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Charlotte's Sword

By JA Howe

For once, as I watched the parade, I was glad to be living on the main street of town. At least I didn't have to scabble down there among the masses for a good view. "Look at the colors!" my neighbor Elinda called, waving. "Who'd have thought *that* from-- well, trolls, of all things?"

I agreed that the trolls were looking unusually nice, considering all of the terrible tales told about the creatures. Swathed in what must have been acres of chiffon-like, pearl-colored material that was lined in ruby and gold, the Troll Council stomped proudly up the street. Their guards wore tunics spun wholly of pure gold thread, with huge clubs hanging at their sides. Younger creatures walked before and behind, bearing gaudy red banners with a giant black rune in the center. Last of all came the Troll King himself, surrounded by still more guards and sitting on a high chair that rolled along the street on wheels.

"I just think that it's amazing that King Maxwell is signing this treaty with the trolls," Elinda continued. "And, after all the trouble we've had with them, too!" The beasts had been accidentally awakened by treasure hunters looking for gold, and ever since had caused the King immense amounts of trouble. Who knew that trolls were in there, the treasure hunters had asked when called to the King's presence. The discovery of the creatures was bigger news than that of the gold . . . since it did start a war. Sadly, the people had not been allowed to take the gold out of the cave: the monsters were angry when they awoke, and they refused to recognize that humans owned the land now. A couple of the people were eaten, according

to the messengers.

War, therefore, had been unavoidable. I remembered the months of hearing news about woundings and deaths. People discussed it as easily as they might figure out what to wear the next day. Bards' old gruesome stories about the old days when trolls were around were listened to as avidly as the very detailed accounts of some wounded war heroes when they made it back.

Peace, a year and a half later, had been harder to get, and people considered it less interesting than tales of "the horror in the caverns." I couldn't recall people saying much at all about the troll-human mess at parties, once the fighting had effectively stopped.

Days must go on, however, despite visits from trolls and kings, and soon the parade was over with. I sighed and went back inside to do housework. When I came out again later on to bang carpets on the balcony sill, I saw that the city cleaners were already finished fixing up the street below.

The rest of the day went by as usual. I cleaned the house, ate lunch, then dinner. Went out to watch the stars rise in the sky. My sister's up there somewhere, I thought-- the funeral had been only a week before. Hi, Margaret. Now there's only one old maid in this house. I'm not even twenty-two.

"BUUUUUURP . . ."

I jumped nearly out of my skin as the sound echoed through the quiet streets. A huge shadow passed by underneath my balcony. A TROLL! I leaned over to take a closer look and saw that it was carrying

something--dragging it, actually. My eyes widened. A PERSON!

Something told me that couldn't be good.

Maybe it was something from my parents, from all those stories about my grandfather who'd fought for the king long ago in the great war; maybe it was just plain blind insanity. Whatever it was, I raced into action. I dashed inside the house, to the hearth.

Grampa's old sword hung there, still in its sheath. He always used to say that it would never leave that sheath unless in the hands of one of his blood, I remembered. I took it down half reverently, muttering an apology to his ghost.

The troll and its prey were just disappearing around a corner into an alley as I ran up, waving the sword. It was heavier than I'd imagined, but I hung on tight, remembering my grandfather's words: "Put the fate of the people before your own."

With Grampa's words in mind I dashed forward, yelling. "YAAAAA!" I cried, jumping at the creature. The troll turned in surprise and I slashed wildly at it with the heavy weapon, nicking it in the face. The monster howled angrily and laid out with its fists at me, and I slashed it again.

"Ha--he--hi--ugh!!" I cried over and over again, as I swung the sword around my head in the alley. My arms ached. The troll continued punching, not thinking to grab its club. I hoped that it wouldn't think of it. The fists were bad enough, thank you. Once it hit me in the leg, and I reeled back, feeling like a cart had run over me.

The pain, however, only made me angrier, as it does with most people. I raged back at the troll, slicing hard this time. "Ha!"

This cut rang true: straight through the troll's harder-than-hard arm went the sword, cutting it off almost entirely. The beast gave a howl of rage, heading straight for me, the cut arm swinging disgustingly in the air, as

blood poured from it. Oh, God, I'm going to die now, I thought, feeling a bit faint for a moment as the stench of troll blood curdled my stomach.

