

Wisdom of Heroes

The old dwarf ran the piece of cornbread around the rim of his plate, sopping up the last bit of red gravy. Eldkossa, the heavily spiced dwarven beef roast, was a favorite dinner of his as a child and, although this meal wasn't prepared by a dwarf, the smell and taste still took him back to those easy-going days. Thorg Firearm popped the cornbread into his mouth and wiped the gravy from his lips with the sleeve of his shirt. The spice and peppers ran through his blood, and brought a flush to his face.

"Ah there's the fire" proclaimed the dwarf.

"Had enough?" asked the Olaran barmaid.

"Aye lass, more than enough"

"That's three copper then, dwarf." While many would find her words abrupt, and maybe a little insulting, Thorg knew better. Olarans weren't known for their diplomatic skills. Olarans were straight forward. Thorg admired that about them for dwarves were the same way.

"One second lass" he said, and reached for his purse. A shock ran up his left arm and Thorg grunted in pain. The old warrior stretched and let the joint pop. Thorg eased back into his chair and sighed heavily.

"Need the healer, dwarf?" asked the barmaid.

"Nay, just a friendly reminder of how old I'm getting. That's three copper you say?"

The barmaid nodded.

"I'll pay his tab for him, m'lady" said a light tenor voice. A silver coin plinked down on the table.

She turned at the sound. A man, not yet eighteen years of age, sat down opposite of Thorg. The barmaid scooped the coins into her gloved hand and eyed them cautiously.

"I promise the coins are good.," the young man said.

The woman, speaking as much to herself as anyone, said "You never know when some scum will try and pass off pewter coins as silver." She nodded to the dwarf, adding, "Tell me if you need anything else, Thorg."

"Aye, lass. And thank you, lad." Although Olaran women are taller and broader than most females on Shaintar, there was still a sway in this woman's hips that brought a wry smile to the dwarf's face. Thorg rose from his chair and made his way to the fireplace across the room. The young Frelander noticed the aging dwarf moved with a pronounced limp.

"Consider it payment, sir," the youth called out, but not yet crossing to the fire.

The dwarf raised both of his eyebrows at this, then pulled a small pouch of tobacco and filled his wooden pipe with the pungent leaves. Soaked in wine spiced with cinnamon and clove, the smell soothed Thorg's nerves.

"Payment for what, lad? I've not offered items or services for barter." Thorg pulled a small branch from the fire to light his pipe. He puffed on his pipe enough to let the tobacco glow in the bowl, drinking in the sweet scent.

"I require wisdom," the young man dared, "Wisdom from a hero."

Thorg Firearm limped his way back to the table and gingerly sat down into his chair. "And what makes you think I'm a hero, farmboy?"

"I...how did you know I was raised on a farm?" the Frelander asked.

"Your tan skin and sun-bleached hair means you've spent many an hour in the sun. Your shoulders are the size of cannonballs which says you've done hard labor for most of your life. Your hands are calloused which means you've worked them well, but there's no scars on your arms, so you've never been in a fight." The dwarf stroked his salt and pepper beard. "You are a farmboy."

His ego wounded, the young man puffed his chest, proclaiming "I've been in a fight. I've been in a lot of fights."

"Oh, really? Tell me about these battles then. They must truly be grand." Thorg smirked at the boastful boy.

"I fought down a bully in my town. I smashed his head with a rock and opened a big cut on his forehead. One of his friends tried to interfere but I punched him and broke his nose."

The dwarf belched up a huge cloud of smoke and began to laugh heartily. Tears pooled in the corners of his eyes. "Oh lad, I haven't laughed so hard in all my life."

The young man's eyes narrowed on the old man. "I killed a minotaur once," he said bitingly.

The dwarf wiped his eyes off with his sleeve "Oh ho? A minotaur, you say? Tell me."

"This big bull-man ran into my village, swinging his giant axe. He killed a lot of people." The young man paused. "He gored my father and slung his body into a bog." Forcing himself not to tear up, the youth continued, "Then he came for me. I

pulled my dagger from its sheath. The thing slipped in a pool of blood and fell on top of me." The man's tenor voice grew softer. Almost offhandedly, added "The dagger slipped through his ribs and punctured his heart."

