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Spring 2022

King of Swords

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Recommended Citation

Kimble, Hannah, "King of Swords" (2022). *WWU Honors College Senior Projects*. 558.
https://cedar.wwu.edu/wwu_honors/558

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Abstract: *King of Swords* follows five teenage friends on the precipice of beginning their adult lives who find themselves transported to a fantasy world inhabited by orcs and dinosaurs. Each major character reacts differently to this world, making their own allies and enemies, and come into conflict with one another, engaging in combat with magic swords and gay subtext. Some of them want to return to Earth, while others seek to find a place in this new world. In the end, they mature, learning to talk through their differences like functional adults, and accept the responsibilities that come with that.

Here's the first chapter of the novel:

GLORIA I

They tried to take the sword away from her.

She'd been handling the situation well until that point, all things considered. A surprise trip to a mysterious, magical otherworld was a childish fantasy she'd left behind years ago, less enticing than the freedom that came with getting her driver's license, but in her heart, she'd maintained a soft spot for portal fantasy stories and *isekai* anime. There was something about escaping the dull, helpless day-to-day doldrum of her world for another, more exciting one, a place where she'd actually be able to make a difference.

And this one had *dinosaurs*.

The forest where she'd woken up looked no different from the endless evergreens of the Pacific Northwest, so much so that her first cognizant thoughts hadn't been *holy crap, I just got isekai'd*, they were *Where'd the Stein family cabin go?* and *Why can't I hear the river?* Before she could wonder what had happened to her friends, she'd become aware of the *Velociraptor mongoliensis* sniffing her ear, and all other thoughts left her head.

The dinosaur was *adorable*. A sinewy little thing, two feet tall and six feet long, covered in soft brown feathers. In the back of her mind, Gloria wondered what a Velociraptor was doing in a temperate rainforest, rather than the hot, arid regions where fossils of the animal had been found, but she was too excited to care. If it was a dream, she wanted to stay asleep a little longer.

She would have reached out to pet it, as it didn't seem afraid of her, probably never having seen a human before, but that would have meant letting go of the sword with at least one hand, and Gloria couldn't bring herself to do so.

The velociraptor heard the approaching soldiers before Gloria did, ruffling its feathers and darting into the bushes as the flag-bearer emerged from the woods. Clad head to toe in boiled leather armor, he struck an imposing figure, towering over Gloria, who was not a short woman. If she'd been able, she would have pulled herself to her feet, but transport to another world had turned her legs to jelly.

The clearing where she'd appeared was a brief hike from a stone fort crowned with towers and ramparts. Red-and-golden flags billowed from high-up windows. Had she not been carried by soldiers, she would have squealed with excitement. She'd always wanted to see a

real castle, a living fortress bustling with armored men and women, robed nobles, and torchlit halls, not a historical relic owned by an eccentric millionaire. Fantastic places like this had dominated her daydreams since before she could read. It was hard to feel afraid when this was what she'd always wanted.

After getting carried up an unreasonable number of stairs, the soldiers had dumped her before a fearsome-looking woman on a throne of stone. The first thing Gloria noticed was that she wasn't human – her skin was a deep forest green, and four large tusks jutted from her lower jaw, tips capped in gold and silver. Her dark hair glimmered in the torchlight.

"Welcome to my realm, human. I am Lady Phoenix. Tell me, who bears the King of Swords?"

"This?" Gloria asked. Her fingers tightened around the haft of the sword. It *did* look rather regal, now that she got a better look at the scabbard without the rust that had covered it when Val found it. Black banded iron bound it all together in repeated stripes every few inches, raised slightly above the silvery metal that composed the rest of the scabbard. Even the tip was ornate, made of the same iron, pointed, as if the sword was a weapon even when sheathed. "Oh, I'm, uh, Gloria the human! I'm from Earth. You've heard of it?"

Lady Phoenix smiled. Gloria figured it was meant to be welcoming, but with her tusks, it struck her as a little grotesque. Not that Gloria was anyone to judge – she'd been made fun of for her toothy grin as a child so much that she'd stopped smiling for a year. If her friends hadn't stood up for her – oh geez, her *friends*, were they here too? They weren't gonna be as happy about the dinosaurs as Gloria was, she had to find them, and oh geez, Lady Phoenix was still speaking. Ten minutes into her first adventure in another world and she was already getting on the bad side of authority figures, wasn't she? Lady Phoenix was probably telling her essential lore she'd need to understand if she was going to survive for as long as she was here. Why couldn't she just *focus*–

Then she felt a soldier's hands around the hilt of her sword, and adrenaline surged through her body.

She found her footing, wrenching the sword away. "No!" She swung wildly, spinning on her heel. "Stay back!"

The armored soldier raised his hands, palm-up. From her seat, Lady Phoenix chuckled. "A feisty one, eh? Good. You'll need to be if you want to hold on to the King of Swords and all the responsibility it entails."

Oh! Gloria knew this one. "You're not gonna take it away from me?"