Suddenly a shadow fell over me. "Sakes be to you for attacking a woman!" a low-pitched voice boomed. The angry troll whirled and I looked up in surprise.

Two knights in chain mail stood there, a man and a woman. They were both about my own age, from the size of them. Neither took any notice of me, however, but immediately fell into battle stance. "On guard, ya fool!" the woman hollered, whipping out a huge bola, and swinging it over her head with one hand, as she poked at the troll with a slim sword with the other. The beast lunged for this new attacker, and the man slipped behind. "Uh-uh," the woman teased as it tried to catch her, and slid away in time, nicking it on the shoulder. The troll turned in fury, growling.

As it turned, the man took his chance, and pulling out a very thick sword, he ran it right through the back of the creature, just as the woman tripped it with her bola, swinging the rocks around its legs. The troll gave a last roar of pain and fell with a crash to the ground.

Suddenly the alley was silent again. "Best one yet," the man remarked as he pulled his weapon out of the troll's back and wiped it on a cloth. "Gotta tell Emory that these new swords of his really do work. This should get us a star."

"Ha," the woman grinned as she stooped to unwind her bola from the creature's legs. "I've seen you do better--hey, look at this!" She pointed to the partly severed arm.

"Wow," the man said appreciatively. "Whoever did that . . ." At that moment, though, the man who'd been the troll's former prisoner, and who'd been lying in a corner, began groaning, and the man ran over to help him.

The woman turned, and found me

crouched against the wall, clutching my grandfather's sword: fear had at last set in, and I was still feeling a bit nauseous. "Did you do that? You're not bad with a sword," she said, unwinding her weapon at last and reattaching it to her belt. "Here. Take my hand. Name's Liza, and this is my partner Nethane."

Nethane was at that moment crouched over the troll's victim. "Hey, Erl, it's me," he said gently.

"Is he going to live?" I asked. Liza laughed.

"Aw, sure, he's seen worse than that," she said, her eyes twinkling as Erl stumbled up, helped by Nethane, his eyes still a bit glazed. "Haven't you, dear?"

"Verra funny," the older man muttered, sending the female knight laughing again.

"Erl, sweetie, I think you need a nap," she said, grinning.

"Wat I need's an aspirin, if ya got any," he groaned.

So it was that I, Charlotte Kelly, was made a knight of the service of King Maxwell. Liza insisted on it, especially on hearing my name. I was moved into the castle the very next day by servants that the king himself sent, and Liza--who refused to detach herself from me--began my training immediately.

"Saints, girl, we'd thought the Kelly family was all gone," she had cried when she'd heard who I was. "Your grandfather's famous!"

I thought of my parents, and my father's disappointment when I'd shown up in this world as a girl. "There are no female knights," he'd said, and that was that. Here, however, I was, facing one.

Every morning before dawn after that I was awakened by my own servant. Liza had especially given her to me, and I soon found out that servant had strict instructions as to what I was to do. Cold showers were the least of my worries: I often ended up eating

beef that was either raw and bloody, being just caught that very hour, or so cured it chewed like rubber, along with bread that was hard as rocks. According to Liza, it was to prepare me for the days on end when I'd be on the road and would have to survive on such fare. I also had to get rid of most of my dresses--though some I could keep "for court." The king--I wasn't to feel comfortable about calling him by his name for quite a while yet--kept a fairly relaxed castle, I was told, but every so often there were functions where the stricter rules of royal life must be followed. "You know: weddings, banquets, visits by emissaries or nobility from other lands."

"Speaking of that, whatever happened with the trolls?" I asked. It was a few months later, and I had not seen hide nor tail of the creatures since I'd come to the castle. Liza made a face.

"Well, Max is a bit put out about that business," she admitted. "The King of Trolls apologized well for the trouble, but he only said it was a malcontent--between us, I don't think the king bought it. They all left rather quick next day, you see."

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry about that . . ."

"It wasn't your fault. You saved Erl's life! He's very grateful, you know."

Erl--or actually Sir Erl, if you want to be formal--was so very grateful in fact that he offered to help in my training. So it was that for three days a week starting from the time I came to the castle, I was taught lessons in swordsmanship and fencing by Liza, two of tilting and equitation by Nethane, and once a week I went to Erl to practice archery. On Sundays, after Mass, I got lessons in the etiquette of king and court.