Thorg looked at the boy again. "So you killed a minotaur."

The young man nodded.

"With your knife?"

Again the youth nodded.

"By accident?"

The boy raised his head, glaring angrily at Thorg. A moment more and he stood, loosed a short sword from its scabbard, and held it threateningly at the dwarf. "Why do you mock me?" he challenged, "I would run you through."

The dwarf sighed and tapped out his pipe. "Son put away your pig sticker before I bend you over my knee and spank you with it."

The young man quivered for a moment before thinking better of the situation and slid his sword into its sheath.

"Now sit down," Thorg chided.

The young man sat, chagrined.

"Just what wisdom are you looking for?"

"I want to become a hero," the youth said.

"Why?" Asked Thorg simply.

"Because heroes are admired," the young man stated, as if it were common knowledge, "They're rich, and songs are sung of them. They get all the glory, and they always get the woman in the end."

"Really?" the dwarf smiled, "No one told me about this. I should really talk to somebody about it."

"Are you mocking me again, sir?" the youth asked.

"No. I'm mocking the stories you may have heard about being a hero. You think heroes are rich?" Thorg pulled out his purse and dumped its contents onto the table. Sevens coins, three copper, three silver, and one gold, bounced on the hard wooden table. "You think I'm a hero now?" he said, his voice becoming harder, "This is all I have to my name boy."

"But the songs..."

The dwarf interrupted, "There are no songs sung about me, farmboy."

"Y...yes there are," the Frelander protested, "I heard one. A few months back, I did. I was in Shan and there was this bard there..."

Frowning Thorg questioned, "Was he round, wearing garish blue robes? Did he lisp when he talked?"

"Yes, sir," the young man said, "Yes he did."

The dwarf repacked his pipe. "I hate to burst your bubble boy, but I know the charlatan. His name is Elon Brighty, and his ego has ever more substance than his stories." Thorg grimaced, adding, "Whatever song he may have sung about me is pure rubbish."

"You have to lying sir. I paid this man a good silver to hear the story of how you slayed two gargoyles with just your shield."

The dwarf coughed, swallowing the bile that ran up his throat. "I beat two gargoyles?" he cried incredulously, "With just my shield?" Thorg turned his head to the ceiling in frustration then asked, "Boy, have you ever seen a gargoyle?"

The farmboy shook his head.

"Their claws will flay a man's skin from his bones with one swipe of its hand. Its stony skin will stop any sword bite save for magic ones. If it were ever to sink its teeth into you, it would hold until you die, long after it's broken bone. If you ever meet one underground, you best pray for a swift death. It blends with the stone behind it so well you'll likely never see it until it's too late." Thorg sighed, offering "Even if you were to hurt one, farmboy, it'd just take wing, fly off, and fight another day."

Chided, the boy hesitated to speak further. Seeing the pause in the youth's face, Thorg asked the young man's question for him.

"And the women?" Thorg planted his left foot on the table and pulled back his pants leg to reveal a wooden leg, then end covered by a leather shoe. "What woman would want to bed a hero with a monstrosity like this? Or this?" The dwarf rolled up his left sleeve. The skin on his arm looked as if melted wax had been poured on and left to dry. "Women just love the sight of burned flesh, don't they boy?"

The young man wasn't the only patron in the inn to grow slightly sick at the sight.

"Sometimes at night, I can still smell the flesh cooking," Thorg added.

The farmboy covered his mouth and clutched his stomach to quell the nausea.

The dwarf called out to the barmaid, "Tilya, get this young man a drink before he gets sick on your floor."

The Olaran lass drew a mug of beer from the keg behind the bar. The smell of was enough to catch Throg's own thirst.

"Best make that two, Tilya," he added.

Tilya nodded and grabbed another mug. When she brought them to the table, the young man grabbed the mug from the barmaid and gulped down half what it held.

"Slow down son," Thorg cautioned, "Drink too fast and you'll be twice as sick as what you're trying to prevent. What is your name anyway son?"

"Andrew," the young man offered, "Andrew Benfellow, from Fadrin."

"Fadrin?" Thorg reflected. "Nice place. Why did you leave?"

