

THE SJÖFN ACADEMY THE CHRONICLES OF ARIANTHEM II

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ISBN: 978-0-9885822-3-1

Published by Samantha Sabian and Arianthem Press

THE SJÖFN ACADEMY Vol 2 CHRONICLES OF ARIANTHEM, 2013. FIRST PRINTING.

Office of Publication: Los Angeles, California

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Chapter 1

Skye appeared outwardly calm, but Torsten could tell by the way she chewed her thumbnail that she was ill at ease. He was none too happy at this plan, either. It wasn't simply that his childhood friend was being sent away. It was the fact that she was being delivered into the hands of their mortal enemies.

Torsten had to correct himself. Skye was not being sent away; she was leaving voluntarily. And this was the result of long-term diplomatic negotiations between the Ha'kan and the Tavinter in an attempt to settle a war that had raged for centuries. The Ha'kan Queen had made a most intriguing and unusual offer. She herself had a daughter but three years older than Skye. Skye could attend the Sjöfn Academy, the most prestigious and exclusive institution in all of Arianthem, and be personally mentored by the Queen's daughter. It was hoped that the experiment would resolve the long-standing bitterness between the two cultures.

Torsten feared it would end in disaster. Skye, although well-able to handle herself, was being delivered helpless into the lion's maw. He did not trust the Ha'kan. Skye's identity would be concealed except to a select few, but still, the fact that Kolgrim would deliver his own daughter, his only heir, into such a dangerous situation bespoke how desperate the Tavinter situation had become.

The doors to the chieftain's chambers opened and a guard motioned for Skye to enter. She stood, patting Torsten on the shoulder.

"It'll be fine, friend. You'll see."

Torsten found her words none too convincing. And her tone of voice told him she did not entirely believe them, either.

Kolgrim eyed his daughter as she entered. She was calm, resolved, perhaps even a little resigned. Her expression brightened as the gray-bearded man stepped from the shadows and she ran to him, hugging him mightily.

“I knew you would come!” Skye said.

Pale blue eyes twinkled from a wizened face. “Did you think I would miss the opportunity to say goodbye to my favorite person in the world?”

Skye’s expression clouded a little at the mention of their parting, and the gray-haired man motioned for her to join him on the couch adjacent to Kolgrim.

“You’ll be fine, my little sparrow. I think you’ll find your time at Sjöfn very enlightening, perhaps even enjoyable.”

“It’ll be strange being around nothing but women.”

Kolgrim sighed. It would be more than strange. He could not imagine the cultural upheaval he was exposing his daughter to. The Ha’kan and Tavinter cultures could not be more different and he feared this attempt to bridge that gap would end in disaster. Still, with the Garmlain pressuring them on one side, the Ha’kan on the other, and the growing threat of the Hyr’rok’kin, their people could not survive without seeking some type of alliance. And the Ha’kan were the lesser, just barely, of the three evils.

“Do you have any advice for me?” Skye asked.

The elderly man gazed at her fondly. “Just be yourself, Skye. Keep your mind and your heart open.”

Skye nodded. It seemed very vague advice and not particularly helpful. But she would keep it in mind.

“Are you ready?” Kolgrim said a little gruffly. He was struggling and wanted to get this over with before he changed his mind. He had lost his wife, Isolde, but a few years before and now he was giving away his daughter.

“I am,” Skye said, squaring her shoulders.

“Good,” Kolgrim said. “A Tavinter cohort will escort you to the agreed meeting place where you will continue on with the Ha’kan.”

“I understand,” Skye said with a short bow and started to leave the room.

“Skye,” Kolgrim called to her, his voice thick with emotion.

Skye understood this also, and forsaking the legendary Tavinter reserve, rushed into his arms. He hugged her tightly and it was she who finally stepped back, reverting to her normal calm demeanor. He had never been more proud of her.

Both men watched as the young woman disappeared from the room. Kolgrim turned to the older man.

“This goes against all of my instincts. I hope you’re right.”

The gray-haired man was thoughtful. “I can see the beginning of things, and less clearly, the end, and I know nothing of what happens in between. But I can tell you that this is necessary, not only for the Tavinter and the Ha’kan, but for all of Arianthem.”