"Not if you're worthy," said Lady Phoenix. "That weapon is a gift from the Sky Goddess to spare us from her wrath, a way to prove that we remain devout. In ages past, she has brought us a variety of champions from your world to hold the King of Swords and use its full power, though not all have been worthy. Are you up for the task, Gloria the human?"

Gloria squirmed. She didn't want to show weakness in front of the fearsome Lady on the throne, but saving the world from atmospheric calamity was... actually, not dissimilar to the messages her hippie parents had given her growing up. She'd been told over and over how her generation would have to undo the ecological damage done by her parents' and grandparents' generations, switch over to carbon-neutral energy, and save the world.

Defeating an angry goddess was a different sort of challenge, especially if she was the single chosen one who had to do it alone. Well, she might as well skip over the refusal of the call. "I'm worthy," Gloria said, puffing out her chest. "You can count on me, Lady Phoenix. I won't let this world be destroyed." The extinction of dinosaurs on Earth millions of years before her birth had upset her to the point of tears when she was ten. If she had the power to prevent it, she would do it in a heartbeat. Here, she had a chance. "Sorry if you already mentioned this, but what's your world called? You know I'm from Earth, so if I don't know, there's this sort of imbalance, y'know? It's no big deal—"

"If you can really save Gladia, draw the King of Swords from its sheath."

Gladia. Cool. That *totally* wasn't too close to her name to be suspicious. This was fine.

"Sure thing," Gloria said. With the hilt in one hand and the scabbard in the other, Gloria tightened her grip until her knuckles were white and tugged. She squeezed her eyes shut, shielding them from the flash of light that had blinded her when she'd last drawn the sword, but it didn't budge. She yanked again and again, but it was stuck fast. "This didn't happen last time, I swear."

It was true. When she'd fiddled with the sword in her home world, she'd been able to wiggle it back and forth, flakes of rust falling to the earth with every tug. It made sense at the time, since Val had found it in a river not far from her family's cabin, but the portal had cleaned the scabbard. Whatever held it stuck fast this time certainly wasn't rust.

An hour ago, Gloria had been safe and sound on Earth, spending a week at the Stein family cabin before she and her friends went their separate ways. They'd been the best of friends as kids, allies and protectors for one another against the cutthroat, social darwinist environment of Jane Addams Middle School as puberty made children with underdeveloped senses of morality even more cruel. After four years of high school, though, they'd started to drift apart, busy with extracurriculars and the challenges of growing up.

Frankly, it was a miracle that they'd had a shared opening in their schedules before they all left for various colleges across the country. It was one last hurrah, a callback to the good old days before they had to say goodbye and make their way in the adult world. One final game of *Battle for the Galactic Imperium* to determine which of them would get permanent custody of the trophy they'd been passing back and forth for years.

Valorie Stein had been winning the game. No surprise there. She was the one who had bought it all those years ago, saving up her allowance for six months to buy the expansion pack. She'd always been a sucker for tabletop games, more loose and freeform than the rigid programming of video games and potentially possible to cheat. Wily little Val, with her charming

words and unit production strategies. She'd always been a whiz with diplomacy, getting away with aggressive plays and tactical betrayals that she somehow always avoided comeuppance for.

It was probably because Gloria had a stupid, monster crush on her. Hard to hold Val accountable for using her space cannon to blow up Gloria's flagship when she batted her eyelashes and told her she was sorry, she *had* to, it was the only way she could score a victory point that round.

Not that Val hadn't had competition. Diana Joshi was, in Gloria's opinion, the cleverest of her friends, mathematically minded with a good head for rules. Even though the game belonged to Val, whenever there were disputes about the rules of *Battle for the Galactic Imperium* – and there were many, seeing as Val would always try to twist the rules in her favor – Diana would quote the rulebook and settle it. Her game plans were predictable, but Gloria couldn't deny they were efficient. Even knowing what she was going to do, Gloria's slapdash space fleet wouldn't stand a chance against the veritable pound of plastic figurines Diana had on the board.

As usual, Blake was struggling. He'd always been a quiet, soft-spoken boy, short and scrawny. More than any of Gloria's other friends, Blake loved *Battle for the Galactic Imperium*, despite having never won a game to put his name on the trophy. Gloria had asked him about it once, but he'd given a rare smile, brushing his black-dyed hair out of his eyes like the little emo gremlin he was. He liked the diplomacy aspect of the game, negotiating trades and truces with his friends to buy and befriend his way to victory. It never worked – without military might, it was easier for Diana to steamroll his forces and take what she wanted without giving anything up, or Val could betray his trust again and again to snatch his victory away from him, but he never stopped trying. As far as Gloria knew, he was just happy to be with his friends, win or lose, and she couldn't fault him for that.

Marshal, on the other hand, was a wild card. As Val's little brother, half his strategy in any given game had been dedicated to undermining his sister. He was fond of taking risks, grand plays that would win or lose him the game in one dramatic moment. They usually didn't work, resulting in his army going down in flames in what a young Marshal had called an "epic fail," and even when they succeeded, if he didn't win the game outright, his tactics painted a huge target on his back. Either way, it was more entertaining than Diana systematically sweeping through the board in a slow, but inevitable victory.

