

# Goldensun

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**Reformation**  
Lightning



# 1

## The Order of the Dragon

Hera's short blonde hair spiked upwards towards the leaden sky, accentuating the steely determination in her eyes as the horn sounded for the fight to begin. She sparred with her opponent, feeling him out and hunting for weaknesses. Their feet moved constantly as they lunged and ducked and feinted and whirled. Young as she was at thirteen, Hera's relentless training had already provided her slim figure with well-toned muscle and rapid reaction time.

Suddenly, Janus thrust his lance forwards towards her torso, but he was far too slow to catch her off guard. Her lightning sidestep and counterthrust resulted in a guttural grunt from Janus as he took the full weight of her cudgel in his midriff. He bent over and retreated a step to regain his breath and his balance. But Hera did not allow him the privilege. She lunged forwards and delivered a second blow to his chest, sending him sprawling, gasping for air. He rolled over, clutching his chest and grasping for his lance. But Hera kicked it away from his hand, disarming him. She stood over him, waiting for him to rise. The horn

sounded again, and the bout was over. Janus lay panting, his perspiration mingling with the dust. Hera had not even broken a sweat.

The tournament was in its early stages, and most of the newcomers were knocked out in the first two rounds. Janus, though, had been with the Order of the Dragon for three years and he thought he had made progress. This devastating defeat at the hands of Hera made him realise how far he had yet to go. He had known she was going to win the round before the bell had even tolled to signal its start, but he thought he may at least have given her a run for her money. As he picked himself up and gazed around the sparsely populated arena, he reckoned that Hera's only chance of defeat would come from one of the Seniors. She might even make it into the semi-finals which would be a record-breaking achievement for a Shell. But then...she'd been here a long time.

Later that evening, Hera lay in her bunk, reminiscing about years gone by. Inevitably, her thoughts led her to the night of her kidnap eight years earlier. The details were seared into her brain. The family to whom she once belonged were sleeping in the house as she was woken and whisked from her bed, blankets and all, tape fixed firmly across her mouth to prevent her from making a noise. She remembered that terrifying journey in the blackness of the van, and the smell of fumes and oil and sawdust and urine. She remembered the blinding light that greeted her as the doors opened in the delivery dock at the far end of the compound. She remembered her terror as warriors

clad in black pulled her from the van and put her on the docking platform to be inspected. She remembered how she had stood in her damp pink nightgown, biting her lip and refusing to cry, glaring back at them in hostility. She remembered that throughout her first year here she had refused to speak, refused to trust anyone, withdrew deep within herself. But she never forgot her parents and her little brother Jethry.

Most trainees arrived at the compound around the age of nine, orphaned by accident or design. Usually they came loudly, with heart-rending sobs, screaming at the monks. Often it took months for them to calm down and become useful. But Hera had been only five years old when she was taken. Within days, she had adjusted to a new life in the compound – perhaps it was because she was so young. Within two weeks, she was knuckling down to train. She never cried. She never looked back. She built a wall around her heart and pushed the pain away. No-one would ever break her. She would never surrender. And she would be the best warrior the Order of the Dragon had ever seen.

She remembered the night, three years later, when she had finally figured out how to exit her dormitory via the skylight and get across the compound unnoticed in the dark. Now she could watch the Seniors do their advanced combat training. After that, night after night, she would lie in the shadows on the rooftop, memorising the moves and methods the monks were teaching. Then, early in the morning – as she moved out of the dormitory for the strictly regulated ten-minute shower in the wash hut – she

would rehearse those same moves in the large cubicle, the running water to her left covering the sounds of her feet on the boards. Then she would jump under the water and race through the shower in the last ninety seconds, pulling her clothes over her not-quite-dry body, and emerge panting into the compound ready for the day's work. She smiled as she remembered that she had kept this up for nearly eighteen months before someone discovered she was not in her bed when she should have been. Then there was hell to pay.