Chapter 2

Queen Halla stood, moved about the room, then re-settled upon her throne for perhaps the tenth time, brushing her robes distractedly. Her High Priestess, Astrid, glanced to her then over to Senta and Gimle. The three of them represented the very height of Ha'kan society, the heads of the three vocational branches within their culture. Senta, tall and broad-shouldered although not thickly built, was in charge of the military and head of the Royal Guard, the highest-ranking member of the Warrior caste. Gimle, slim and willowy, was responsible for all Ha'kan research and education, by default head of the Academy as the head of the Scholar caste. And Astrid, voluptuous as were most of her calling, oversaw the Priestess caste, a vocation integral to the stability of Ha'kan culture. Queen Halla, appropriately, was a perfect blend of all three: tall, graceful, and shapely.

It was significant that these three joined the Queen in welcoming the newest member of the Academy, something that was never done. Few “non-Ha'kan” were allowed into Sjöfn Academy, and they generally came only as some part of a brief exchange program. This experiment was novel on so many levels.

But really, Astrid thought to herself, she and the others were present primarily to provide support for the Queen. And, she silently admitted, because their curiosity was getting the best of them.

The Queen got up and paced the throne room restlessly once more. She really wished the escort would arrive so she could get this over with. It had seemed like such a good idea, but now she was questioning the wisdom

of it for so many reasons.

Unfortunately for her peace of mind, her staff began articulating some of those reasons.

“Do you think she’ll want to be a warrior?” Senta asked, her misgivings evident. “The Tavinter fight in such a low and unorthodox manner.”

Gimle had her own misgivings about the newcomer, but the scholar in her would not let such a mischaracterization stand. “The Tavinter are nomads, forest dwellers, and their guerilla tactics are suitable for the terrain they fight in and their lack of sophisticated weaponry.”

These comments intruded upon Queen Halla’s thoughts. “Not to mention the fact this ‘low’ and ‘unsophisticated’ opponent has held the Ha’kan at bay for hundreds of years despite our superior tactics, weaponry, and numbers.”

Senta fell silent. The Queen’s words were true. The Ha’kan should have defeated the Tavinter centuries ago, yet they had proved a tenacious enemy. The Tavinter were also excellent hunters and, Senta had to admit, the best scouts in all of Arianthem.

It was Gimle’s turn to weigh in on the new student. “I hope she doesn’t aspire to be a scholar. The Tavinter have their saving graces, but are not known for their intelligence.”

“You forget Isleif,” the Queen reminded her.

“I can only think Isleif was an anomaly,” Gimle said, “although such a wizard is a credit to any people. But Isleif must have passed a hundred years ago.”

“The Tavinter ways are just different,” Queen Halla commented, her thoughts still flitting about. The Ha’kan prided themselves on their vast written history, their compilations, their research. They possessed one of the finest libraries in all Arianthem. The Tavinter, on the other hand, relied almost entirely on an oral history in keeping with their nomadic ways.

“I just hope she doesn’t want to be a Priestess,” Astrid said, finally offering her own opinion with a pained expression on her face.

Gimle tried to stifle a laugh which rendered it an unfortunate snort. Senta openly chuckled. The Queen remained silent, her expression brooding. This was the scenario she dreaded the most. The Ha’kan, without exception, were beautiful. And they prized beauty as much as they prized strength or knowledge. Many outside their lands considered the

Ha'kan shallow, but the Ha'kan considered them hypocritical. All prized beauty; only the Ha'kan did so without apology or denial. Extraordinary beauty was required to be a Priestess.

And the Tavinter, well, there was just no way around it. They were not attractive. The few that had been captured, male and female, were just downright ugly. The women were broad hipped with plain features, chipped teeth, and poor hygiene. The Queen dwelled upon the fact that this poor creature might be ostracized. It would help that her daughter, who was extremely popular, would be assigned as mentor, but it might not be enough. Thankfully Gimle changed the subject.

"Are we even certain she's the Tavinter heir? I understand there was some question, at least historically, to her claim?"

