WARRIORS OF ISIS

Jean Stewart
by Jean Stewart
Kali’s heart was racing. Another cold trickle of nervous sweat chilled its way down her spine, and was quickly absorbed by the thick poly-fiber of the bodysuit she wore. She glanced over her shoulder, and saw nothing but the fir trees and granite boulders that bordered the narrow cliff edge. Anxiously, she returned her uneasy scrutiny to the twisting trail ahead.

In the murky dawn light, the trail which led up to the mountain pass seemed quiet and harmless. All the same, her psychic antennae were screaming Danger!

She had been picking her way cautiously, stumbling over stony ground for nearly an hour. At last she was closing in on the area that satellite surveillance had pinpointed as Arinna Sojourner’s base of operations. Arinna was the fugitive from justice already responsible for two deaths; a woman who would not hesitate to kill anyone else who got in the way of her dreams of a personal empire. Kali knew that hours earlier she should have been intercepted by some sort of security patrol. Instead,
she had succeeded in penetrating deeper and deeper into hostile
territory, without being challenged. Which could only mean
that a deadly trap awaited her somewhere just ahead.

As Kali stepped forward, her boot skidded on a loose stone,
throwing her momentarily off balance. Simultaneously, at the
edge of her vision, she saw two huge, uniformed men leap from
behind the boulders two meters to her right.

Recognition of the green uniforms hit her; a silent inner
wail broke loose. *Regs! They’re Regs!*

Desperately, Kali lurched backward, trying to regain her
footing as the brawny Regulator in the lead bore down on her.
Her foot slipped again and she was suddenly on her hands and
knees, scrambling frenziedly. She saw the Reg above her, his
short, rounded staff raised in his hand. It was too late—the Reg
was snarling, the thick, wooden club was descending, and she
was paralyzed beneath it, watching her doom unfold.

Suddenly, a shrill computer tone sounded, seeming to go on
and on. In a helpless mix of terror and frustration, Kali groaned
and sank against the stony trail. Above her, the fir trees, and
then the fierce fascist soldiers of Elysium, disappeared as she
tore the ARC band off her head and abruptly emerged from the
computer-generated world of virtual reality. The bright halogen
ceiling lights nearly blinded her. The jarring alarm ended and
was followed by a courteous, well-modulated female voice,
which to Kali seemed even more insufferable than the alarm.

“T’m sorry,” the disembodied voice soothed. “The projected
opponent of choice has made contact in a manner which renders
unconsciousness. The Seeker is captured, and thus loses round
24 of ARC Training.”

*It’s only a simulation session,* Kali reminded herself, trying to
center herself. *They weren’t real Regs.*

Still, here she was lying on the platform of the Artificial
Reality Centrum, defeated and badly shaken. All because Danu’s
amazing new training device had unexpectedly brought Kali
face to face with the creatures of her worst nightmares.

Sighing, Kali lifted her head and looked up. Above the vast
ARC Platform, she could see Styx standing by the floor-to-
ceiling windows of the enclosed observation deck. Styx’s arms were folded disapprovingly over her chest, and her weathered Mayan face wore a stern frown. At her side stood a stranger, a young woman of Japanese heritage dressed in a Freeland Warrior’s uniform. The shoulder insignia on her burgundy jacket marked her as a lieutenant, and her impassive, dark eyes seemed to be taking Kali’s measure.

Disconcerted by the presence of an observer, and feeling strangely defensive about it, Kali protested, “Regs?! There wouldn’t be _Regs_!”

She gripped the ARC headband in a clammy palm, carefully folding protruding pieces—the eye visors and holophonic filaments—tightly to the thin plastic circumference. Shakily, she slipped the device into its small protective case and then pocketed it.

She stood up quickly and marched across the simulation field. Beneath her climbing boots, the adjustable molecular density surface began rapidly abandoning its appearance of rocky terrain and twisting trail. Recklessly, Kali stomped across the shifting surface, her ability to keep her footing faultless as the flexible-plastic composite layers steadily flattened out into a smooth, hard plane. When she reached the end of the platform, Kali hopped over the edge, dropping the two meters to the hardwood floor with the supple grace of a cougar.