As far as Gloria's strategy went, she just went with her gut. She'd read somewhere that a person's first instinct in chess was the second-best possible move on the board, and she'd never had a problem with being second best. Her quick, decisive plays weren't optimized like Diana's or cunning like Val's, but at least she didn't make her friends wait while she stared at the game board, considering every option. All she needed was a little bit of luck to get her name on their trophy a couple of times.

They'd been taking a break from the game when Val found the sword. *Battle for the Galactic Imperium* was an all-day affair, and the five of them had a full week to wrap up their

final battle. Besides, they were at the Stein family cabin in the woods, surrounded by the beauty of nature. Might as well take a quick hike to stretch their legs before returning to the game.

Diana stayed behind in the cabin. She had a *thing* about dirt and felt the need to recharge her social battery. That hadn't stopped Val from teasing her as the rest of them put on their hiking boots. How much fun could Diana have all alone in a cabin with no internet connection on her phone?

That answer, apparently, was plenty. She had short stories downloaded to her phone for just an occasion.

Gloria had been content to let Val lead the way on their hike, along with Blake, while Marshal had made a little fuss. They followed the river upstream for hours, enjoying the babble of freshwater on rounded stones. Far away from civilization, Gloria was able to forget the pressures of her looming adult life – moving away from home, making a new social circle, working hard on academics and athletics, all while balancing self-care, like proper nutrition, a hygienic living space, and her favorite, laundry. Beneath the evergreens, just her and her friends, it felt like she was a kid again, having adventures with the people she loved the most.

The *NO TRESPASSING* sign had put a damper on that. They'd followed the river around a bend where the bushes had grown so thick they had to roll up their pant legs and take off their shoes, walking on the riverbed to keep going. Blake, ever cautious, had suggested they turn back, but Val had never been one to let anything so trivial as the law hold her down. Marshal one-upped her, charging past the sign, a smug smile on his lips beneath his wispy teenage mustache. Gloria gave Blake a helpless shrug, and they'd followed their friends.

Ten minutes after trespassing, Val had noticed the rusty sword at the bottom of the river, half-hidden by rocks. She'd tugged it up proudly, holding it above her head as water dripped on her face like she was the Lady of the Lake in Arthurian legend. Blake had been visibly uncomfortable, telling Val that this was on private property, she should put the sword back before whoever owned this land showed up and yelled at them. Val had laughed, consoled the boy, and just like that, they brought the sword back to show to Diana.

Gloria had carried it, obviously. She was the biggest and strongest of her friends thanks to the muscle she'd built playing for the Pirates, Zelazny High's girls' baseball team, no matter how Marshal's attempts to flex tried and failed to prove otherwise, much to his chagrin.

Diana had been upset for different reasons than Blake. She pointed at the rust, rambling about tetanus, but acquiesced when Gloria explained how they waited for her presence to draw the sword. Gloria had put one hand on the scabbard and the other on the hilt of the sword and tugged, only able to wiggle the sword a little, dislodging flakes of rust.

In the end, it had taken all of them to pull the sword free, the boys tugging on the helve while Diana and Val tried to pop the scabbard off, with Gloria in the middle. The setting sun had tinged the metal orange as rust. Like a tug of war, they'd pulled and pulled, until the blade started to show, glinting in the evening light, and then everything had gone white.

And then it struck her. *That* was why the sword was stuck. Gloria had only been able to draw the sword with the help of all her friends. They were transported to Gladia with her, tossed into this world with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Without the King of Swords, they couldn't get home, and Gloria couldn't use the King of Swords properly without all of them by her side.

One last adventure with her friends before they went off to live their lives didn't sound so bad. Gloria had always wanted to try LARPing. She could see it in her mind's eye; wandering Gladia to find her friends, adding them to her party one by one like companions in an RPG, each of them taking up different roles and classes. If it weren't for the threat of death, she could have whooped.

"Well?" Lady Phoenix asked, cocking her head, and Gloria realized just how stupid she looked trying and failing to unsheathe the King of Swords.

"When I was on Earth, I was only able to draw the sword with the help of four of my friends," she explained. "I need to find them. Without them, I can't save Gladia or get my friends home."

Lady Phoenix drummed her fingers on the armrest of her throne. "We'll send out mail. You appeared in a flash of light unseen in decades, I'm sure your friends will be just as conspicuous."

"I should go find them. I'm the one with the sword, I need to go make sure they're okay—"

"In time," the Lady rumbled. "It would be foolish to travel with no destination in mind when you do not know our world. Stay in my halls a little longer. If you are to be our hero, you ought to learn to fight."

"You'll train me in swordfighting?" *I get a training arc? Do I get a cool training montage with rock music in the background? Holy crap, yes, yes yes!*

"My master-at-arms, Ur, will personally oversee your training. Welcome to Gladia, Gloria the human."