She turned over on her bed once more, searching for a cool place on her pillow on the hot April evening, trying to get to sleep. She could hear a few of the Shells discussing the tournament and the Narkon Carnival that accompanied it. It was the one time of the year all the trainees enjoyed. The flamboyant market stalls with their wide range of hats and artwork and clothing and ornaments and fruit and candy. The performers on stilts who wove in and out of the crowds, juggling fire sticks or riding unicycles. The giant animal balloons in impossible colours, desperately held down by beefy men in striped shirts and rippling brown capes. The massive model dragon flowing up and down the street, powered by twenty Senior combatants dressed in deep vermilion robes. The musicians dotted about the town, playing their jaunty tunes on traditional Turonian instruments. The smells from the pop-up grills churning out huge quantities of pan-seared wings and pork ribs, all devoured by the happy and hungry crowds surging across the town. The trainees loved the carnival. With so many

bustling crowds and so much noise, it was the easiest thing in the world to steal food from the grills and the tubs of candy and the fruit and vegetable stalls and the international cuisine marquees and most of the other food vendors who were crammed into every nook and cranny of the cobbled streets. It was the one and only time of the year that the trainees could have full bellies.

Hera heard the other Shells making their carnival plans. But she knew that if she wanted to win, she could take no part in the carnival. The tournament was all that mattered. Unusually, she and one other Shell had progressed to the second day of fighting. Tomorrow the arena would be full by midday with all the senior city leaders in the VIP box watching to see who would be crowned the winner. The dividing barriers in the arena would be removed for the final three rounds of competition so that the spectators could give each fight their undivided attention. The royal band would be playing on the podium at one end. The royal visitors would process to the Royal Box followed by their retinue of dignitaries and bodyguards and personal attendants. And the bell would toll.

Hera tried to push it from her mind, and she turned over once more, willing herself to sleep. But she could not help dreaming of glory. What if she made it to the quarter-finals? What if she broke the record and made the semi-finals? What if she won? Surely, she would get an assignment then? But over the past twenty years, only Seniors had ever won. They were taller, broader, stronger and had more years of training behind them. It was inevitable. And yet...She tossed

about on the bed, finding it difficult to get comfortable, to relax, to rest. The Shells around her had stopped their murmuring and the dormitory was quiet. But it had been dark for some time before Hera finally slept. It was a good thing she did not know what tomorrow would bring.



## 2

# The Second Day

Hera awoke to leaden gloom, with the rain falling on the skylight. This was not the gentle pattering of a light shower, nor the heavy hammering of a passing downpour. Rather, it was a relentless drumming on glass, a steady and committed driving rain that was in for the long haul. She grinned to herself in the half-darkness. Rain meant she had an advantage. In the rain, Seniors were nervous of slipping, especially with high kicks and swinging lunges. And as a lighter and more agile combatant, her chances were marginally higher. The difference was almost imperceptible. But it was there. She climbed down from her bunk and prepared herself for the day ahead.

Two hours later, she was in one of the dressing rooms in the bowels of the arena. There were no windows, only strong lights, black walls and gaudy paintings of former Turonian warriors standing over their defeated foes. There were long counters with make-up trays and sinks and hair products and huge mirrors surrounded in gold mouldings. There were racks carrying breeches and capes and tight leggings

and base layers and stockings and scarves and stretch tops. There were stands holding lances and spears and cudgels and battle axes. There were rows of body armour and ancient mail shirts and leather forearm protectors. Unlike in times past, most warriors arrived with everything they needed, their combat attire carefully checked, documented and approved before they ever reached the dressing rooms. But occasionally, usually for superstitious reasons, a combatant would select an item from the dressing rooms – perhaps a couple of gartered stockings or a ribbon.

Hera had a simple approach to attire. She rejected everything flamboyant – no capes or flowing robes, no spears or axes, no restrictive body armour. Instead, Hera went bare-headed and wore only a body-hugging top, leggings, a forearm protector and a brace to counter the weight of the medium-length cudgel which swung from her wrist. She dressed the same way for every fight – simple, unadorned, ready. The only thing she took time over was the spikes of her hair. She waxed them until they were stuck straight out from her head like the quills of a porcupine as it took up a defensive pose. No-one else prepared for battle like she did.

Out in the arena, a huge Order of the Dragon banner hung outside the stadium and the majestic golden dragon standard fluttered from the flagpole high above the Royal Box, visible from most of the town. But the walk into the arena on the second day was very different from the first. On day one, only the monks and perhaps a couple of hundred local spectators were scattered in groups around

the stadium. Yesterday, gentle music was being piped through the speakers as the combatants fought for glory, but there was no applause, no cheering from the crowd, no sense of atmosphere.

