



A Game of Heroes

by Gary L.M. Martin

All rights reserved.

Chapter 1: A Love Denied

Elena was one of the very best of the Alkani. She was a brand new Harpy of the Blade, but she had been competing in the lists for three years, ever since she was 15, and very quickly had moved to near the top of the ranks.

She felt the wind in her hair and the sun on her face as she wielded her vorpal blade, seemingly effortlessly, parrying Merusa's attacks, one after another, while making her own in rapid response. Elena moved forward, and back, as if to a dance whose steps only she knew. Merusa tried to match her but seemed to be moving to a dance of her own, one that complemented Elena's in parts but was at cross purposes at others.

Elena cut an impressive figure, her bronze breastplate blazing in the sun. The armor, from the waist going up, covered the undersides of both pairs of wisdoms, but left the upper halves exposed. It was common for warriors to have scars of battle on the upper parts of their wisdoms. "Cleavage of death", they called it. But Elena had none, not a single scar from her many bouts, and she had already been awarded the Valor of the Harpies not once but twice in her short life, and was one of the greatest up and coming swordswomen. All four of her wisdoms were unscarred, untouched as the day they were born. Untouched by blades, at least.

She wore a short white skirt which danced with her movements, and her tall bronze boots captured the sunlight at every move. On her helm she wore her bronze caplet, with red feathers from the Igo ostrich on top, feathers she herself had harvested. Her hair, tied in a neat ponytail, bounced with her as she battled.

Merusa sweated mightily as she pressed to gain the advantage; one could see the wetness on her exposed wisdoms, glistening for all to see. While Merusa's lower two wisdoms were untouched, her upper ones had seen the scars of battle; she was a veteran, despite being only four years older than Elena.

For several moments the two dances competed with each other, until, suddenly, it seemed like Elena changed the tune, without so much as a say-so to Merusa. Merusa, caught off guard, spun to regain her balance, swinging high with a blow of her sword. Elena ducked under Merusa's blade, and swung her vorpal sword, carefully landing the point squarely between Merusa's first and second set of wisdoms, not two inches from her body.

"Score!" cried the keeper, and suddenly, the audience, seeing how precisely it had been executed and how meticulously it had been planned, broke out into wild applause.

Elena and Merusa stepped back, and bowed to each other.

"You fought well," said Merusa, betraying no emotion.

"As did you," said Elena. Merusa came forward and hugged Elena, kissing her on the cheek, and the audience cheered.

Elena smiled, and then turned and noticed, for the first time, the small tent shelter that had been set up during her battle. And on top of it was the emblem of the royal dove.

"Approach!" she was ordered.

Elena sheathed her sword, and went to the tent. Queen Elesha stood there, flanked by her functionaries. Elena bent on one knee. "Your Highness," she said.

"Elena."

The Queen's expression could not be read. It was as if she had been carved out of stone, deep, cold, unreachable.

Elena could hear the whipping of the tent flap in the wind through the silence.

"You may rise."

Elena stood up.

"You have done well," said the Queen, giving only the barest hint of a smile.

"Thank you, Mother."

Elena was the only child of the Queen of Alkani. The Alkani were a race of warrior women who lived in the Hidden Valley. They thought themselves the best fighters in all of Aridor, but valued their seclusion. For many, their existence was merely a myth. The only way in and out of the valley was through the Paths of the Dead, and few knew the way. Elena had been given the rare gift of traveling outside the valley several times, as "part of her education", as the Queen put it. She knew the rest of Aridor was quite different. She knew on the outside, that men ruled and women, if not quite slaves, were treated as lowers.

That's not the way it was in Alkani. Men, all men, without exception, were thralls. When women got married to each other and wanted children, they used the services of a thrall, but as a tool, much as one would use a furry rod to clean a pipe.

Elena had been taught by her royal tutors that thralls were a necessary part of society, a vital source of labor, cooking, cleaning, farming, and of course that *other* special purpose, as needed, but Elena did not like the thought of thralldom of any kind, even for men.

