older than Pel. Her name was Wyt. She also had a baby.

Silla held Wyt's baby so the young woman could feed Myk, which was the boy's name. Her heart broke for Wyt, and she felt grateful that she and Pel had had so many years untouched by the disease.

She turned around to see Pel looking at Myk. As Silla watched, she realized her daughter had to make the impossible decision whether to have her own children and risk this. Pel joined the group, and took over feeding Myk, so the young mother could eat her own dinner.

As she did, Wyt asked Silla, "Are you the woman who won that match in the city?"

Silla nodded, shyly.

"Hearing that story made us all feel grand," Wyt said. She wiped some spilled food from Myk's shirt.

Pel said. "I'd like to learn that art, too."

In the evenings, whenever the caravan stopped for the night, Silla and Pel would do an hour or two of tykyd with the others. Silla was proud to watch how the training mellowed her daughter's strength.

It became part of the daily practice for Pel to help Myk. She let him lean on her, as he grew more affected. Or carry him, during the training. One evening, when lightning threatened, the group sat around the fire and talked about how it felt to do tykyd.

With his uneven voice, Myk described the dream he was starting to have in the mornings. "I breathe this glowing light. Then, I'm less scared."

Thunder rumbled the air. Silla said, "I've have a circle of gold that rests in the background of my dreams. I hope it will make me less afraid, too."

Myk put his small, trembling hand on Silla's, and said, "I'm sure it will."

The group went into the woods, each evening, to harvest nuts, then carved beads by the firelight. Silla would sometimes see Kyr's hands twitch, as he worked. He would slow down to accommodate the movement. She followed his example.

Fryn and Kyr began to teach them the woodpeople's language, with its soft y-sounds. Bas'ta spent as many hours as possible feeding, currying and talking to the big purple kyly.

In the three months it took the caravan to break out of the thick forest and cross the plains, the musician convinced one of the animals to let her ride. Bas'ta looked blissful, with her hands wrapped around the kyly's lavender antlers.

That same evening, Tay said to the rest of their group, "Pel and I would still like to be married."

Kyr smiled, and said, "There is a woodland priest, in the group. Would you like to talk to him about their traditions?"

Pel looked at Tay, and then said, "Yes."

The middle-aged priest came to their fire circle for dinner, the next night. He wore the same brown traveling outfit everyone else did. The only difference between him and the other woodpeople was that he didn't wear any of the seed bead jewelry.

"We can arrange a woodland wedding," he said. "They last three days, and center around a large ceremonial dance. I think it might suit you. Usually the whole caravan would be invited, in a case like this. Would that be all right?"

Pel and Tay looked at each other and nodded. Kyr said, "We will have to stop for a month in Hudrarin, when the kylys rut."

"They rut for a whole month?" Bas'ta asked.

Fryn said, "Yes. And, from what I hear, you wouldn't want your cart harnessed to them when they get started."

Kyr said, "Maybe we could have the wedding then?"

Pel and Tay agreed. Kyr brought the priest to interview them. They began to plan the ritual. The preparations made Silla feel there was more to life than watching her own increasingly frequent spills and stumbles.

It took another month for the caravan to leave the sparse growth of the plains, and weave among the wind-whipped trees, on the foothills of Hudrarin. There, the drivers drew the carts to the side of the road, and released the kylys. The animals' mating began slowly, with the females bouncing their new antlers against trees to shake off the fuzz. The pace became more frantic as they blushed violet, and began to fight each other for dominance, with bellows and great clashes of antlers.

Meanwhile, the males created wallows of urine and mud, and contended with each other over the mucky territory. The sex was large, groan-filled and thrashing, and went on for hours at a time.

The people walked up a rocky path to the village, and lodged in hostels, there.

They were far enough away from the noise and shaking of the kyly's rut that they could focus on Pel and Tay's wedding.

The ritual began with a day of fasting, and silent contemplation. All the guests participated. The idea was to embrace Pel and Tay's union. Silla found it was also an opportunity to be grateful for her own marriage to Bas'ta.

