

## To Win a Sword

By Tiona Yates

Isala gripped the practice blade and moved to dodge under the heavy swing of her instructor. Despite coming into weapon work so late in her life, she was naturally quite good, and had both quick reactions and the determination to get better. She was one of maybe a dozen students training here in Alamber at this time. It was too bad that her instructors feared that she'd be unlikely to win herself a sword from the Goddess. With neither magery nor mind-magic, and a strong resistance to any hints of priestly training, she was very unlikely to earn Railah's approval.

Her instructors kept up her training, if only because it would be a shame for her to be cast out of the training halls with no trade that she could practice. At least, with her surprising strength for being such a small desert tribeswoman, she might make a decent mercenary. It was possible, for she did seem to show Railah's favor, that she might become good enough to help out here, even, training the new knights in their swordwork. That usually fell to older knights, ones that were slowing down and past their prime. But if Railah offered her that chance, they would be more than happy to have her stay here in Alamber.

Isala shifted her stance, bringing the heavy blade in her hands in an arc, down heavily onto the arm of her opponent. She'd pulled her blow; that was one of the first things they'd taught any who came to study here. But it was still enough to knock Kistar's blade from his hands. She was good. He wished again that there was some hope that she'd actually earn a sword. But it seemed unlikely indeed, having no magic of her own to compliment the powerful magics contained in a soulsword. He stepped back, signing an end to the practice.

"That was a good hit, an unlikely one, but still a good hit. You've got both the strength and skill to go far, as a mercenary, most likely."

"I will earn one of the Goddess' swords," her voice was low, her face intense, as she sheathed the greatsword she'd been holding and let him retrieve his soulsword. She knew the rules, but was certain, somehow within her, that she was destined for the Goddess' Order. She had as much reason as a person could have to test for such a blade. It would provide her with safety, security. Her instructors knew that as well as she did. With a soulsword, she'd never have to fear another man's attack upon her person. But, they also knew that she wouldn't gain such a sword without magic of some form. And the only magic they couldn't prove she didn't have, she refused to touch, for her own reasons.

Kistar sheathed his blade smoothly then shook his head, "Railah has never been known to grant such a gift to an unmagicked person. You know that; you've progressed far enough in your lessons to know that much. Even if you could convince the Prior to take you down to the chapel, once it was proven that the Goddess hasn't accepted you, you'd no longer be able to stay here. You would have to move on, most likely as a mercenary. Don't rush yourself. If you're going to have to take up a blade to survive, you will need more training, in things other than merely swordwork."

Isala shook her head, "I have reached the age where I can test. I can hold my own against those I would have as sword sisters and brothers. There is no reason to wait longer. I need to test, see what the Goddess wishes of me." There was a need in her, a desperate need, to find the security that would keep her from having to face that wrongness that she'd faced once before. It didn't matter if the others

thought she wouldn't earn a soulsword; she knew that she would. She had felt the calm that comes from the Goddess. She couldn't imagine that Railah would deny her a sword, not now.

Kistar shook his head. She could continue training, improving. She had the skill that would make a good mercenary, but he doubted it would protect her from the past she was running from. That she'd been terrified by her promised husband, back there in the desert a few years ago, was obvious. She wouldn't touch priestly magics, perhaps because of the dedication to Jirel that most girl-children received there. She probably still felt bound by that dedication, though she performed no magics at all, whether Jirellian or Railahn. And a regular sword couldn't guarantee the protection a soulsword would. He understood that. If she chose lay-service to Railah, she'd be protected, but no, she wanted a sword.

"You're right, Isala. No one can stop you. It is traditional for the Prior to go down there with you, wait for the time it takes to tell. Even if you don't have that, you can still test. But I can't imagine any way that you'd manage to convince Railah to allow this, not without some form of magic."

She straightened her braid and pulled at the armor she'd used for the practice. "I must test. It is something within myself. If I cannot get Prior Landol to bring me to the chapel, I will go myself, but I will earn a soulsword."

Kistar feared greatly for what would happen to Isala when she failed. He was certain that she would. No one without magic ever earned a soulsword. Even if she had the natural aptitude for magic, unless she was willing to use that magic at the command of the Goddess, she wouldn't have any chance for that kind of gift. He watched her walk away, knowing that she would force the issue, probably within the next week.

He was right, but he didn't know how soon it would be. Prior Landol had already told her that he would not grant her the permission to go to the chapel. Theoretically, she could go herself. She knew that part of the laws as much as any other. So, when the motherhouse slept, she would go herself, tonight.

She had already snuck a proper outfit for the test from the stores. It was a little big for her, though perhaps made for an elvare initially, but she could cinch the trousers tightly, and belt the tunic. She had to know, tonight, whether Railah truly did favor her. No matter what people said, she had to be certain. What she'd never said was that she had performed small magics before, priestly ones, dedicated to Jirel, before she'd run from her tribe. She knew that she had magic, though she did not wish to ever use it. Railah's priesthood might be different, but she didn't want the taint of priestly magics, even if that's what gave her the strength to defend herself.

Once the temple here had fallen asleep, she carefully pulled herself out of the bed she used in the dormitory, and changed from her light sleeping tunic to the outfit of a petitioner. The clothing was white, bleached so after every attempt at earning a soulsword. And she prepared herself mentally. She knew that she'd have to leave this place if she failed. There would be no hiding her failure if it came. Yet the chance existed that she might succeed. And that was what she was hoping and praying for.