The second day, however, was a completely contrasting story. Despite the driving rain, two-thirds of the stadium was filled with spectators by mid-morning, and more were coming. The retractable roof had been pulled across the stands, and the floodlights provided much-needed illumination of the contestants. Long-range cameras caught the detail of the action and relayed it onto the huge screens at each end of the arena. The crowd sang and roared and laughed and booed and rippled like waves on a rough sea. The VIP box was filled, and the Royal Box was being prepared for the arrival not only of the Emperor, but also of his royal guests from Notalia, Anasius and Parlemoni. The Royal Tattoo, a huge band of over 200 instrumentalists, were already entertaining the crowds with live music, from old Turonian classics to the more modern “fizz” music enjoyed by so many of the country’s young people.

Hera walked through the tunnel and into the stadium along with the thirty-one remaining combatants. She was watching them carefully, trying to anticipate the ones she would have to fight and what their weak points might be. Juntox, the only other Shell through to the fifth round, was garrulous.

“I wonder who we’ll be fighting first,” he said. “Do you think they’ll go easy on us and give us those two skinny ones over there?” He pointed ahead to two Junior twin

boys. “I mean, it would be wrong to make us fight Seniors for the first battle of the day, don’t you think? Just look at that guy.” He nodded off to his right at a bearded Senior who must have been six feet tall and almost half as wide. “He’s terrifying. I wonder what he’s been eating—”

“—Shhhh,” Hera quelled him. Juntox always talked when he was nervous. She was trying to stay focused.

As they emerged into the bright lights of the stadium and the pouring rain, the band reached a crescendo and the crowd erupted in applause, whistles and cheering. This was their first glimpse of the top contestants from the Order of the Dragon this year. They knew the list of names, and many had read the brief synopsis of each player and placed their bets accordingly. The way the betting worked meant that all those who backed the right player received a cut of the full pot of prize money. There was no payout for second place, and there was a great deal of money involved. A successful bet here would ensure financial security for a winning punter, probably for the rest of their lives. As a result, there was much interest in the combatants as they arrived. Some warriors had fought in previous contests, but for others, this was the first time they had been seen in the public arena.

The combatants came to a halt at the red line as the crowd continued to express itself through the stamping of feet and clapping of hands and the screaming of youngsters and the whistles and cheering of others. The combatants stood stock-still, keeping their faces expressionless as they had been taught. They worked to keep the fear and nerves

out of their eyes as the cameras moved systematically down the line, pausing for a few seconds on each face as the commentators reiterated their names and some of their background, before moving to the next one. Finally, the noise of the crowd began to subside, and the combatants were given the signal to form four perfectly spaced straight lines opposite the Royal Box. The Royal Tattoo then struck up the royal anthem to greet the Emperor, whilst his guests and the crowd rose to their feet out of respect.

The cannons around the roof of the stadium fired their blank rounds in swift succession, their sound ricocheting around the arena. In the middle of this, the Emperor and his royal entourage drove into the arena in the famed golden carriage pulled by four magnificent black stallions. Their coats were brushed and gleaming and their bridles and bits glistened under the glare of the floodlights. The carriage came to a stop directly below the Royal Box and an immaculately dressed attendant skipped across to open the door with a flourish and a bow.

The Emperor stepped out onto the first step, gave a royal wave to the tumultuous crowd and then descended to the floor. The anthem came to an end, the combatants bowed in homage and guests got settled in their plush seats.

“Welcome to the second day of the tournament of the year 561,” the Emperor spoke into the microphone before him, his voice cutting through the downpour. “On behalf of the Order of the Dragon, let opponent selection begin.” Then he pressed the large red button in front of him and the giant screens exploded into life once more, showing the

names of all thirty-two candidates as they were shuffled randomly into place. At that moment, Juntox and Hera realised that whether or not they progressed to the final sixteen depended entirely upon blind, pitiless chance. They held their breath.

Within moments, the shuffling slowed and the names settled into the slots. Juntox would fight Magna, a tall olive-skinned Junior girl with long black hair wound up into a tight bun on the top of her head. Magna took a sidewise glance at Juntox just down the line from him and grinned. In that second, any hope Juntox had previously held died a swift death.

Hera was to fight Marcus who was a short stocky Senior, built like a tank. Juntox gave her a thinly veiled smile of encouragement, but Hera could see the doubt in his eyes.

Following allocation came the fight order selection. For this the fourth round, two fights would happen simultaneously, one at each end of the stadium. Juntox's fight was fifth and Hera's was seventh. They were secretly glad they were not called to fight each other, or to fight at the same time – it meant they could watch each other's work.

“Let battle commence!” The Emperor's voice came over the speakers once more.