The second day, there was a great feast followed by a talk from the priest and an opportunity for the guests to offer advice.

Then, Pel and Tay improvised a dance to express their unique relationship. It started with what appeared to be an adaptation of the friendly combat of their long training together. It changed into a series of hot, loving pursuits, with frequent reversals, and culminated in a long kiss. The guests applauded wildly.

Each family present also did a dance reflecting its relationship. Silla and Bas'ta started with a lusty dance of the rhythm of their many seasons together, then, found themselves in a long series of whirls. Knowing she had the melting made Silla appreciate every uncertain step she took, so her dance with Bas'ta was ecstatic.

The exswordwoman made an appreciative gesture toward her brother. Kyr and Fryn danced so close and slowly Silla thought they were going to fuse.

Wyt held her baby and turned, while Myk let tykyd flow from his hands and swirled it around them. The Beluruian family wove a dance that seemed to speak of their mountain home. Eventually, the family dances integrated into a day-long dance that everyone joined for as long as they could.

At one point, the priest got everyone on their feet and directed the newlyweds to lie down on the ground. Then, the group lifted the pair over their heads, and passed them around the hall. When everyone was exhausted, they went into a communal bath. Seeing the other people from the caravan naked gave Silla a feeling of oneness with them. Everyone trundled home to bed.

On the third day, Tay and Pel visited each of their guests. They received gifts and heard performances dedicated to them, at each stop. Bas'ta had written a new composition. Kyr and Fryn danced along. Silla told a story about a couple that lived together so long they knew each other's thoughts, before they thought them.

After that, the newlyweds disappeared into a mountain cabin for a month, alone together. With the ceremony and the rutting kylys and the cold sunsets over the peaks of Hudrarin, most of the travelers also found themselves in a honeymoon mood, including Silla and Bas'ta. At the end of the month, they were all fortified to return to the jouncing caravan.

When they left Hudrarin, their way took them high into the mountains, where the trees grew shorter and covered with snow. Gray skies weighed down on travelers.

The caravan moved slowly, and people bundled into the leather and fur coats each cart had under its seats. Silla noticed that the woodpeople whose trembling was more advanced wore a layer less of clothes than the others did in that cold. Myk, in particular, always looked too lightly covered. His body must have felt hot. The kyly's muscles strained visibly for what seemed like an endless succession of days.

Finally, the mountains gave way to the lower lines of foothills. People put their coats and leather leggings and boots away. The foothills flattened out into a high, wide desert. Hot season clothes came out, again. The tremblers stripped down even more than the others.

Here, the skies were dry blue, and the days were filled with the stale cheese smell of kyly sweat. Three months spread out in the desert.

Everyone in the party was appreciative, when they reached a place where the days were cooler, and gentle hills formed. This was Plynyn, the land of the woodpeople. When Silla saw the byny trees that populated these hills, she could understand why tykyd had been invented here. They were surprisingly strong for their thin lithe lines. She could tell they were rooted deep.

For a fortnight, she saw they were approaching a large lake. The settlement they were moving to was on its shore. The lake provided cooling breezes in the hot season. Its winter storms could tear the roofs off houses.

The cluster of brick buildings looked much like any town. What was unique about Ymyl was that about half the population had the movements of the melting, in, varying degrees. Her year on the caravan had given Silla time to get used to being around other melters, so there were no great surprises in Ymyl.

The caravan stayed in Plynyn for two months. One fresh sunny day followed another. The kyly gave birth to a flock of skinny-legged young, and nursed them. When the train left Ymyl for its return trip to the east, Bas'ta kept one purple foal.

Silla and Bas'ta moved into one of the low-roofed houses. Kyr and Fryn settled into the house to the left of them, and Pel and Tay to the right. They supported themselves making beads to trade. Tay tried to teach the art of sword, but no one in the settlement was interested. So, he apprenticed himself to a carpenter. Bas'ta and Fryn continued to create music and dance.