"That was all rumors and nonsense," the Queen said, "and it was a question settled by the Tavinter years ago. Apparently, the girl's great-grandmother gave birth to her grandfather in a questionable time frame, a little late after her husband's death. But it was resolved, and the succession continues unchallenged."

The Queen settled onto her throne once more and the group fell silent. At last, the great doors opened, and the chief of the escort entered. She motioned and a small, shrouded figure came through the door.

"We release our charge to you," the escort said, then bowed and left. The figure wavered near the doorway.

"Approach the throne," Senta said with authority, and the small figure moved forward. All watched, curious to see if the Tavinter would kneel as was customary or would be too proud to do so. The figure, dressed in a rough-hewn, hooded robe, walked up the steps and once at the top, gracefully took a knee.

"Arise," Queen Halla said, "and welcome to our lands."

The figure stood upright, still a little uncertain.

"Please remove your hood, my dear," the Queen directed, and the figure obeyed.

Gimle gasped aloud and Senta's mouth dropped open. The Queen and Astrid simply stared.

And stared.

And stared some more, for an interminably lengthy time.

Skye looked from one woman to the other, uncertain what exactly

she had done wrong. She had kneeled, just as she had been instructed. She had committed no breach of etiquette as far as she knew. Her cheeks grew hot at the prolonged inspection.

It was finally Astrid who regained her senses and made a small movement to attract the Queen's attention. The Queen's recovery was instantaneous, and she glanced to Senta and Gimle who were still openly gaping.

"Senta," she whispered sharply, "shut your mouth."

Senta's jaw clamped shut and both she and Gimle regained their composure.

Skye's cheeks were burning but she went forward with her prepared speech.

"I thank you for this opportunity and welcome this new dialogue between our people. I will do my very best to learn all that I can while I'm here and will strive to meet the high standards of the Academy."

The Queen had now regained all her regal composure. She stood and walked to the girl, taking her hand.

"And I welcome your presence here. May this lead to peace between our lands." She gestured to Gimle. "This is Gimle, the Headmistress of the school."

Skye bowed in the Tavinter custom, a sign of respect and recognition. Gimle returned the bow. "I'll provide you with a tour of the grounds shortly and then get you settled into your quarters."

Skye nodded her thanks. She was tired from the journey which had taken almost four full days.

"If you wouldn't mind sitting in the antechamber for a moment," the Queen said, "Gimle will be with you in just a bit."

The escort returned and Skye followed her from the room. The four women fell into silence, staring at the closed door.

"Well," Queen Halla said at last, "now I have a whole host of new problems on my hands."

Senta fairly exploded. "THAT was the Tavinter?"

"Yes," the Queen said, amused, "it seems we've been somewhat misinformed."

The girl was gorgeous. Stunning in every way. Exceptional even for a Ha'kan, not to mention the allegedly unattractive Tavinter. She had olive

skin, hazel-green eyes framed with long dark eyelashes, and light brown hair streaked by the sun. Her high cheekbones were pronounced, even more lovely when she had blushed. Her lips were neither too thin nor too full but fit perfectly in her chiseled features. She was a touch boyish, in that space between childhood and womanhood, but simply beautiful.

“They fight in furs and war paint, or even masks made from animal skulls,” Senta mused, “And they always carry their dead from the battlefield. Is it possible we’ve been misled on purpose?”

“I think it not only possible but probable,” the Queen replied, “If you remember, my grandmother used to raid surrounding lands for beautiful women to enslave, a custom my mother abolished. It’s possible the Tavinter deception is purposeful and goes back a very long time.”

“By Sjöfn,” Astrid said, “I can think of none that would not welcome her as a Priestess. I take back my earlier words.”

“As I said,” Queen Halla remarked, “I have a whole host of new problems on my hands. Astrid, get Lifa in here.”

Skye sat outside on the marble bench. It was uncomfortable to her. She was used to furniture made of wood and furs. She could not fathom why anyone would choose to make a bench of this material. She knocked on it experimentally with her knuckles: cold and hard. A ridiculous choice for something to sit on. Her backside was as slender as the rest of her and she could actually feel the two bones she was sitting upon. She sighed, trying to remain open-minded. At least the bench would last a great while, perhaps that was the purpose. She stared at the floor. The intricate tiles had been as harsh and unfamiliar to her feet as the bench. Nothing was normal or familiar here, not even the ground.