The observation deck intercom carried Styx’s unruffled reply to Kali. “We didn’t build this Artificial Reality Centrum,” Styx counseled patiently, “in order to stock the opponent file with images of villains you feel _comfortable_ fighting against.”

Raising her chin obstinately, Kali countered, “The Regs are in Elysium, enclosed safely behind the electromagnetic force field screen we call the Border. Right?!”

Styx said nothing, but instead exchanged a brief, indecipherable look with the warrior beside her.

Her face felt hot, and Kali mentally cursed her fair skin for its ready betrayal of emotion. “Before we locked down the Bordergates two months ago,” Kali reminded Styx, “we determined that no trace of Arinna’s DNA had registered in any
of the Bordergates, which led everyone to agree that Arinna’s
still in Freeland—somewhere.” Using what she thought to be
classic logic. Kali continued, “Now, since the Regs are all safely
corralled behind the Border, in Elysium, and I’m going to be
looking for Arinna in Freeland, where there are no Regs…tell
me why I’m wasting my time and energy, tangling with Regs in
my combat exercise!”

Tossing her blonde braid over her shoulder, she suddenly
noticed Whit leaning against a wall about seven meters away,
her serious, gray eyes leveled on Kali with that familiar intensity.
Taking a deep breath, Kali fought to get her emotions under
control. In a strained voice, she finished, “For Gaea’s sake, you
should have warned me, Styx.”

With a noncommittal grunt, Styx left the observation deck
and came down the stairs, followed by the young lieutenant.
Pushing up the sleeves of her loose, wheat-colored pullover,
Styx came steadily closer, the concern in her ebony eyes cooling
the last of Kali’s anger.

The stranger beside Styx spoke up then, her respectful
tone not masking the fact that she expected a truthful answer.
“Deputy Leader, you panicked—am I right?”

All at once ashamed of herself, Kali’s gaze dropped to the
polished hardwood floor. “Yes,” she managed, her throat closing
on the reply.

“If you are to survive a confrontation with a mind-power
like Arinna Sojourner, you cannot allow yourself to panic—
no matter who or what you meet on your mission.” Again
the lieutenant’s tone was mild, but when Kali looked up,
disconcertingly perceptive eyes probed her own. The eyes of an
exacting teacher; she realized.

Dejectedly, Kali stood there, considering how to explain
the overwhelming terror that even now pounded in her blood,
making her clench her hands into fists in order to mask the fact
that she was still trembling. One look at a Reg and she was like
a deer in a raging forest fire, unable to think, able only to run.

“Ever face a real live Reg, Tor?” Whit’s husky voice called,
saving Kali from trying to explain the unexplainable.
The stranger turned and watched Whit push off from the wall, advancing on them with that distinctive, long-legged stride. The click of Whit’s polished boots sent echoes through the huge chamber that surrounded them. Her gleaming dark hair glinted with strands of auburn and the high-cheekboned face seemed to shine with an austere beauty. Kali noted, for the hundredth time since last month’s election, how magnificent Whit looked in formal Leader’s attire. Today it was a long scarlet coat with intricately embroidered shawl lapels, draped over a high-collared black shirt and tight black pants.

The lieutenant gave a slow smile, as if conceding a point. “No, I’ve fought every kind of tough guy, but I must admit I’ve never had the dubious pleasure of encountering an Elysian Regulator.”

With a nod at Kali, Whit said, “You’ve heard all about the Deputy Leader, I suppose.”

Kali was trying to figure out who this woman was, and realized she could actually feel the weight of the lieutenant’s keen appraisal as it passed over her, examining, registering details of Kali’s outward appearance. Who is she? Kali wondered. She looked to be only in her early twenties, but the patience and wisdom in that face belonged to an elder.

“Oh, yes,” the woman stated, “I’ve heard of Kali Tyler, the warrior who survived both the Fall of Isis and ten years’ internment in Elysium.” Stepping forward, with a look of sincere respect, the woman bowed, while Kali sent a puzzled glance to Styx.

Pushing her hands deep into the pockets of her khaki trousers, Styx shifted her big-boned frame and made introductions. “Kali, this is Lieutenant Tamatori Yakami, of the colony of Morgan. Lieutenant Yakami is both a martial arts expert and a seasoned Wiccan.” Flicking a look at Whit, Styx explained, “I asked Whit to petition the Eight Leaders Council, so that Tor could be reassigned to military duty here in Isis. We wish her to assist us in your training.”