A long blustery season came and shook the byny trees. Wood fires lit those nights. Silla noticed her body was trembling more, and as it did, her body heat rose. She didn't have to sit as close to the hearth as she used to.

Wyt lived in a house nearby. Her son, Myk, had to stop coming to community tykyd, because he couldn't get out of bed anymore. He would visualize the practice, instead. Pel came, daily, to sit with him while he did the internal training.

The rest of the Highwall City family visited and helped, too. Silla would sit beside the increasingly thin boy's bed, and tell stories. This always reminded her of Gyrt.

There was a young volunteer assigned to help Myk. The helper came to Silla's house, one night, to say Myk had died. The exswordwoman went to the funeral, and whispered to the body, "Thank you for the things you taught me about the light."

Wyt collapsed for the long months that followed. There were others who had lost family members, who came to visit her, and help her through those long slow days. Silla had an image of a similar group coming to sit with Bas'ta after the exswordwoman's death.

Her partner was quick to learn the local language, once they were immersed in it, as she had learned the Higwall Language, before. Silla found the process slower, but she tried to learn a few words every day. She felt it kept her brain supple. And she liked the way the stories she made up sounded in woodslanguage. There was always some entertainment to be had from her misunderstandings of words.

The woodpeople had domesticated animals, called dynyns, who were protective companions. Their first season there, Kyr brought home a young blue male one for Silla and a red and white female for himself. Silla liked to run her hands through the dynyn's soft fur, and scratch his long ears. He followed her everywhere she went, and sat as close to her as he could, crawling up into her lap, if possible.

Silla would visit her brother, and their dynyns would chase each other around the house. Then, the animals would fall asleep curled up together, the red and white fur contrasted with the blue. When the exswordwoman would walk back to her house, her dynyn would wander through the glowing stand of byny trees, in back of their house, then, reappear by her side, just as she opened the door to go in.

Kyr, Silla and Pel continued doing daily tykyd practice. They took foul tasting herbs that slowed the progress of the melting. As time passed, she noticed that her nightly dream of circling fire was shifting to a paler shade of gold.

Silla saw her own reflection in the random movements of Kyr's arms and legs. She knew that the nonmelters found the two seasons of Ymyl cool and cold. Like the other melters, she was now always hot, and wore as few clothes as possible.

Watching Pel do the flowing movements of tykyd soothed Silla. The mother saw no signs of the tremor in her daughter, yet.

One evening, when the whole group had gathered for dinner, Silla cut her thumb with the knife she was cutting bread with. Her little dynyn sat on her foot, in a way that felt reassuring.

"Blast," she said, and sucked the blood, until Bas'ta could bandage it. The concern she saw in Fryn's eyes, looking at her from a position close behind her partner's shoulder reminded her of something. She couldn't remember what. The ex-assistant swordmaster was about to say maybe she should stop handling knives.

Before she got the chance, Pel said, "We have something to tell you."

Tay beamed. Pel continued, "I'm going to have a baby."

"Hooray!" Silla hugged her daughter, her heart expanding, her eyes filling with tears.

Bas'ta laughed a big, happy laugh. Kyr and Fryn danced, their movements echoing each other's in a fine-tuned harmony.

Silla asked, "You're not afraid it will inherit the melting?"

"Of course I am. But look around you. The other melters, here, are having children. They don't let it keep them from this happiness."

As Pel grew bigger, Silla and Bas'ta started calling each other grandma. Fryn

would call Kyr uncle. Tay was nervous, and started dropping things so much everyone would have thought he was the melter in the family.

The birth of Pel and Tay's daughter, Rini, strengthened the group in its shared love and sleeplessness. She was a restless baby, who didn't want to miss anything and constantly had her tiny hands around someone's finger or hair. Silla was relieved that the child didn't shake or quiver.

The nights of little sleep aggravated Silla's own erratic movements. She woke up, after one restless night, and asked, "Did I keep you awake, last night?"