The young man shrugged his shoulders. "After my father was killed, there was no way I could keep the farm going by myself. So I sold it to one of our neighbors. I decided to take the money and journey the world to see what was out there."

"And what have you found?" the dwarf asked.

Andrew sighed. "Very little, sir. Lies and backstabbing mostly. I really don't know who I should trust and who I shouldn't. It's all so confusing."

"True, true. You're just young and gullible, my friend," said Thorg, smiling at thoughts of himself when he was the same, "Learning who to trust will come with time and experience. In the meantime, I can only say: Trust no one."

"But how can one go through life trusting no one? It doesn't seem like much of a life if you can't put your faith in others."

"That bard you met in Shan? That Elon Brightly fellow?" The dwarf paused long enough to savor a drink, "Should you have trusted him?"

Andrew sighed, saying, "I guess not."

Thorg continued. "Has there been anyone you've met in your travels that you'd fully trust?"

"No, sir," said Andrew, defeated.

"As well you shouldn't." With this, the dwarf took a long draw off his mug. "Mind you, I'm not saying there aren't ones out there worth your trust. Just be wary of the ones who want your company so much. Usually they just want your purse..." The dwarf puffed his pipe, adding, "...or worse."

The young farmboy crossed his arms on the table and leaned in towards the dwarf. "What about my original question, sir? How do I become a hero?"

"I can't answer that son," Thorg said flatly, "No one should be able to."

"Why not?"

The dwarf drew a deep breathe from his pipe. As he blew the smoke aside he said, "Let me ask you this question: What makes a hero?"

The young man shrugged. "He saves the damsel in distress. He'll jump in front of an arrow to protect his friend. He'll slay a monster to save a village."

"Aye, admirable traits all. But do you know what makes a hero to me?"

Andrew shook his head.

"A hero is the constable who will wade into a bar fight without knowing what who's armed and who's not. A hero is the priest who keeps preaching when no one hears his words. The farmer whose crops don't give the harvest he wanted, but can still feed his family during hard times. That's what makes a hero to me. The everyman that doesn't seek the glory and doesn't get songs sung about him, but keeps facing adversity head on." The older man raised an eyebrow the younger man. "It's

not what you do that makes a hero, it's how it's done... and why."

"So it all depends on what people think a hero is?"

Thorg cocked his head and shrugged his shoulders.

Andrew frowned in thought. "You think I should have kept my family's farm going, don't you?"

"I think you should follow your heart son." The dwarf settled back in his chair. "Is your heart really into traversing the world and seeking your fortune?"

The young man thought for a moment. "I don't know." He cast his eyes downward.

"Where is your heart?" The dwarf narrowed his eyes thoughtfully at the young man.

"I don't know. I just know it's not at the farm." The youth looked up, as if starting to understand. "It's just not my home, not anymore."

Thorg nodded and lifted his mug again. "I guess its true then."

"What's that, sir?"

"Home," the dwarf said with hint of a smile in his eyes, "is where the heart is."

"Yes sir, it is." Andrew smiled. As he stood, he placed another silver piece on the table.

"What is that for?" Thorg asked the young man, one eyebrow raised in curiosity.

"For the ale, and," Andrew said, "for your wisdom."

The dwarf nodded and puffed on his pipe again. Andrew turned when he noticed Tilya had walked up behind him. He planted a kiss on the barmaid's cheek as he turned to go. The Olaran woman scowled but couldn't help but smile when his back was turned. Thorg Firearm chuckled quietly. Andrew made his way to the door, stopping just as he grabbed the handle.

"Sir, I just want you to know something before I go."

The dwarf nodded.

"I still consider you a hero." Not waiting for a reply, Andrew Benfellow opened the door and passed through.

"And you're my hero, too, old dwarf" Tilya said, leaning over to kiss Thorg on the head as she moved past.

The dwarf huffed and shooed the barmid away with a wave of his hand.

"Oh, shut up," he chided, but still smiling himself.

Tilya deftly scooped up the coins as she walked away, laughing, and leaving the dwarf to his pipe, his ale, and thoughts of his next adventure.

SHAINSTAR: IMMORTAL LEGENDS

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