Extending her hand, Kali murmured, “Welcome to Isis, Lieutenant.”
With a composed smile, the woman returned, “Call me Tor, and I won’t call you Deputy Leader, okay?”

Relieved, Kali nodded. The title still made her feel awkward. She clasped Tor’s hand firmly, and looked searchingly at a pair of serene eyes in a very attractive face. Oddly enough, Kali found that her natural ability to mind-read was being blocked. Although she listened with all her might, she was unable to pick up any images or feelings.

With a cool smile, Tor began removing her wine-red dress-uniform jacket and western string tie. Handing the clothing to Styx, Tor went on to roll up first one starched white shirtsleeve, then the other. With a deft twist of a barrette, she pulled her long black hair away from her face, neatly out of her line of vision. Abruptly, she motioned for Kali to move over to the closed door that served as the main entrance into the room.

“Let’s review some basic ways of handling a surprise attack,” the young lieutenant began. “In a minute, I’m going to put you on the other side of that closed door. I’ll dim the lights in here, then when you’re ready, you’ll open the door and enter this room.”

Kali shot a questioning look at Whit.

In answer, Whit winked, then grinned like a rogue.

Beside Whit, Styx cocked her head sideways and sent a telepathic remark: *Listen to her. Yakami holds every hand-to-hand combat award a warrior can earn.*

Tired and discouraged, Kali licked her lips, wishing she could at least get a drink of water. That last nerve-racking session on the ARC Platform had left her parched. Normally, they ended these sessions around four in the afternoon and then had a meal while they checked the latest air-search reports. But tonight, whether for Tamatori’s benefit, or because of this unusual visit by Whit, the combat training session was dragging on and Kali’s wristcom indicated that it was well after six.

Tor was still talking, going through a slow-motion example of how she expected Kali to react to a surprise attack. “Once you’ve lost your footing, for whatever reason, drop your weight and roll into your opponent.” As she spoke, Tor dropped to the
floor and rolled sideways, until she bumped against Kali’s shins.

Licking her lips again, Kali concluded for her, “And the attacker’s momentum makes them trip and fall over you.” Frowning slightly, Kali offered, “I’m a Freeland Warrior. I know this move.”

“But do you know this?” Demonstrating the roll again, Tor added a surprising variation. At the end of the roll, as her boots hit the hardwood floor again, Tor leapt up, one arm poised in a half-cocked punch, the other close to her face, acting as a shield. “Attack immediately,” Tor instructed, and just in time Kali leapt aside as Tor began a series of windmill strikes, her arms and legs almost a blur of motion.

“Mother of Earth,” Kali breathed, retreating still further away, trying to see exactly what martial art technique Tor was using.

As suddenly as she began, Tor stopped. The smaller woman took a deep breath, then spread her arms out and up in a smoothly powerful stretch. “I am here to teach you to balance ki, to direct the flow of inner energy, which is your life force.” Stepping closer, Tamatori pressed her palm against Kali’s flat stomach. “Feel ki here. Direct ki into each kick and each punch. When you kick, kick through your opponent. When you punch, send the ki through the first two knuckles of your fist.” Tor moved away again, studying Kali’s face.

Staring back at her, bewildered, Kali thought, I have a vague memory of this. Was it from one of Baubo’s trance teachings?

Motioning toward the door, Tor finished, “Let’s try it.”

Again, Kali checked her friends and caught Styx and Whit exchanging what was definitely a conspiratorial grin. So they’ve taken me up on the demand I made last week, Kali thought ruefully, remembering her complaints to Styx and Whit.

In a fit of impatience. Kali had snapped that the past month of memorizing Wiccan lore and sweating through a daily fitness regimen was doing little to develop her natural, latent psychic abilities. Fearing that she would still be unprepared when they finally discovered Arinna’s location, Kali had demanded that her training be speeded up, demanded to be “challenged without
mercy, pushed to the limit of my abilities.” *I suppose using the Regs against me was just the beginning,* Kali realized glumly.

Knowing she’d asked for this, that she truly needed it, Kali examined her opponent. Though shorter than Kali by several centimeters, Tor had the broad shoulders and firmly muscled thighs of a lifelong athlete. She looked relaxed and eager, as if she were anticipating this opportunity to tear someone apart.