Bas'ta nodded, eyes looking sleepy.

Silla said, "I love sleeping with you. But, for your sanity, maybe we should move to separate beds."

"Maybe we should. We can still visit each other's. It might help you sleep better, too."

Pel walked into the house, carrying Rini. The baby's sobs cut through Silla's chest. Bas'ta sat up, and held her, and shushed her. Pel said, "I've got to get some sleep. Could you keep her for a few hours?"

"Sure," Bas'ta said, standing and walking up and down the room.

"Thanks," Pel said, and left, looking exhausted.

Bas'ta paced with the baby, and cooed until she settled down. Then, she put Rini into bed beside Silla, and stretched out on the other side. As the three dozed, together, the ex-swordwoman felt a wave of grief. She was going to miss this closeness and ease of touching.

Silla drifted to sleep. When she woke up, several hours later, the baby was gone. Pel must have come back and picked her up. The red and white dynyn had snuggled into the warm place. Silla rubbed his furry chest, and enjoyed the sensation of Bas'ta's belly, which still rested against her back.

Bas'ta shifted in bed, so Silla knew she was awake. The ex-swordwoman said, "If there comes a time when I can't make love to you, any more, I want to set you free to find someone else."

Bas'ta said, "I don't want someone else."

"But, it wouldn't be fair for you not to have someone. The woodpeople have lived with this disease for generations. That's why they have the tradition of divorcing to free the healthy partner."

"How do you figure I'm the healthy partner? My joints ache too much to dance with someone new."

That evening, Silla sat in the men's house, and told Kyr about her conversation with Bas'ta. She asked, "What would you want Fryn to do?"

Kyr scratched the red head of his dynyn. "We've had the same discussion, and he is just as stubborn. The fact that we are both woodsmen doesn't help. Maybe some day I can get him to honor our partnership, that way. I don't like the idea of him being

basically alone, just because I'm still alive.”

“Exactly.”

The two women moved to separate beds, that fortnight. They would cuddle in the ex-swordwoman’s single bed, then, Bas’ta would go to hers to sleep. Sometimes, they would make love, carefully, so Silla’s outflinging limbs would not hurt her partner.

Silla would wake up reaching to caress Bas’ta, but unable to touch her across the gap. In the mornings, she could see that Bas’ta was more rested, though. That satisfied her.

Sometimes, Silla would wake up with her dynyn tucked into the bend of her leg. The baby would be in the crib next to the bed. Silla liked to watch Rini’s tiny tan chest, rise and fall.

Every year, the kyly caravan would arrive. They always included a few woodpeople who had been turned out of Highwall City. Bas’ta would invite the new refugees to their house, and gather the news of their old home.

The woodpeople told them that the integration of the sword school continued, despite Dranna’s politicking against it. Silla would have thought that was a sign of progress. But one sunny season, the kyly train arrived, without any woodpeople in it, at all. Did that mean the turning outs had ended? Or that Highwall City’s treatment of the woodpeople had taken a darker turn?

The people who had lived in Highwall City gathered to discuss the lack of news, without figuring out what it meant. The mystery only deepened, because the next sunny season came with no woodpeople from Highwall City on the caravan. In fact there was never another refugee.

One cold season, Silla sat talking with Kyr, in her and Bas’ta’s house. Their partners had gone into the music room, hours before, Fryn falling into step, behind Bas’ta. The bynyn trees swung with the breeze, on the other side of the window.

Kyr asked, “Have you noticed the aura between Fryn and Bas’ta.”

Silla thought a minute, and said, “They are very close.”

“Wouldn’t it be perfect, if they married each other, when we can’t hold them, any more?”

“Yes,” Silla smiled. “I hate losing that with Bas’ta. I’d feel better, if I knew she had someone as sweet as Fryn.”

Bast’ta and Fryn came out of the studio door, flushed and happy looking. Kyr and Silla exchanged a glance. The swordwoman rubbed the place where her dynyn’s blue stomach turned white. Rini toddled through the house, pulled the tablecloth off. Dishes crashed. Everyone rushed to pick up the pieces.

