

“Hero”

I think I can, I think I can, I think I can, that one line from my favorite children’s novel *The Brave Little Engine that Could* keeps flashing through my mind as I walk through the darkness. Crunch. Instinctively, after stepping on a tree branch, I look around to see if anything is going to jump out at me. Nothing but trees huddled together, the forest floor covered with twigs and pine needles, and of course, there is the darkness. I am still afraid of what is in it.

I check my watch, 11:49 p.m., almost time to begin. I reach into my pocket and take out the sacrificial knife that, in a few minutes, will bathe in the blood of the sacrificed.

Ahead, I see the runestone, the pile of seemingly unimportant rocks that may be the key to our downfall. My heart begins to beat so fast I’m afraid it’s going to burst straight out of my chest. It is moments like this when I just have to ask why me? Why, of all people on the face of the Earth was I chosen to be the champion of mankind, destined to fight ancient evils and things from my worst nightmares? I just hope I make it out of this alive.

11:53, the lamb in front of me begins to bleat loudly, as if sensing its oncoming slaughter, but I feel nothing. Instead of being able to feel things like thirst, hunger, the sun on my face, the breeze, etc., I have immortality and strength far beyond that of most creatures. I take a moment to straighten my tie, best to look presentable for when my masters enter this dimension. Even though in a few moments I won’t need this form anymore.

The thing I find most striking about the demon is his mask. He is a tall, muscular

figure with black hair, dressed in the finest suit I've ever seen: a true gentleman. As if sensing my presence, the Gentleman turns away from the lamb he's led to slaughter and faces me. His face, it is calm and without emotion.

The Chosen One arrives five minutes after I expect him. I'm starting to think that torturing his mentor to death was a complete waste of time because what's standing in front of me is a mere boy, a tall, scrawny boy with blond hair and glasses that cover his brown eyes, holding a sword the wrong way. Something else I notice is the sweet aroma of fear. Why? Searching his thoughts, I realize he understands that what happened to his mentor could happen to him and... Oh yes, I believe I can use this to my advantage.

What the Gentleman did then wasn't exactly smiling, although it was close enough; the end of his mouth seemed to quiver slightly. So I lifted my magical sword, or at least tried to, my hands shaking so badly. Then, suddenly,

"So, the *hero* saw the bat-signal and decided to ride in on a white horse," said the Gentleman, his voice was filled with sorrow and seeming to suck me in. "Tell me, where's your army?" I don't even bother responding; afraid my voice will give me away.

"Oh right, you're all alone," continued the Gentleman. "What kind of hero are you, without an army or even your own Jedi Master?"

"Be quiet." I really hope my voice doesn't sound too much like a whine.

"I mean, really, not even your own parents wanted you."

The Boy looks as if he'd been slapped; now it is time to act, go the whole nine yards. Acting on his surprise, I step forward and deliver a hard jab to the ribs, breaking them. Then I'll dislodge his jaw; a single punch should do it. Next it's time to take out his vision,

which is simple enough when you're in the middle of a forest. The Boy crumbles to the ground. When I bend down to remove his weapon, I notice he is crying. I suddenly want to do what humans call laughing; he gets a thumb's down, the worst Chosen One ever.

"You are the sorriest example of any hero ever," I say as the Boy turns his head to face me. "Make's you wonder why your mentor wouldn't give up on you like your parents, especially after what I put him through." His eyes filled with realization and that's when I hit him again. Now, that is yard ten.

Epiphanies are funny things, because that's what I end up having. I have officially hit rock bottom, lying on the ground, bleeding, *crying*, chest enflamed, and the monster that killed the closest thing I've ever had to a father is about to destroy the world. Then it hits me; epiphanies don't involve weird visions and songs about hybrid animals like in *The Simpson Movie*. Mine is more like the one Elvis has in *Bubba Ho-Tep*, when he realizes suddenly that everything bad that's happened in his life was basically his own fault. My name should have been Matt because people have been stepping on me my whole life, but I let it happen. I always ran, been running my whole stinking life. But now, it stops! I get up and begin to stumble towards my opponent. Only when I'm vertically an inch from where the Gentleman is standing do I notice that night is no longer night.

12:05, I've slaughtered the lamb. Its spilled blood is now raining over the runestone, and has officially punched a hole through this dimension and into my master's. They should promote me for a job done this well. I hear a twig snap and find the Boy is now standing behind me. *So, the hero's come back for round two.*

The Gentleman's mouth was twitching again as he slips the still-dripping sacrificial

knife into his jacket and steps forward.

“ So, hero, I trust you have a new plan of defense,” said the Gentleman’s sorrow-filled voice.” When will you people ever learn?” Instead of replying I spit blood on his shiny black shoes.

“ If that’s everything new you have to offer, you might as well quit now.” He gestured towards the bright, shiny vortex that had opened behind us.

“ My masters are going to be here soon, so you might as well get on the ground and start begging for mercy.”

“ I would, if it weren’t for one thing,” I reply.

A warning sign flashes in the back of my mind, but as I so clearly have the upper hand, I lean in closer and ask “What?”

“ Well, if it weren’t for who’s holding the knife.” An alien feeling fills my whole body, as I realize that I should be feeling a slight weight on my left side. And then an even more alien feeling fills my body, starting in the area of the chest where my heart should be.

I plunge the knife straight into the Gentleman’s chest, and a green pus-like substance begins to spray over my hand and stain the white shirt he’s wearing. I look up and see that the Gentleman’s face has lost its calm demeanor and is now showing that he’s feeling the full force of his emotions, particularly surprise, anger, and fear. For once, I’m glad my foster father taught me his “trade.”

I feel...cold...oh...so... cold.

Suddenly the Gentleman's body begins to change. His hair turns snow white and his skin grey and leathery. Then poof, he's ash in front of an invisible fan that blows him into the now closing portal. Suddenly, it's dark again, but I don't mind now. A hero has been born. Now, whatever's hiding in the dark has something new to fear.