Reluctantly, Kali walked past Tor and through the doorway. Once outside, she paused a moment, studying the panel of the door as it slid closed. Nervous, she bent over, massaging her aching thighs. The clinging material of the gray bodysuit beneath her hands was hot and uncomfortable. However, since the electrical leads that cued the ARC program were implanted in the suit, signaling her kinesthetic reactions and thus feeding her responses to the advanced interactive program, she had no choice but to wear the suit and suffer.

_Goddess, what I wouldn’t give for a drink of water_, Kali thought wearily. She looked longingly down the hallway. There was a water fountain just outside the bathroom. _It would only take a minute if I hurried._

Squinting against the slanting rays of the late September sunset, seventeen-year-old Danu slowed her mountain bike at the end of Cammermeyer Street. Surrounded by mountain meadows, at the edge of the city limits, an immense, dark building loomed against the red-lavender blaze of western sky.

With the eyes of an experienced architect, the young genius surveyed the huge structure before her. Externally, Navra Recreation Hall was a completed structure, its rainbow-hued, vinyl-concrete slabs marking it as one of the most striking buildings in Isis. Yet within, Danu knew the edifice housed a series of vast, empty rooms, defined by retractable walls. Though it was presently devoid of decor, carpets, and furniture, one day Navra Rec Hall would be a luxurious gymnasium complex. But at the moment, the only comfort in the place was the high-
tech plumbing. As the ARC Platform was assembled within this structure, so were the only two completed rooms: one consisted of rows of enclosed toilets and a counter of sinks, the other consisted of showers surrounded by heat lamps.

In fact, after the newly constructed Leader’s House had been destroyed in mid-August, there was only one reason why work crews had been allowed to finish Navra Rec Hall at all: Whit had seen Danu’s design for the ARC Platform. While most work crews were reassigned to clearing the debris of the Leader’s House and starting over at that site, the best computer designers and craftswomen in the colony had been quickly gathered and asked to assist in building the ARC Platform. And there was only one place in Isis with a chamber big enough to house such an immense mechanism. Navra Rec Hall had been given top-priority status simply to provide a home for the ARC.

The computer grid alone had taken up the entire section of wall below the eight-by-three-meter observation deck. High ceilings and huge areas bordered by retractable partitions created an inner “outdoor” feel. And in order to amplify the desired impression of continuous space, the flexible-plastic composite platform was forty square meters. Scenery, additional characters, unexpected events—all unfolded after the Seeker placed the ARC band upon her head. The eye visors were a snug fit, the holophonic fibers caressed both the upper ear cartilage and the audio-sensitive bone behind the ear. A wired bodysuit provided kinesthetic feedback, and the flexible composite platform made any landscape feel utterly real. Danu had succeeded in creating an incredibly vivid artificial reality system, run by a specially enhanced super computer that measured its data in terabytes, its capabilities in teraflops.

Dismounting with a rangy swing of her leg, Danu trotted her bike to the main entrance and parked it. Casting a surreptitious glance around, she reached for the DNA lock plate, keying the restrictive lock which allowed her to tug open the heavy oak door. She passed from the bright, autumn sunlight into a dimly lit hall, but as the architect who had conceived this building, and in fact most of Isis, Danu knew her way. Her soft sport shoes
were soundless on the smooth hardwood floor as she jogged along.

Danu hesitated before the door of the chamber where the ARC Platform was contained, her hand hovering near the crystalline DNA lock plate. Another hallway intersected this one, leading on either side to a pool of darkness. Turning her head, Danu listened intently to a faint noise.

*Water?* she wondered.

Straining her ears, she lost the sound. After another moment, she uneasily ran a hand through her lengthening crop of red curls, then decided it was nothing. She opened the door, stepped into the near darkness, and reached for the panel of light controls.

The next thing she knew, someone grabbed her reaching arm and yanked, tossing Danu head over heels to the floor. She landed hard, felt a flicker of shock that this was happening, then responded with moves she had been honing each night for nearly a month.

With a swift sweep of her leg, Danu brought the figure hovering over her down to an equal level. Immediately lunging forward, Danu’s hands grasped someone squirming in the dark, someone smaller than herself, someone agile and quick. Danu clambered over a warm, thrashing body, using her longer limbs to wrestle it down.

