

Roslind
&
Halfdan

Knight of Gaelgara
Precursor

Gary J. Martin



Temple Dark Books

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Roslind & Halfdan: Knight of Gaelgara Precursor
Copyright © Gary J. Martin

Typesetting & Formatting by Temple Dark Books
Temple Dark Publications Ltd.
20 Harcourt St., St. Kevin's, Dublin 2
D02 H364, Ireland
www.templedarkbooks.com

The Author asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author. The author denies permission to use the text of this publication for AI systems training or other AI-related purposes.

“Pride, Honour, Justice”

Motto of the *Knights of the Sword*

Newly avowed knight Sir Roslind Radvinn of Aksson took a deep breath as she entered the stables. The blend of fragrances from the horsehair and bedding to the stench of manure always brought a smile to her face, and the close air inside the barn contrasted wonderfully with the morning chill. The sun had risen enough for spears of light to pierce between the lats of the stable walls and briefly illuminate floating hairs, grain dust or occasional insects on their way to pester the horses. Halfway along the length of stalls to her left Roslind spotted her handsome steed, Solstice. She shook the wooden bucket of oats, corn and barley, alerting Solstice and other horses, who raised their heads and looked in her direction. The stallion clopped and moved his head out of the stall as Roslind approached. As she passed an empty stall she could see one of the stable lads she knew, Rourke, sleeping on a mound of empty flaxseed sacks.

“Good morning, my best boy. Feeling strong today?” asked Roslind in a hushed tone, so not to wake Rourke. The horse ducked his head to the bucket, attempting to begin his breakfast. When she moved it aside the horse tried to bite at the cloth sack tied to her thick leather belt but caught the sleeve of her black tunic instead. Roslind placed the bucket on the ground and wrapped her arms around the horse’s neck, patting it. “That’s what I like to hear. Some food for a

hug is a good trade and there is nothing faster than a grain fed horse.”

She looped the rope of the bucket around a hook, where Solstice could reach it. He began to eat. Roslind looked to the other horses in the stable, all owned by other knights she would be competing against in a range of hastiludes throughout today’s Tournament of Peers. Although excited for the day’s festivities, a giddiness gripped her stomach when she thought about returning to Aksson. For too long she had been away from her family while training to become a knight. For too long she had worried over her younger sister’s progressively distant and increasingly less frequent letters. She longed to see the sun rise over the Sonton Bay again and take walks along the cliffs near Bryann’s Bluff fort, as she had as a child with her father, mother and older brother, Ulrik.

Today, she would take part in the duels, archery, and finally the joust. She knew her skill at archery would not be winning her any glory or honour, being middling at best; but she enjoyed being part of the competitions. It was in the single-combat and jousting competitions she rated her skill, but against such knights nothing was certain. Roslind knew she did not possess the brute strength of her fellow knight, Calan, who usually tried to fix any problem he faced by punching it; but she was fast, and as her training master, Lady Millicent Eulan, had told her: ‘the strength of a strike matters not if there is nothing there to hit’. In her training in the ‘battle focus’ Roslind had also demonstrated an ability to maintain it even when

pushed by Lady Eulan to near dangerous attempts to break Roslind's concentration. Roslind felt she was ready to face the day's challenges.

The noise of young Rourke's footsteps drew her attention. "Good morning m'lady...I mean *Sir Roslind*." The fear and frustration on the boy's face was unmistakable. "I apologise, Sir...I forgot, I didn't mean to offend."

Roslind smiled warmly and reached out to his shoulder. "Calm yourself, Rourke, there is no offence taken, I have not yet become used to it myself." The lad still looked troubled. She crouched down and pulled a wooden step over in front of her. "Here, I brought you breakfast, too."

Roslind reached into the cloth sack and produced two apples, half a loaf of ryebread and a linen parcel of salted venison. The boy's eyes lit up at the smell of the meat. "Only cooked last night," said Roslind.

"Oh thank you, thank you, I can't remember the last time I had some meat." The boy's fingers worked feverishly at the knot. As it opened, a shout came from the far end of the stable.

"Boy!"

Roslind stood slowly, trying to see who it was silhouetted in the doorway. Her heart sank when she recognised another newly avowed knight, Sir Halfdan Kade of Darkdale. His father, Lord Lister Kade, was a staunch supporter of the king and had ensured each of his five sons were trained as Knights of Gaelgara, Halfdan being the youngest. It was rumoured the support his father showed was by way of large

donations to the treasury, acquired through harsh taxes on his lands and brutal methods of collection: *Caught breathing in Darkdale, you pay the Kades. Stop breathing in Darkdale and pay even more.*

Lord Lister's state of esteem and entitlement was something Roslind felt had been inherited by his sons, even though he still lived and Halfdan exuded his self-determined superiority as often as he could. This included his opinions on women being permitted into knighthood. Unfortunately he was not alone in his thinking.