One night, Silla and Kyr watched Bas’ta play at a local pub. They had to be tied into their chairs so they wouldn’t slip out.

The ex-swordwoman recognized deep joy in the way the musician bent over her instrument, and breathed across the strings. Fryn danced, expressing her music, moving

as if on large wings.

Kyr said, "He understands her so well."

Silla noticed with pleasure the way Fryn rubbed Bas'ta's shoulders, afterward. She said, "Look at the glint in her eyes."

"Let's ask them, tonight."

When they were home, and Bas'ta was helping Silla undress, the melter raised the issue, "Your music and Fryn's dance resonate so much."

"Thank you." Bas'ta's dark hair clouded around her face.

"You two seem very close."

"Fryn is a good friend."

"Have you ever thought of being more?"

"More?"

"Lovers?"

"I only have one lover."

"But, my ability to do that is fading. Why won't you divorce me and marry Fryn?"

"I'm happy here, Silla."

"You deserve to be caressed the way you caress me. If my hands can't do that, let me give you that gift, by separating from you. It would honor our marriage for you to go on and have another one."

"Those are all logical arguments. But it doesn't feel right to me."

"You've given me so much tenderness. I'm lucky. One of these days I'm going to be too busy dying to relate to you. I want you to say to yourself, 'I've given more than enough,' and leave me then."

Bas'ta shook her head.

"Stubborn!"

"Stubborn!"

The next day, Silla asked Kyr how his conversation with Fryn went. He said, "He admits they are psychically close. But, he will not leave me. I'll keep working on him."

Kyr gave her a twisted grin.

Over the seasons, Silla grew less able to talk. Her thinking became telegraphic. She returned to her conversation with Bas'ta about remarriage, regularly, with the same results. Sometimes, she would see the easy way Fryn stood close to Bas'ta, and she would send a belabored wink in Kyr's direction. His wink in response would be just as slow, and just as triumphant.

Silla's daily dream of breathing fire comforted her through her daily losses. Its

color was becoming pinker, every day. Kyr told her he had dreams of the gray-eyed goddess Kyjy, watching over the two of them.

One night, Silla woke up to find her arms tied to the bed, and her lover caressing her. She said, "That's a good solution."

They used that solution, until Silla's foot hit Bas'ta's jaw with a resounding clunk, one night. The swordwoman felt badly. When she woke up to find all her limbs tied down, a fortnight later, she said, "I must be forgiven."

As Bas'ta lay her head on Silla's chest, the swordwoman said, "But, I worry about the things I can't give you."

Bas'ta said, "I have other satisfactions."

Silla asked, "How can that be enough?"

Bas'ta said, "It just is."

The next day, Silla's granddaughter, Rini came to visit. By this time, Rini was eight years old. On each visit, the child's light tan face would wrap into a smile, and she would say, "I want to tell you a story, Grandma." And, as Silla listened to a tale of dynyn riding on kyly's backs, she thought of the stories she had told, at that age.

Silla's steps developed an increasing sway. One day, she tried to walk across the living room, and accidentally kicked a book that crashed into Bas'ta's leenio. She watched its fateful trajectory, helplessly. She wanted to run away from the sound of the smashing. Her heart broke with the instrument. It would be impossible to get more of the belurian wood it was made of.

"Oh, Bas'ta," she cried, "I am so, so sorry."

The period that followed felt shapeless, and full of grief. The wind in the eaves sounded like bones rattling. Silla felt she had taken everything from Bas'ta. There was nothing she could do to make it better. The exswordwoman tossed through sleepless nights, kicking her sheets off. Her dynyn sat at the foot of her bed and mourned with her.

Bas'ta didn't visit for a fortnight. The silence cut Silla's heart.

When the musician returned, she brought the leenio, which had been repaired. The chartreuse wood was spotted with gray byny wood patches so that it looked like a dynyn.

