

The Sword of Champions

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Â Joint winner of the Â 2015 Literature Competition

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It did not know its creator. It did not know the time or place of its creation. It did not know what species created it, or to what end. All it knew was that it was a weapon intended for champions, for people who dedicate themselves body and soul to the needs and desires of others. As long as its current wielder confirmed to those requirements, it could lay dormant, and let the champion decide matters both great and small. And so it was wielded in the cause of righteousness.

Â Â It did not have a personality as others would recognize it, but it did possess intelligence. Among other things it was capable of changing its form to suit the current fashions, to make itself appeal to others both as a piece of beauty as a tool of death. Many shapes and sizes it has took in its ageless existence, but for some reason it had most often been a sword of some kind or another. Long or short, double-edged or single-edged, curved or straight, it did not matter; the shape of a sword seemed intrinsically linked to champions. On some level it could understand this, since there were good arguments to be made for the superiority of a sword over other weapons. However, there was more to it than that. The difficulty of forging a blade, as well as mastering swordsmanship, made the sword a weapon for the mighty and the noble in the public consciousness. When the helpless and the hopeless saw it in this bladed form, they were impressed, and thought to themselves that the champion was someone they could trust. While it was mystified by this need for theatrics, it did not let its lack of understanding stand between fulfilling its purpose. And so it was a sword.

Before it met the species which would be called humanity it had been wielded by many hands, as well as by claws, tails and in one case a psychic mind. It was uncertain how to categorize this kind of creature. It wouldn't be the first time it had been wielded by monkeys, but humanity felt different. They felt...brittle. Virtually every species was influenced by Chaos in some way or another, but humans spend most of their lives in pursuit of their darker emotions without needing much encouragement. Even worse, in instances where the Ruinous Powers did take an active interest, many humans became willing slaves to darkness with an alarming speed. Champions of Chaos had tried to use its power for their own goals before, as did greenskins, the unquiet dead and stranger creatures. Yet because of that very reason - their desire to use it for selfish means - it had always rejected these so-called champions. Humanity though was another case entirely.

The first human it came across was a foolish charmer who could not commit himself to a single woman. He would court his sweetheart of the moment without tiring, promising her everything she could ever desire. Some women were convinced in mere hours, with others it could take years. A few even exploited the man, demanding that he perform unlawful acts such as theft and murder in order to prove his love. All however gave in to his advances in the end. Then after some time had passed and his ardour had dulled, a new beauty would catch his eye, and he would move on. But this was not due to malice or thoughtlessness on his part. Each and every time he was genuine in his affections, convinced that he had finally found the one he could share his life with. He was prepared to do anything for his beloved, and when he inevitably changed his mind, he felt remorse bordering on suicidal thoughts. "How can I talk about love, when I do not know the meaning of the word?", went the human. He did not show these thoughts outwardly, mostly because the people saw him as larger than life. In their minds he could be a hero or a villain, a gentleman or a rogue, but not someone who was capable of self-doubt. The human could only find the courage to open up to his former lovers, and they were rather unsympathetic to his plight. But even with these faults he was still a suitor without compare and a gentleman throughout, ready to give up his very life if it would but remove a single tear from the face of his beloved. And so it knew the first human champion.

It was disturbed by the frequency of which human champions became unfit to wield it. Champions enduring lapses in devotion, honesty and honour was not an unfamiliar experience to it, far from it. Civilizations had been destroyed and deities had died because of them. Humanity though seemed destined to fall from grace. If it was inclined to sarcasm, it would call this quite an accomplishment, considering that humans were so far beneath elves, dwarves, lizardmen and even halflings. It however had no sense of humour, and had no desire to change this. Its current wielder had become a king by his own hand, as so many had done before. The idea of merging the nobility and self-sacrifice of a champion with the authority and responsibilities of a leader appealed to both champions and the people they defended. Unfortunately, with humans being a leader almost always became more important than being a champion.

At first they all wanted to rule well, to lead their people into safety, liberty and prosperity. But sooner or later, ruling well changed into simply ruling, as it had today. The champion-turned-king wanted it to become a symbol of status, something he could pass down to his offspring to legitimize their sovereign right to the throne. Deep in his heart he was unsure whether he wanted this for the greater good or for selfish desire, for the dream that centuries later someone of his bloodline could rule the world. What his true intentions were did not matter to it. What mattered was that in this way it would no longer serve champions. A leader could still be a champion, that was true. Hungry monsters, scheming witches, baseborn criminals and other enemies of civilization could be fought without shedding blood. Yet it was and would always be a weapon, and a weapon unused was a weapon wasted in its mind. To say nothing of the fact that the king expected it to blindly accept his heirs, regardless of whether or not they were worthy to wield it. And so it used its powers to slip away from the king's grasp, and fall to the bottom of a tranquil lake.