"Boy!" the call came again. Rourke stood from where he was crouched by the food-covered wooden step, his fearful eyes cast downward.

"What do you want, Halfdan?" asked Roslind.

"I believe I called for the boy. As useless as he is, at least he has that going for him...unlike some."

As he strode forward, Roslind saw he was armed with a sword and already wearing his gambeson. His long fair hair fell loose around his face and a darker red beard. He looked at the boy's banquet on the wooden step, to him mere scraps. "You left the cinch of my saddle loose yesterday. I could have died when I fell and the fall dented my backplate. It is an expensive piece to repair," Halfdan accused the boy. "If you have no time to do your job correctly, you have no time to eat." He kicked over the step, spilling the food onto the dirty stable floor before stepping on the venison.

"That is enough, leave him be," said Roslind, her tone resolute as

she grabbed the knight's arm. "Every decent rider knows to check their own tack before they mount, you can't blame the lad for your own stupidity."

Halfdan looked down to where Roslind held his arm and then turned his baleful gaze toward her. "If I wanted you to touch me I would have paid you a copper circle," he said, jerking his arm from her grasp.

Anger welled in Roslind's chest and she felt her muscles tensing and her fist clenching. "From what I hear, your little lock-pick could not even best an open lock, no matter what you pay." Roslind shifted her eyes to the knight's groin and back. "Poor child, perhaps that is why you are always so unpleasant. You are carrying the weight of all those disappointed women you brought to your chambers. I suppose a famous name can only do so much work before you have to take over." Roslind could see the pale skin of the man darken as she stared at him.

"This does not concern you, woman!" Halfdan shouted. "I have a lesson to teach the young master here about saddling a horse." He looked back to the frightened lad. "And it is a lesson you will learn well, my boy," he said, grasping the grip of his sword.

Roslind stepped between the man and the boy. Already she was controlling her breathing and preparing for the battle focus as taught. Without taking her eyes from Halfdan she called to the stable boy, "Rourke, run along. I am sure you have chores to do elsewhere." The

boy said nothing but skittered away from the knights to the rear exit, tripping over a bucket on his way out.

“You have a woman’s soft heart and have only delayed my business with the boy. When I catch up to him I will make him pay. Your efforts here are as useless as your knighting skills,” Halfdan said through a painted smile.

“You will leave him be —” attempted Roslind.

“Or what? What is it you think you can do about it, if I choose to ignore you, like every real knight should?” Halfdan interjected. “The king has not ignored me, the Gothar Prime has not ignored me and therefore Oln himself has not ignored me.”

“I am a Knight of Gaelgara and you would be a fool to ignore *me* today in the duels,” said Roslind. Halfdan was trying to provoke her into attacking him. To be the aggrieved party, to prove she lacked the discipline of a knight. She was determined not to give him the satisfaction, no matter how much she wanted to break his nose.

“I feel bad for you, really I do,” continued Halfdan. “It is a shame they forced you to compete in the tournament instead of putting on a pretty dress and watching from the side like the rest of the women. Poor little Roslind, trying to be the son her father would have preferred. When you are battered and beaten and left on the arena floor, maybe then you will realise how much time you have wasted playing at being a knight.”

“I am on my way to declare my challenges,” said Roslind.

“Congratulations, you have just slithered to the top of my list. You will see my skills up close and you will fall, snake.”

“You wish to challenge me?” Haldan laughed. “In that case I should thank you for my guaranteed placement in the second round of duels. Even if you are lucky and I trip on a stone or something, it will matter not. This is a spectacle fight, no one believes you have the courage for a real fight, one where stomachs are opened, limbs hacked free and lives are lost. When the real fighting starts you will tuck that bitch tail between your legs and flee with the rest of the women and children. So, let the king and the Gothar Prime say their foolish words and pretend you are a knight, let us all pretend you and Millicent and the rest of the women here are knights. When you are tested, your stomachs will turn to water and we shall finally see who the real disappointment is.”

Not waiting for a response from the now wide-eyed and fuming Roslind, Halfdan walked past her, deliberately impacting her shoulder as he did so. The anger in her grew to a fury fighting for release. Her vision narrowed and her sense of things had heightened – the smell of the stable, the sound of Halfdan’s fading footsteps, the light spears shining through the cracks in the wooden walls, the feel of her clenched fists and tense muscles. It took her a moment to realise she had entered the battle focus without intent. She needed some time to calm her mind but she promised herself that this day Sir Halfdan Kade would pay for his words with every strike of her sword.