Silla noticed that her lover's gait had become slow. Bas'ta played a sad tune for Silla. The music spoke of seasons of loss. The sound had nowhere near the purity it had had before.

"It will never be the same."

"No," said Bas'ta, with eyes damp. "But it is good enough."

She stroked her partner's head comfortingly. Silla's cheeks were damp with tears.

When the ex-swordwoman couldn't walk, she did the subtle movements of tykyd, seated. When she didn't even have enough control of her body to do that, she did it internally, visualizing its slow swooping circles.

There came a time when Silla couldn't handle a spoon any more. She let her family or the woodland volunteers feed her. Eventually, she couldn't swallow solid food, so she drank her meals slowly and deliberately. Sometimes, she choked, panicking, trying to get air through her mutinous throat.

Among the woodpeople, the melters used boards that were reminiscent of the alphabet boards of Silla's school days, to communicate. When it got too frustrating to try to make her shaky speech understood, she tried to spell words on one of those.

Trying to remember words in the woodslanguage made this difficult. Bas'ta found a blank board, and painted it with the swordpeople's letters. That helped, for a long time. Eventually, Silla's movements grew so pronounced she could mostly only point to the words "yes" or "no."

When Silla and Kyr weren't able to stand up any more, they asked to have their beds moved into a room, together, where they could look at each other, and out at the tree-lined shore of the lake. Her brother's restless movements didn't disturb Silla because her body was dancing to her own symphony.

She liked to watch the blue dynyn at the foot of her bed, and the red and white one at the end of his. The two animals seemed contented being close to each other. Silla found herself sharing her brother's dream that the woodland goddess, Kyjy, watched the two of them sleep, and beamed light on them.

Though Silla loved Bas'ta's visits, she was concerned that her partner was spending too much of her life ruled by a disease she didn't have. Silla would spell out on her board that Bas'ta should divorce her, and marry Fryn. Bas'ta remained firm on the point.

Silla overheard her brother having similar arguments with Fryn. It was clear to them that their spouses belonged together. She would ask her brother, "What makes them so stubborn?"

Even when spelling things out on his alphabet board became difficult, and Kyr could only manage one word a day, Silla could hear Fryn spelling out loud, slowly, as Kyr made his twitching hands point to the letters, R-E-M-A-R-R-Y. After a while, all Kyr had to do was point to the letter "R" and Fryn would say "Remarry. I know. Forget it, dear."

Silla used the same campaign, and got the same response from her partner. Sometimes, the ex-swordwoman would try to starve herself to free Bas'ta. But her lover would always sweet-talk her into eating again.

One day, there was a pattering of rain on the byny branches that increased until it was pounding. The wind blew clouds across the sky. Lightning jagged through the gray.

Kyr struggled to pull himself out of his bed. He gave Silla a long look that she didn't understand. The woodman pulled his wasted body, painstakingly, out the door. He lay on the porch. Kyr must have been doing tykyd in his mind, because he drew a lightning bolt that killed him, before she knew what was happening.

Silla had been grieving the loss of her brother, already, for many years, as he faded from her. She still missed him terribly when he was gone. There was something

comforting in the way he had smiled at her with his deep grey eyes before he killed himself. It reminded her of the feeling she had, every morning, when she woke with her breath of life dream, that nothing was all that frightening, in the end. That death was like being in that loop of tykyd and not having to wake up.

When Fryn and Bas'ta had recovered a little from Kyr's death, Silla laboriously spelled on her alphabet board, while Bas'ta read the letters aloud: K-Y-R F-R-E-E-D F-R-Y-N.

It took her another day to have enough energy to communicate the rest of her message: I-'L-L F-R-E-E Y-O-U.

Bas'ta paled a little and said, "You wouldn't."

"Oh, yes, love, I would," Silla thought, *"What do I have to do to get through to you?"* But, all she could coordinate was to point to the word "YES" on the board.