A young woman was coming down the hallway and Skye looked to her with interest. She was lovely, which really wasn’t that descriptive as everyone Skye had seen was beautiful. But this young woman had a spring in her step and a vivacity to her that was marvelously attractive. Her hair was worn long, braided in a most comely fashion. The neckline of her gown was not immodest but revealed a hint of cleavage that was somehow more enticing than had more been revealed.

Lifa swayed gracefully down the hallway, nodding to the Queen's guards who smiled at her. Their looks were of gentle admiration, for Lifa was too young for any of them. But she was the High Priestess in training, the one most likely to succeed Astrid when Dallan assumed the throne. And she possessed all the liveliness and charisma one should possess for such an exalted and important position.

Lifa caught sight of the newcomer seated on the bench. The newest class had arrived last week, and she knew most of those girls already. But this one she had not seen before and she certainly would remember her if she had. Lifa greatly desired to stop and speak with her and probably would have had she been summoned by anyone but the Queen. Instead, she smiled as she passed.

"Hello," she said.

Skye felt an attack of shyness, but the young woman's smile was so warm and genuine she managed a response.

"Hello," she replied, and the young woman continued gracefully on, glancing back over her shoulder. Fortunately, the guard noted Lifa's inattention and opened the door for her so that Lifa did not walk full into it.

The Queen observed Lifa's distracted entrance and placed her hand on her forehead, sighing deeply. Astrid hid a smile.

"Oh my," Lifa murmured to herself with pleasure. Such a delightful addition to the campus. She approached the throne, glided up the steps, then kneeled before the Queen. It was obvious she was still contemplating the girl seated outside on the bench as she rose to her feet.

"And how is the new class coming along?" Astrid asked her protégé.

"They are splendid," Lifa said, "and settling in nicely."

"Good," the Queen said, "because I have a very important task for you."

Lifa bowed demurely. "I'm at your service, my Queen."

Halla gazed at the girl, unsure how to proceed, then decided she should just get right to it.

"The girl sitting outside on the bench is my daughter's responsibility, but Dallan is not scheduled to return from summer field exercises for at least two months."

Lifa assessed the Queen's words, not fully understanding. Comprehension was slow to dawn but when it did, her response was the same as

the Queen's staff.

"That is the Tavinter?"

Queen Halla sighed again as Lifa muffled laughter, speaking more to herself than those present. "And Dallan was so dreading this!"

It was as Halla expected. Her daughter was dutiful and would never speak openly out of respect, but clearly, she had not been looking forward to this assignment. Lifa's mirth was not helping things.

"Lifa," Astrid said gently, "focus."

Lifa sobered abruptly, remembering she was standing before the Queen. She was greatly beloved by all present, but she would not breach etiquette.

"Of course, forgive me. And what is it you wish of me, my Queen?"

"I want you and the other Priestesses to take her under your wing, at least until Dallan returns. Much rides on the success of this experiment."

Lifa's eyes glowed at the prospect and her dazzling smile lit up the room once more, but before she could respond, the Queen would finish.

"There's one significant issue, however."

Lifa waited for the Queen's words, hanging on what was evidently a weighty revelation.

"The girl, Skye, is still four months shy of the Age of Consent."

This proclamation sobered Lifa completely. The Ha'kan possessed an openly sexual, non-monogamous society whose structure was created and maintained in the bedroom. Indeed, almost all relationships whether personal, professional or political had their basis in some type of sexual contact, casual or otherwise. Because of this, the Age of Consent was one of the few immutable laws. All were discouraged from sex prior to the Age, not due to moral objection or prudishness, but rather so that the sexual awakening could be supervised. Sex was so integral to their culture, it was important that the women enjoyed it and that they be good at it, a skill as recognized as archery, swordplay, or sorcery. The primary purpose of the Priestess caste was to foster the sexual health and education of the individual to further the society as a whole.