Padding silently down the hallway, she slipped into the stairway down to the vaults. The chapel of the test was down here, protected and hidden. She knew where it had to be, even though she'd never walked this way before. There were glow lamps floating along the walls at regular intervals, enough to keep the way lit for her. And, at the end of a long hallway, she could see the heavy door to the chapel.

She took in a deep breath, trying to steady herself. This was going to be a harder test for her than fighting off Ikhal. She would bare her soul to the Goddess she had dedicated herself to, open herself up to the possibility of failure, of refusal. But it was also necessary. Though there were plenty of mercenaries who were women, she knew that there was always the chance of what could happen if she were captured. It would be different with a soulsword, for the blade's magic would guard her and protect her, as would the oaths she would take, keeping her from being forced into an unwanted marriage or bed-bond. She needed a soulsword.

She opened the door quietly and stepped within, closing it behind her. There, as she had been told to expect, was Railah's altar, undressed stone with a brazier kept burning upon it, and the rack of possible soulswords behind it. One of those swords was what she wanted, needed. She knelt on the cold stone and began her petition, opening up her heart and singing the songs she had learned, and hoping that her heart would guide her to complete this ritual correctly.

There was an outpouring of warmth in her spirit as she sang the ritual invocation. She could feel the Goddess' mind upon her, judging her and testing her. She let her spirit show the need she had, not only to protect herself, but to protect others like her, women and girls forced into unwanted marriages, forced to bear again and again until they died of the bearing. That was what she was trying to avoid; she wanted neither husband nor child. She needed the Goddess' protection to keep that from happening, ever.

As the words fell silent on her lips, she stood, focused almost in a trance. There were six swords ready for bearers, some reasonably new, though none was unmarked as to its name. All had been borne at least once before. She stood up carefully, walking to the rack of swords behind the altar. Each one possessed some power, and three began to respond to her touch. That didn't mean much, only that her spirit was similar enough to pull a reaction from them. She carefully concentrated on each one, wishing for the ability to hear the song of the sword before it was bound. That would tell her in truth, if any of these blades were destined for her.

Of those blades, one of them, an old one, seemed to be the strongest. As her hands touched it again, she could feel a warmth, a natural understanding. She would attempt with this blade. She picked it up and carried it carefully to her place before the altar. Now was the time to know truly whether she had Railah's favor.

Carefully, she set the blade against the palm of her left hand, opening a slit that would allow the blood to wash over it, attempting to bond with the soulsword. It felt like a fire was washing over her, powerful and yet non-damaging. In her head she could hear words beginning to form, a question for her, ~Why should I give thee of my power, when thou will avoid all other uses of it?~

She knew she had to answer that accusation, ~Lady, I will do whatever it is that you wish of me, should you grant me this boon. My dedication, my service, all will be yours. I must prove that I am not Jirel's, and cannot be bound that way. You are my only hope.~

The words were not harsh that returned, but they held a bit of sternness to them, ~This service will be mine regardless, but I will have thee learn the truth to thy gifts, if not quite yet. When the time comes, thou will loose my own magics upon my enemies. I will grant thee this gift, in knowledge that thou will serve me, no matter how difficult such service becomes. I will have need of thee, but know this, as thou are mine, no man will touch thee with such intent as thou fear. ~

The light and fire receded, and Isala looked down at the blade in her hands. It was limned with fire, deep red fire from Railah's choice. This blade would be hers. As she closed her right hand along the hilts, she could hear its name echo in her mind, JusticeBeacon. She would have known soon anyway, but it was better to learn it this way, from the Goddess herself. She rose to her feet in a smooth motion, carefully keeping the blade from touching the ground just yet. Soon, but not now.

The door opened behind her. Railah must have awakened the Prior. Isala turned toward him, a fire within herself to prove that she was as she had guessed already. "Railah has granted me a sword, Prior Landol. I will be a Sacred Sword."

He nodded, frowning. "I don't know how you convinced the Goddess of this, but she has made it clear that you are indeed one of her chosen. Kneel then, and take the oath that she would have of you."

She set the point of JusticeBeacon into the floor and dropped to almost kneel and kiss the crossguard of her sword. "I Isala Ritam, daughter of Khal Ritam and Lihana of the Ayahana do promise to adhere to Railah's laws in all things, speaking truth whenever possible, and defending those who seek

justice with all the strength of my body. I further swear to uphold law and justice before all of the comforts of the world, seeking Railah's touch in all things. Let her justice come upon me now, and guide and strengthen me while I serve her will. And may her just punishment fall upon me should I fail in my duties. I take her name in this, Lady Railah, Mind Lady and Mistress of Magics. Let it ever be so."

The feeling of power she'd sensed earlier, the watchfulness that could only be Railah's own attention seemed to focus on her for a moment longer, then withdrew. It was enough. Isala rose, holding the blade carefully between her hands, "This is JusticeBeacon."

The Prior forced a smile. Perhaps there was more to this desert tribeswoman than appeared. For whatever reason, the Goddess had accepted her, even woken him to tell him that he was needed here. She was a Sacred Sword now, and would train a bit further before being partnered and sent off to do the Goddess' will. But she would have that which she'd always said she would have, the favor of Railah. It might not make any sense to him now, but he expected that he'd learn of her own magics as the years passed.

©Tiona Daughtry, 2013