So she had resisted for a long time when Mother had tried to get her a thrall, starting when she was 17. After a year of saying "no", Elena came home one day to find Mother standing with a new thrall she had never seen before.

"What do you think, Elena?" said Mother.

Mother had bought a new thrall. Personally, Elena thought they had more than enough thralls in the palace to do all the chores. Elena shrugged, as if she didn't understand the question, or, more likely, simply didn't care.

"He's yours," said Mother.

It was at that moment that Elena took closer notice of the new slave. Clad in only a loincloth, he was enormous, with huge arm and chest muscles. He had dark hair, and dark eyes, and a firm face, but looked only a few years older than Elena. Others would have called him handsome.

"And I haven't even shown you his best feature," said Mother. She pulled at his loincloth, and it fell to the ground. Mother reached down, and actually cupped his candelabra in her hands, as if she were offering Elena a treat, something to snack on. "Look how much of him there is!"

"Mother!" Elena was embarrassed, at everything; at the very presence of this new slave, at Mother grabbing his candelabra like that, at the still-expressionless face of the thrall, who must be feeling tremendous humiliation, and yet somehow managing not to show any expression.

"I don't want a thrall!" said Elena.

Mother released her hold on the thrall's candelabra, and Elena couldn't help but note how it swayed back and forth, just for a moment. Even the shadow of it was big and heavy on the saucer on the setting table.

"Elena, do you want to have children some day?"

The question caught Elena off guard. Her eyes shifted this way and that. "Yes, Mother, I suppose so."

"You suppose so?" Mother acted as if she had been slapped in the face. "I should hope you'd be a little more certain of such an important thing as that. But if you want a child, you have to use a thrall."

"Mother, I'm not ignorant."

"You sometimes act like you are," Mother snapped. "You have to get used to having a thrall around you."

"There are thralls all around me," said Elena, waving her hands at the palace around her for emphasis.

"You know what I mean," said Mother. She hated when Elena acted purposely obtuse, to avoid obeying her instructions. This was how Elena acted difficult. Her father (another thrall, of course) had been like that too, in some ways. Perhaps she should have chosen to have been impregnated by a different thrall, one who would have passed a more pliable personality down to Elena.

Elena was about to open her mouth to deny Mother again, when her gaze was transfixed by the thrall's face. There was something, something in his impenetrable, dark, eyes. It looked like a plea, almost.

"Mother, no.... no, all right," said Elena, changing what she had been about to say in midstream. "All right, if it will make you happy, I will try this thrall. For a few days. But if I can't tolerate him, he goes!"

"Of course." said the Queen, and it was at that moment that they both knew that there was no chance of that happening. She gave a broad, happy smile, the largest Elena had seen in some time, and said, "I'll leave you two to get acquainted. I have some Kurlian spies I have to put in the frier. I'll be back for dinner." She actually *waved* her hand as she left. Mother never waved. Ever.

The queen and her functionaries left. Elena was left alone in the room with the thrall and suddenly realized she had no idea what to say or do. She looked up at the thrall. "Why, why don't you, you know," she pointed to the loincloth, discarded on the ground. The thing was casting such a big shadow on the setting table! It was making Elena a little nervous and she wasn't quite sure why.

As he reached for his loincloth, Elena suddenly found her head had become paralyzed and she could not turn away while the slave dressed. Only when he was done and *it* was covered again, was the spell broken.

"Do you... have a name?" said Elena, realizing the question was silly the moment she asked.

The thrall nodded, but said nothing.

Had this thrall been debarked? Was he a mute? Suddenly, Elena felt herself in a panic. "Can you speak?" she said, working hard to keep the concern out of her voice.

The thrall, considering, nodded up and down.

"Well, then say something!" Elena almost yelled.

"I am called Davis," said the thrall. His voice was deep as one would expect from a body like that. Elena felt a small thrill tingling down her legs. "It is an honor to meet you, Mistress."

Elena sharply turned away to calm herself for a moment, pretending to discover a sudden interest in the tapestry on the far wall until her bosom stopped heaving. Then, when she had recovered herself, she turned back to him. "All right. Let's get you settled in, shall we?"