

The Champion's Ceremony

by Julie McMillin

The door to the Public House slammed behind Talia. 'Twas a very surly Thoren who rounded on her.

“How long have you known?! When were you going to tell me?”

Talia nearly dropped the empty case that once held the Elemental gems of power as she swiped at the stray hairs in front of her eyes. With a clear line of sight she stared at Thoren eyes-to-eye.

“I told you later, Thoren. And I did mean it. We have not the time for this discussion...”

“Time!” Thoren threw up his hands and turned to begin stomping up the stairs. “Oh, there's plenty of time! Nais just informed me that time is not an issue!”

Exasperated, Talia sighed. “That is not what she meant. And you know it.” They both stopped as they heard four thumps on the upper floor. “They're waiting for us,” Talia whispered. She and Thoren hurried to the upper level of the Public House.

The upper rooms were dark. The sun sat low on the horizon and no lamps had yet been kindled. But the physical darkness was nothing compared to the Paragons' mood. Thoren and Talia stood slack-jawed as they watched each Paragon siphon more power into the gems in their hands. Each gem glowed briefly before returning to its inert state. Terranus reached for the case; Talia wordlessly handed it over. She could only assume that the Paragons had not needed the extra power based on what had just happened under the egg.

With a soft click, Terranus closed the lid on the now-full case. Aria sniffled, and wiped her eyes. Steadying her voice, Nais addressed them, “Now is not the time for mourning.” She looked at Thoren, “Nor the time for explanations. Despite what has happened – we have Champions to honor. Have they been called?”

Thoren nodded, “Aye, Paragon. They remain... guarding the egg.”

“Good,” Ignis stated. “As is their duty.”

Talia pulled two large chests out of a dusty corner. In her strain she muttered, “Please, Master, no more 'duty' today.”

“I agree,” replied Terranus. “As Talia says, no more talk of duty. The Champions must receive their due. Especially on this, their Queen's natal day.”

Talia mentally cursed herself. Her words will one day land her in trouble.

Thoren gathered the scrolls that Master Walsingham had prepared for the occasion. Talia took a few deep breaths. The Paragons lifted the Champions prizes. They all steeled their hearts and walked back to the egg.

With each step Talia could feel her emotions, and her nerves, rising. This was the culmination of all the Guardian's efforts. In this simple ceremony the Guardians would see five of their rank rise to be the named Champions. At least, they would think it a simple ceremony. For Talia, she would be reciting new poetry in front of a distinguished crowd... for the first time ever in her life. They rounded the corner and began walking the short distance to stand beneath the egg. The crowd roared at their approach. Cheers and applause drowned out all nervous thoughts that Talia had only seconds ago. She stood before the loving crowd and basked in their approval for five brief seconds.

The cheers died down and Thoren stepped forward. “Guardians! This has been a long journey...”
As Thoren continued, Talia laid out the prizes. She took her place at his side as he called forth the first Champion. “Our Lunar Tribe Champion: Nanus”
Almost hesitantly, Nanus joined Thoren and Talia under the nest. Talia cleared her throat and proclaimed his deeds:

With patience, thought and cleverness and truth
'Tis Nanus: Bane of fire, no fool this one.
With strength so deep and bravery of youth
The elder elements embrace their son.
And thus do we, of Band of Twisted Claw,
Our Lunar Prize do give – and hailed by all.

With cheers, Nanus received his bounty and returned back to the other Guardians. They nearly could not wait for the next to be chosen now that they knew what to anticipate. Thoren reminded all that the size of stature does not determine the size of one's devotion, nor the size of their heart. He called, “Our Order of the Sun Champion: Gage.”
Talia began the first line of his proclamation of deeds – and promptly forget the rest. Fortunately, those assembled forgave her lapse of memory. Thoren opened the scroll and Talia read:

Unstoppable the Knight of Ignis stands
For justice, Gage has ever raced to fight.
Devotion true is known throughout the lands
So fierce his spells – lays evil low with might.
And thus do we, of Band of Twisted Claw,
Our Solar Prize do give – and hailed by all.

Then Master Ignis himself presented Gage with his seal – so that all might know he bore the title “Knight of Ignis” truly.
Thoren spoke on quiet strength – it is not the loudest who is the wisest. He called, “Our Mage Champion: Skylana.”
Talia winced as she began the proclamation. Of all the Champions t'was Sky's displeasure she feared. After all, who else would correct the meter of her verse? Nevertheless – Talia began all the same:

So fleet of foot yet fleeter still of mind
'Tis Sky! Let all assembled hear her name!
Of rhymes no greater scion shall you find
Her spells do put my doggerel verse to shame.
And thus do we, of Band of Twisted Claw,
Our Mage most high do name – and hailed by all.

Talia need not have worried for Sky appeared most pleased as she rejoined the Guardians. Thoren then spoke of a Guardian achieving the unexpected. Looks can be as deceiving as an opponent's feint. He called, “Our Warrior Champion: Illyria.”
Grease lead the cheer as she took her place of honor. Talia proclaimed:

To War! The hue and cry for blood sings loud
And Spartans battle, force unequal-ed.
Illyria, the Scorpion so proud
Has mastery of body so thus prov'd.
And thus do we, of Band of Twisted Claw
Our Warrior do name – and hailed by all.

Amidst the cheers, Grease stepped forward to confirm that Illyria was an apprentice no longer. She is a Spartan. And the Scorpion's Champion. There was only one Champion left to name: the Champion of Champions. Our leader, our inspiration, who selflessly defended the Band at every crossroad. Thoren called, "Our Champion: Ryder."
Talia choked back her tears of joy and proclaimed:

The Brave, the Strong, the Smart, the Steadfast too
Mysterious and ancient, so it's said
His strength of mind unites pure body true
And thus to vict'r'y first brave Ryder lead
The Guardians of Element – all four!
Inspiring those around him with his deeds.
A ranger pure, defender evermore
Accepts due praise more humble than a priest.
And thus do we, of Band of Twisted Claw
Our Champion do name – and hailed by all!

And with complete sincerity, Thoren and Talia knelt before their Guardian, Defender and Champion. The cheers thundered throughout the valley and Talia let her tears flow freely.

* * *

The celebration was brief, but no less intense. Thoren made sure that Talia finally had the cup of mead she'd been whining about all summer. But Talia had forgotten that mead can very quickly addle her brain. Thus, when Ryder and Sky took her aside for a few words, she only half understood what they were saying.

"Talia," Ryder's voice was low, "We would like for you to have this." He pressed a small object into her hand.

"A leaf?" Talia did not understand.

"Aye," Skylana replied. "But for protection. Keep it, please."

A grin split Talia's face. "But of course! How could I refuse!" She laughed and embraced those that she one day hoped to call 'friend'. And she made sure to place the leaf securely inside her pouch.

But later, when Morgan required some bit of information from Talia's book, the leaf fell upon the ground in Talia's haste to answer the Guardian's request. Neither Talia nor Morgan saw the tiny leaf resting in Bristol's dusty paths. Neither understood what Talia had so carelessly dropped.

Many hours later, under the waning moon's light, a figure retrieved the fallen leaf with a low chuckle. "Farewell to Bristol, indeed," they whispered as they strolled into the darkness.