The lights came on. Danu found herself astride a young, dark-haired woman. Blinking, disconcerted, they stared at each other for a moment. Then Danu saw a lieutenant’s insignia on the ripped shoulder of her attacker’s white shirt—the shirt of a Freeland Warrior. Releasing the woman’s wrists, Danu leaned back, breathing hard, unconsciously settling her slim weight fully on the firm hips beneath her thighs.

Wide-eyed, the lieutenant rasped, “*Who* the hell are you?!”

Confounded, Danu got off her, and staggered to her feet. Nearby, Whit and Styx were staring at her in disbelief. And then Kali came to the open doorway, brown eyes wide, wiping from her chin the last traces of the water she had just drunk.
With a laugh, Whit shook off her amazement and advanced on Danu. “Don’t tell me they taught you that in those progressive university courses you mentioned!” she joked, grabbing Danu’s hand and shaking it heartily.

Ignoring Whit’s jest and scrutinizing Danu thoughtfully, Styx asked, “What are you doing here? No one expected you.”

Flustered, Danu yanked her hand free of Whit’s grasp. “I come over every night and use the ARC Platform,” she muttered.

Whit turned to Kali in surprise. “Did you know this?”

Calmly earnest, Kali reasoned, “Danu invented the ARC. It’s hers to use if she wants to, don’t you think?” When no answer but a glare came from Whit, Kali went on, “Danu’s been coming in alone for the past three weeks, ever since we started my training. Since I’m on the thing in the day, and she’s on it at night, there’s no conflict…”

Her voice sharp with disbelief and aggravation, Whit interrupted, “No conflict?! She’s been doing combat sessions alone in here! She could have been hurt!”

“How?” Kali demanded. “It’s artificial reality!”

“Well, there’s no reason for her to be in here!” Whit stubbornly insisted. “You’re in training, Danu’s not!”

“Danu’s got her own demons, Whit,” Styx counseled softly.

Unappeased, Whit glowered at Kali until Kali rolled her eyes in exasperation, then looked away. And though Whit didn’t speak, her feelings ran high enough for Styx, a lesser telepath than Kali, to hear the projection of her thoughts. **Damn! She’s not telling me things. When I try to be included in these training exercises—or in any of the plans regarding how she’s going to take on Arinna Sojourner—she acts like I’m getting in her way!**

Kali no doubt heard Whit’s thoughts, too, but seemed aware that Styx was monitoring them both. The blonde gave Styx a cool gaze and allowed her to read nothing.

Meanwhile, Tor was brushing herself off and getting to her feet. Looking over Danu’s attire of a navy knee-length tunic over a gray feeder-wired bodysuit, the puzzled young lieutenant guessed, “You’re a warrior?”
Still vaguely incensed by the rough attack, and equally offended by the Tor’s imperious appraisal, Danu grudgingly admitted, “No. I intend to enlist, though, as soon as my duties here in Isis conclude.”

“What duties?” Tor inquired, ignoring the frostiness of Danu’s reply.

“I’ve been Architectural Director all summer, and… I became Chief Builder, as… well, after Lupa… died.” Danu stopped and swallowed, her sky-blue eyes suddenly falling away from Tor’s.

“You fight creatively,” Tor commented, trying to distract the young woman from the piercing pain she had glimpsed. “We could use someone like you as a sparring partner for Kali. The holograms can only do so much. We’ll need a solid body, and I ought to be in a position where I can observe and instruct, rather than be a combatant.”

Her face lit by a flash of hope, Danu returned, “I’m willing.” With a firm nod, Styx sent Tor her approval.

They all looked to Whit for confirmation, but her gaze was resting on Kali, and it was full of consternation.

“How about it, Leader?” Tor prodded.

Sending a hand through her dark, glossy hair, Whit thought a moment. “The Leader’s House is nearly finished,” she decided, “so until the better weather next spring, Danu’s duties are her own to choose.” Then, with a keen look of concern, Whit added, “Let’s call it a night and get some dinner, shall we? Kali looks ready to drop.”

As if on cue, Kali broke into an enormous, unstoppable yawn, causing them all to laugh. With a weary, good-natured smile, she shrugged, and then led the way down the hall.