"As you know," Queen Halla continued, "no one under the Age of Consent is allowed into the Academy, at least under normal circumstances. But obviously this is not a normal situation. So, you're going to have to be vigilant because most will not know Skye's identity or her age."

Lifa's insuppressible personality bubbled to the surface once more. This was a serious matter but that did not mean she could not enjoy it.

"I understand, my Queen. Does that mean I shouldn't teach her of our ways?"

"No," the Queen said emphatically, "you will most definitely educate her about our society. Answer her every question. Just keep her untouched until her day comes."

A smile twitched at the corners of Lifa's mouth. "And when that day comes?"

"Then she may do as she wishes," the Queen replied, and Lifa's smile grew. She went to a knee.

"As my Queen wills it, so it shall be."

Halla dismissed her and Lifa walked from the room in a dignified manner, although she began humming a lovely little tune before she was even out the door. The Queen watched her go, her misgivings resurfacing in the expression on her face.

"Lifa will be fine, my Queen," Astrid said soothingly.

"Really?" the Queen said, raising an eyebrow. "Your successor, the future High Priestess, the one person in all the school who should possess the most self-control, nearly walked into the door upon first sight of the girl. And my First General," Halla said, glancing to Senta with disbelief, "stood gaping."

"Lifa is irrepressible," Astrid said, "but she takes her vows seriously. I cannot defend Senta, however."

There was humor in Astrid's tone and no sting to her words, and Senta took the good-natured barb as intended. "Her appearance was just unexpected," Senta said a little gruffly. She was normally an impenetrable rock and was embarrassed that the situation had caught her so off guard.

"Gimle," Halla said, turning to her First Scholar, "why don't you show the girl about the grounds then get her settled. I'm sure she must be tired."

Skye's cheeks felt very hot. The lovely young woman had been in the throne room only a short time before she sauntered back out, appar-

ently quite pleased. She hummed a pretty little tune and flashed Skye a brilliant smile as she reached out and tousled Skye's hair as she passed. Skye had no idea what any of that meant but had the fleeting thought she wished she would come back and do it again.

The doors re-opened and the woman who had been introduced as the Headmistress approached her. Skye examined her as all these women were fascinating. Gimle wore spectacles and a long robe that was somewhat shapeless. Her fair hair was fine, silken almost, and pulled into a long braid down her back. Still, there was a refined loveliness about her, a poised intelligence that was exceedingly attractive. She was bookish, probably the meekest and least imposing of the four adult women Skye had just met, and yet even so, sensuality swirled about her in a subtle, most distracting manner.

"Well now," Gimle said, "let me show you about the Academy grounds."

Skye stood, glad to be off the hard bench but still feeling its impression upon her backside. Four days on a horse had been nothing compared to the minutes spent on that bench. She followed the First Scholar as two of the Guard fell in behind. Skye cast a sidelong glance at them, wondering at their accompaniment. Their appearance was impressive, their armor shining brightly in the sun, the Ha'kan eagle crest prominent on their shields. They carried spears that appeared ceremonial in nature, although wickedly sharp, nonetheless. Gimle followed her gaze.

"They accompany me," she explained, "as an honor due my station and not for protection."

"Ah," Skye said. She was trying to remember everything she had been taught prior to her journey, but it was all jumbled together now. "And you are First Scholar, the head of the Scholar caste and vocation."

"Yes," Gimle said, pleased that the girl had done some homework. "All Ha'kan eventually choose one of three vocations, Scholar, Warrior, or Priestess. There is considerable overlap in the actual professions, however. For example, one could be a talented mage as either a scholar or a warrior. As a scholar, one would focus on research, either historically or in the development of new magic. As a warrior, one would focus more on application, such as a battle-mage."

"And could a mage be a Priestess?" Skye asked. She was very curi-

ous about the Priestess caste because it seemed central to Ha'kan society, yet there was very little information about it.

"Of course," Gimle said, reeling in her usual impulse to go off on any subject *ad infinitum*. Several erotic applications came to mind, but this was perhaps a subject best left to Lifa. "You'll meet the High Priestess in training later and she can answer your questions regarding the role of the Ministry."

