

Memories of a Hero

By Josiah Lebowitz

I was only a baby when I first heard the story. The tale of my grandfather, the hero, the legend...

He was only a child himself when it all began. A young boy, barely old enough to lift a sword... Yet even then his courage was far greater than that of those around him. So it came to pass that this child, this orphan, stole a blade and snuck out when all others were too afraid to leave their homes. Some called it skill, some luck, and others destiny when he returned home, limping and bloody, dragging behind him the head of the beast that had been terrorizing the village. That was the first time he was called hero.

After that, they began to treat him differently than before. Some with respect, and some with fear... For how could he be an ordinary child, having single-handedly bested such a foe?

Several years later, when a pair of rogue knights came to the village and began taking everything they pleased, that boy was the only one brave enough to stand in their way. The battle cost him an ear but, in the end, it was he who survived. After that there were no more doubters. The boy whose long hair covered his missing ear, he was no ordinary child. He was a hero, a legend.

As he grew, so did that legend. Whenever there arose a threat to the village, or a dangerous task that needed to be performed, it was him that they called upon and him alone. No matter how tired or injured he was, they still asked for more. After all, he was

their hero, their destined savior. Why risk themselves when he could fight for them? Such things were his destiny, not theirs.

So he continued to grow and to fight. The men admired him and the women chased after him, but no one truly knew him. He was neither friend, nor comrade, nor lover. To them, he was not a man, he was just a hero.

Young as I was, I still remember when I first saw him. I was the only survivor of a caravan that had been set upon by bandits. He was the one who stopped them before they killed me as well. He was older then, middle aged, but strong and hardy. When I first saw him, what captured my gaze was not the blood dripping down his chest or the countless scars that covered his skin; it was his eyes. They were deep eyes... Strong and clear, yet sad and tired. So very tired...

It was he who took me in and raised me, he who named me, and he who gave me a home and a life. I called him grandfather. I knew him...and I loved him. Together we were a family. Yet, aside from me, he lived alone. He was still the hero and there were no others who could bring themselves to see the man behind the legend.

As I grew, I saw first hand what that legend cost him. The loneliness, the wounds, and the endless tasks and battles... There was never rest or peace for him; there was always something else that only "the hero" could do.

When I was just six years old I began to train in secret, teaching myself to be strong and to handle a weapon, so that someday he would no longer have to fight alone.

So I grew and I trained and he continued to fight, for if he didn't, no one else would. They said that he was the hero, that it was his duty, his destiny... They all cheered when he departed, celebrated on his return, and berated his every small failure and mistake; yet

none would rise to aid him, for they were not born to be heroes and it was not their destiny.

I remember well the last time they called on him. It was winter. I had grown older and so had he. Though still strong, he was no longer the man he had been in his youth, for time takes its toll on all of us. Even on heroes. He was too old for the journey, too old to fight, yet still they called on him, pushed him, cajoled him, and still he went. I followed him that day, deep into the mountains, my sword at my side. Yet I remained hidden, for he knew nothing of my training, and it was his wish that I would never have to fight.

So I followed and I watched as he climbed through the wind and the snow, as he pushed himself far past the limits of what his aging body could endure. I watched as he faced the monster, and watched as its roar shook the mountains, causing an avalanche that destroyed the path. That mass of snow and stone prevented me from joining him, from helping him, and from becoming more than an observer at last.

And so I continued to watch as the battle unfolded, unable to look away. I was the only one who saw my grandfather's last fight, as he poured out the remainder of his strength against a foe that he had no hope of defeating alone. I was the only one who watched as he hurled himself off the edge of the mountain, pulling the fiend down with him, and the only one who heard him call out my name one last time as he fell. And it was I, and I alone, who carried his body back through the storm.

I was there when they buried him and heard their cries and laments, but they were not mourning the loss of a person. To them, he was just a legend... Much was said about his battles, his victories and accomplishments, but nothing was said about the man. He was the man who loved to read me stories, to fish, and to carve. The man who fed me,

clothed me, and loved me... The man that I knew, but no others had cared to see. To them he was always only the hero.

It was less than a month later when the villagers came to me. I was an orphan, the one he saved, the one he raised. And, now that he was gone, they needed a new hero. They said I had been born to do it, that it was my destiny...

How I hate that word. Destiny... Part of meaningless phrases spoken by those too blind and too foolish to realize that heroes are not born but made. To be a hero isn't a destiny but a decision. Anyone can be a hero if they only rise to the occasion. Then, even if they fail, they are still a hero; for a hero mustn't always succeed, he must merely give his all and try.

So now I take up the title of hero, this cursed mantle worn by my grandfather for his entire life. I don't do it for the village, this weak and cowardly place that used him relentlessly, never helping, never befriending, and offering rest only in death. I care nothing for them or their troubles. I do this for him, to ensure that he is not forgotten and that his death was not in vain. Others may remember the hero and the legend, but I remember the man and it is for that man that I will rise up, fight, and become a hero.