It seemed the way was clearly set for me now: I was to be a knight or nothing else. So, I lanced and arched to Liza's heart's content. "No, don't swing it around your head like a ninny!" my ebullient tutor would holler as we practiced in the courtyard. "It's

not a flag you're waving! Nethe, block her!" And with a flip of Sir Nethane's wrist I was once again disarmed. He grinned as he helped me up.

"Really, you aren't doing very badly," the knight said to me, returning the wooden sword I used for practice.

"Then why won't you two let me use my sword?" I retorted. Grampa's old weapon was in my room, uselessly hanging over the mantelpiece, as it had back at home.

"You aren't quite ready for that, yet," he said.

"NETHE! COME ON!" Liza's voice bellowed to us at that moment, and we went back into battle stance, for the fiftieth time that day.

Eight months later, I had a hard time falling asleep. The weather had been very hot of late, making my exercises tormentuous to say the least. I had taken to reading at night, poring over some old scrolls from the wizards' library down the street, until I dropped off. That night I had just barely fallen into a doze, when a weird sound jerked me awake again. I crawled to the window, but saw nothing.

Without a minute's thought I grabbed Grampa's old sword again from the hearth and headed out the door.

I don't know why I do these things.

The stairs were cold on my feet as I moved downward, practicing the stealth tactics Liza had been teaching me. Silent as a mouse--I hoped--I crept to the edge of the staircase, in time to see a huge figure pass below. A very familiar figure, I thought, and my heart began to race. Not again . . .

I jumped back behind the wall, thinking. The king's bedroom was down there. Well, I wasn't going to rush into this. Maybe the shadow was a servant getting a snack from the kitchen, I thought. But that shadow had given me a bad feeling. Should I try and wake Liza? No, even if I screamed the

creature was doubtless close enough by then to do whatever it wanted anyway.

"Well, then," I muttered in the darkness. "Best follow it and make sure then, before you rouse the house." I'd done that once already, before I knew the creak of the drawbridge well enough. Quickly I headed downward, keeping to the wall.

The creature was just ahead of me, as I padded softly across the main hall. I was right; it was another troll, and he was headed for the king's room! I tried to get closer, ducking in and out of doorways.

Suddenly there was a great crash! and I almost jumped out of my skin. It was the creature: he'd knocked into a statue of a man in armor that was standing against one of the walls. Now or never, I thought, and dashed forward, giving my war-whoop.

"Yaaaaaaaagh!"

I tackled the troll, leaping onto its back. The slit eyes widened in fear and the creature howled as I poked it with the sword. Apparently word had gotten about concerning me. I grinned. "Oh, no you don't," I gritted my teeth, hanging on as it tried to smash me against a wall.

The troll kept trying to throw me off, while I kept trying to get in a good whack with the sword while maintaining equilibrium. It's even harder than it sounds, believe me. Between us, the troll and I were making enough noise to rouse the dead. I caught out of the corner of my eye a glimpse of the king hurrying away, probably to get help.

Shouting in the hallway made the room echo and the troll half jumped out of its skin, slamming into a wall as a heavy suit of armor fell on us. My stomach didn't particularly like the dizzying lurch as the creature fell and I tried to get out of the way. Parts of my body were still banged and bruised by the old armor, and so was I as I plopped onto my side.

I made myself get up and that was a

chore by itself. The troll, I found, had whacked its ugly head into the wall upon falling and a corner of the old armor--wow, they made that stuff strong, I thought--was sticking out of its back. For good measure, I stuck my sword into the neck of the troll, and that was that.

Footsteps finally got closer, but by the

time they found me, I was standing proudly over a dead body, cleaning my sword with a handkerchief. Liza and Nethane, who'd come with the others, grinned.

"Bravo!" said the king admiringly, squinting at the sword Grampa had left me. "That's an antique, you know."

CONVERGENCE

by David Landrum

Dull boy, but dutiful, Prince Caspian
Learned war and statecraft. Yet his mind was drawn
To myths and stories of the era when
Dwarf, dryad, centaur, maenad, elf and faun,
And talking beast, roamed in mead and dale
And woods of Narnia; when branch and limb
Would rise and take on forms of birch-girls pale
And green-haired willow-women, sad and slim.
These things were not united, till the night
He saw Tarva and Alambil align
And fill the Narnian sky with flaming light
From two stars joining, making heaven shine.
That night his heart and mind blazed: conjunction
Of reasoning with imagination.