They had exited the palace and were now standing in the middle of an immense courtyard. The Academy itself was bordered by an outer wall and inner wall, both gigantic and near-impenetrable structures. Three walkways diverged from the palace in a fan-like array, leading to three marble buildings. The walkways renewed on the other side of the buildings, converging to a single enormous structure on the far side of the courtyard opposite the palace. Gimle pointed to the three middle buildings.

"These are the places of instruction for each vocation, though much of the instruction for warriors is outside, over there."

Skye looked over to the open fields adjacent the far-left building. Figures could be seen engaged in various physical activities, swordplay, archery, hand-to-hand combat, and general conditioning. She felt a twinge of nervousness in her stomach.

"The building in the middle is for the Scholar caste, and the building on the right for the Ministry." She pointed to the far structure. "And that's the barracks, where all the students are housed. With the exception of the Priestesses," Gimle said absently, "who actually live in the Ministry building."

Skye wanted to ask why that was, but Gimle continued her recitation without pause. "The classes of students are designated fourth through first. You're considered a fourth year student even though it's your first year here. I know it seems somewhat opposite, but that's just the way it is. Students may gravitate towards one vocation or another, but they don't actually choose until they are first year. You, therefore, will receive training in all the vocations." Gimle paused, clearing her throat, her thoughts on the Priestess caste. "To a greater or lesser degree."

Skye again started to ask a question but Gimle barreled on. "The far building holds the Great Hall where assemblies are held and meals are served, although in fair weather, the students generally eat outside in the

courtyard. The palace behind us also houses the Queen's staff and academy administration."

Skye was finally able to fit a word in edgewise. "But this isn't the true Ha'kan palace, is it? It's normally in the capital to the east?"

Gimle was again pleased by the girl's attention to detail. Perhaps the Tavinter were not as ignorant as they had been led to believe. "You're right. The true palace is in Haldis. But you're attending the Academy at a very special time. Queen Halla is present because her daughter is of age to attend the college. Although the first year students generally run most of the school as a rule, this particular cohort is very important. Dallan will one day assume the throne in her mother's stead and it's likely the friends and allies she has now will remain by her side and assume the positions of importance in Ha'kan society. Indeed, it's widely understood that Dallan has already chosen her High Priestess, her First Scholar, and her First General, although they merely practice the positions now."

Gimle was describing a very benign succession which was foreign to Skye. "And the Queen will yield the throne voluntarily?" she asked.

Gimle laughed. "Oh yes, it's a voluntary process. Each generation trains the next and enjoys the passing of the baton. Although Queen Halla's mother has passed away, several of her cohort live on to provide advice and support while enjoying their later years."

They were near the three educational buildings and a bell in the central tower began clanging, the metal tone echoing out musically across the courtyard. Apparently, it signified a break in classes as young women began pouring out onto the walkways.

"Ah," Gimle said, "Twelfth hour. They'll be breaking for noon's repast."

The girls nearing them visibly slowed and began whispering amongst themselves. A sea of young ladies flowed around Skye, Gimle, and the two Guards. Most openly stared, giggled, and continued whispering. Skye shrunk down into herself and unconsciously leaned toward Gimle. Gimle glanced down, feeling sorry for the girl. She clearly did not process that she was being openly admired and Gimle felt a surge of protectiveness. Although normally warm and kind-hearted, she was also known for a stern gaze that would freeze young women in their tracks. She used that gaze liberally at the moment to keep the students at a distance and on their way,

and if that did not suffice, a sharp rap of a spear on shield from the guards kept everyone moving. It did not, however, stop the curious and admiring stares that continued unabated.

Skye glanced about her. The young women wore all types of different clothing. Some wore dresses, some wore robes, some wore lightweight leather armor. Skye wondered if they chose their clothing based on their preferred vocation, or if it was just personal choice. She had removed her rough-hewn robe and now wore simple breeches and a loose cotton shirt. She felt very plain, even drab in the sea of colorful, handsome clothing.

“Come along,” Gimle said, placing her hand comfortingly on Skye’s shoulder, “let me show you to your room.”

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