The next day, Bas'ta and Fryn came to visit Silla. She wished she could smile at the way they stood close together, looking down at her bed, their faces matched in concern. The melter slowly spelled out L-I-G-H-T-N-I-N-G.

Bas'ta said, "All right, you blackmailing wench, you have us cornered. We will remarry. But we're not leaving you."

Silla only had enough energy to smile with her eyes, then. The next day, she slowly spelled out G-O T-O B-R-Y, which was Fryn's hometown.

Bas'ta said, "No."

A fortnight later, the priest came to Silla's bedroom, a thin middle-aged woodwoman. She said, "I understand you want your partner to remarry. Silla pointed to the word, "yes," on her letter board.

"I imagine it will be a relief not to have to worry about her."

Silla pointed to the same word again. A tear ran down her face. The minister held her hand, until she drifted to sleep, the priest's cool against the melter's hot skin. The exswordwoman woke, a little later to hear the familiar hum of her partner's and her friend's voices, blending with the minister's, in the living room. It was music she had been waiting a long time to hear.

Everyone in Ymyl, including Silla, was invited to the wedding. On the day of silence and fasting, Bas'ta and Fryn came for their usual morning visit to Silla, and sat quietly with her. When Bas'ta offered to feed her, Silla pointed to the word, "no," on her board. She would fast, too. It made her feel lightheaded and part of the ceremony.

On the second day, they moved Silla's bed, so she could watch the feast. The smells of wedding foods came to her in delicious layers. Her helper fed her a bit of vylkyn soup. The priest's speech acknowledged the gifts Bas'ta brought from her relationship with Silla. Though she couldn't control her face enough to smile, listening to the other guest's advice warmed the exswordwoman's heart. When Silla's turn came, she spelled on her alphabet board, with a shaking hand, T-H-A-N-K Y-O-U.

She was surprised and moved that Fryn and Bas'ta included her in their dance, by

carrying her through the first segment, between them. She was satisfied to see the tenderness they shared, when they put her back in her bed, and turned to each other. Their dance was a sad-looking one, that spoke of love found amid great losses. Fryn was so gentle, Silla was happy to see him put his arms around her lover, as she could not do, any more.

Silla watched Pel and Tay and Rini dance together a dance of appreciation over many years. She saw, a little sadly, that Pel had the same stutter step Silla had had at her daughter's wedding.

Wyt's daughter was now eight. The two danced around the space where Myk should have been.

The guests broke up into the large group dance, and carried the bride and groom over their heads. Before they left, they each came past Silla's bed. The other melters congratulated her. Fryn and Bas'ta carried Silla to the communal bath, the tall man bending his knees to share the load with his short bride. Then, they carried her just as lovingly and tucked her into her bed.

The next day, Fryn and Bas'ta came to visit Silla in the morning, as usual. Pel and Tay and Rini came to honor the couple. Rini had a story to tell them about birds that flew to the moon together. Pel and Tay sang.

Silla used all the strength she had to spell out F-I-R-S-T A-R-G-U-M-E-N-T I W-O-N. Bas'ta laughed. Fryn's pale face blushed brightly. They both cried. They went on their honeymoon.

Silla missed their usual visits, a little, while they were gone. But, Pel came. The mother noticed that her daughter's once red-brown hair was graying. The light movements of the younger woman's melting were aggravated a little by the stress of Kyr's death and the ceremony.

Pel brought Rini with her, who was now sixteen. Silla was grateful every day she saw Rini free of signs of the melting. The girl would always say, "Grandma, I have a story for you," and this time her story was of adolescent animals, striking out on their own.

Visits wore Silla out. Making eye contact was exhausting, though she loved it. The struggle to eat, and resting up from that took most of her energy.

Every day, Silla's dream of breathing light, and her sense of being watched by the goddess grew longer and more comforting. And more difficult to wake from.

Demenseday dawns bright and clear. Silla has a metal sword in her hand, but it's melting. Dranna takes off a long black cloak and wraps it around Silla so she can't move. Dranna looks older. Her hair is mud-colored, and her face is wrinkled. She's as old as she would be, now.