A lady came upon it, hidden deep beneath the waters. Her touch was both strange and yet familiar, as if she bore a close resemblance to someone or something it had forgotten. The lady had a proposal for it. She knew about its last master, and of many other champions it had left. How she came to know this, she refused to say. She asked whether it could accept to become a blessed instrument for a certain goddess of chivalry. It would not be the first time it had been wielded in the name of a deity, but it had always left such decisions to the champions. It had no preference or aversion when it came to the divine. A few holy figures and entities had tried in the past to convince it to take their side, to no avail. The answers on what was holy or unholy, which deity was worthy of worship and which not changed nearly every day and depended greatly on the present company. Such questions only interfered with its purpose.

Despite this, it was intrigued by her talk about chivalry, and something she called a knight. It had known holy warriors before, but these had always looked to their deities and their priests for guidance, if not themselves. These knights would obey a code above all else, a code which compelled them to defend the weak, destroy the villainous and right wrongs wherever they found them. The clincher was the promise that it could choose its champion. All that she would do, is search among her people for those who could be called worthy, and let it decide their true nature. And so it emerged from the water, clasped in her hand, to be given onto a knight kneeling beside the lake.

The world was going mad. Water fell upwards, stone grew like weeds and blood burned in the veins of people and

animals alike. Even so, the final champion continued his work. Most of his fellow knights had died or been corrupted. He fought on, striking down all those with evil intent in their hearts. Both his gods and his ancestors were gone. This did not stop him from following the chivalric code, or from praying for the souls of his wards. Chaos was rife. Still the champion asked people not to give up hope. It was not that he did not fear that all that they knew and all that they would ever know was being destroyed. The champion simply refused to show his fear, for the sake of those under his charge. He had vowed that he would die to defend his keep and all those within, regardless of the odds. A part of him regretted that vow, now that he knew the odds. Humans deep in the embrace of the Ruinous Powers killed his compatriots one by one. Beasts assailed the keep in an unending tide, chipping away at the fortifications little by little. Daemons whispered to him, promising him salvation if he turned to their cause. The final champion was tempted to give up, to give way to the onslaught. And yet he stayed true to his calling. It was emboldened by the courage of its wielder. Even it was afraid of what the future might hold, for it seemed unlikely that it would find its way into other deserving hands. The forces of Chaos had an entirely different meaning on what constituted a champion, after all. As such it called the current champion the final champion, in acceptance of its fate and out of respect for the mere human that brandished it with expert ease. Time lost its meaning. Night and day blurred together with stranger lights and colours. Clouds which rained two-headed fish were dispersed by gales which howled like spoiled children. Perished friends and foes walked around in a grim parody of life. The keep was flung into space, seemingly unconcerned with the laws of gravity.

The siege raged on, the enemies of rhyme and reason uncaring of their own safety. In the end only the final champion and it were left among the defenders. Before them stood the slaves of darkness, a horde fit for any war god. "This is the end for me", observed the final champion. Then he looked at it, following the slender blade in all its shimmering glory. Not all champions had realized that it had intelligence, that it had a presence. Even fewer were capable of communicating with it, regardless of their efforts. This human now conveyed more with his eyes in a single moment than some had uttered in their entire lifespans. "But this does not have to be the end for you", he said with his gaze. Before it had fully realized what the final champion meant with this, he flung it away with all his strength into the kaleidoscopic heavens. It could do nothing but watch as the foul horde attacked the now unarmed knight. Every last bit of his body and soul was fought over as they punished him for his last act of defiance. For the first time that it could remember, it wanted to weep. But it could not weep. It was a weapon of champions, and would never be anything more. And so it tumbled end over end in space, carried onto magical winds to destinations unknown.

It had landed on a piece of the world that was. Its new surroundings were unlike anything it had experienced before. In some ways the environment was touched by Chaos, in other ways it felt wholly natural. The heavens were alight and the ground was shaking, as if the realm was still deciding on what it wanted to be. It would take time before it could fully accustom to the new status quo. This left it room to contemplate on what had happened, which suited it just fine. Despite itself, it had grown fond of humanity. It did not at first believe it was capable of fondness, but it had no other explanation for its current state of mind. It had been disappointed by not a few knights, in spite of their chivalric code. Humanity was deeply flawed, there was no doubt about that. Their talents for egotism and self-deception rivaled that of halflings. But when they succeeded to their own aspirations of chivalry, they shined all the brighter precisely because of their flaws. Those few champions they had were better than those of any other race it had encountered. It was unkind that the world ended in their era. And yet there were still humans around. It did not know how it knew this, but it knew this all the same. Humanity survived, even as its civilizations had crumbled and its people were scattered to the winds. The everlasting conflict had gone on to the next level. Now more than ever mankind needed champions. And so it used its powers to go forth in search for humans.