"Stop fighting me," Dranna said.

Silla woke up, and realized Dranna was sitting on her bed, with her arms around the sheet she was bundled in. "My gods," she puzzled through it. "She's actually here." Silla tried to smile with her eyes. Tears brimmed. She wanted to spell, "What are you

doing here?"

Dranna said, "You're probably wondering what I'm doing here."

Silla couldn't nod, but she tried to flash assent with her eyes.

Dranna said, "Oh, Silla, I was so angry with you, when you took my son away. You betrayed the dream we had shared of watching our children and grandchildren grow up together.

"As the years went by, we missed Tay so much. We tried to imagine how his life with Pel was turning out. We knew they wanted to have a child. We painted pictures in our minds of our baby with his own baby. Chescu pointed out that our grandchild could become a trembler. He made me regret how I had treated the tremblers, because we wouldn't want our son's child treated that way.

"I quit the sword academy -- our old student Porta is the master now. We lobbied the judges until they changed the law about turning out the tremblers. They felt bad about what had happened to you, so that helped me convince them.

"We hired the best doctors in the city, and started a home where the woodpeople go when they start to tremble. The doctors are studying them, trying to find a cure so there's some hope for Pel and Rini and the others.

"Some of the woodpeople saw how much I had changed, and finally trusted me enough to tell me about Ymyl. They were sure you had come here, and they understood that I wanted to try to make amends to you.

"Chescu came, too. We brought some of our doctors who want to exchange with the doctors here, so we'll have the best knowledge of both races in both places. And we want you and Pel and Tay and Rini to come home with us.

"Over the years, I kept reliving the calm way you touched me, in our contest. I puzzled over what you had said about my aging body being beautiful. I came to understand that the reason I had been so hard on the tremblers, before, was because I was afraid of weakness in myself. I had spent my life perfecting my art, and somehow thought that would protect me from growing old. Your disease mirrored my mortality to me. And I was afraid. But, you were right, my body is still a miracle. And so is yours.

"Pel told me Bas'ta remarried, and you don't want her to take care of you. We would like to take care of you."

Dranna put her arms around Silla again, a little stiffly, and said. "I'm so sorry this is happening to you. Please forgive me."

Dranna held up the alphabet board. Silla wished she could touch that barely-controlled combat face and say, "*It's all right to cry.*" Instead, she made her own shaking hand circle in on the word "YES" twice.

Just before her exhausted eyes closed, Silla saw Chescu's brown head, come up behind Dranna's. He looked older, too. His eyes were filled with compassion.

The caravan that had brought Dranna and Chescu stayed for two months, while the kyly had foals. Silla couldn't keep track of the number of days that she drifted awake

to find her first love sitting next to her old rival, there in the cool sunshine of Plynyn.

When Bas'ta and Fryn returned from their honeymoon, the caravan was ready to leave for the east in the morning. Silla, Pel, Tay, and Rini were packed to go with them.

Silla spelled G-O T-O B-R-Y.

She could see agreement in Fryn's soft gray eyes. Bas'ta hesitated and then nodded slowly.

Silla's last night in Ymyl was a restless one. Countless times, she opened her eyes on Kyr's empty bed. Her heart wrung with sadness, every time. She threw off her sheets, because she was hot. A breeze rustled through the byny trees and in the open window.

In the morning, Bas'ta and Fryn came to say goodbye. Tears washed Bas'ta's face. Fryn explained, in a reassuring voice, that they had the kyly loaded to take them to Bry.

Silla also wept. She spelled on her board D-O-N-T G-O --

Bas'ta said, "I thought you wanted me to go, honey."

Silla kept spelling -- W-I-T-H-O-U-T B-R-E-A-K-F-A-S-T

Bas'ta laughed her big laugh and made a pot of porridge with hot milk and spices. She gave Fryn a cup, and drank one herself. She put a spoonful in Silla's mouth. It was hard to swallow, but very, very sweet.