

The Legend of Hobart

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In case you were wondering, becoming a hero is not as easy as you might think. I tried rescuing a damsel in distress. But all of our local damsels practice martial arts and assured me that the last thing they needed was rescuing.

By the time I finished my stew, I was sure. If I still wanted to make it into knight school after this latest debacle, there was only one possibility left. I was going to have to slay a dragon.

That night, I dreamt that I was standing in a massive hall with a sword gripped in my left hand. The ceiling was distant, the floor covered in flattened gold coins. Lit torches sat in brackets along the walls. On the far side of the room was an enormous heap of treasure: gold and jewels, weapons, and crowns.

Lying on top of the mound was a dragon. The beast was larger than I had thought possible. His green scales shimmered in the torchlight. His wings were folded, his eyes shut. Even with his mouth closed, I could see his teeth—white and sharp and as long as my forearm.

In the firelight, I got my first good look at Tate. He was tall and skinny, with golden hair that stood out from his head like straw. He had a round face and bright blue eyes above a broad smile. It was a face I saw scattered throughout the room in various sizes.

That night, I lay in the sleeping loft under a patchwork quilt, warm and well fed, surrounded by the soft snores of Tate and his siblings. But I couldn't sleep. This whole household of people thought I was a hero headed out on a noble quest. What would they think of me if I failed?

Albert was glowing, and not just because Tate's brothers had given him a good brushing. The horse had an audience, and he was enjoying every minute of it. He pranced his way down the main street of Fair Oaks, tossing his head to make his bridle jingle. I finally gave up on the reins, since he was clearly going to do what he wanted.

We spent most of the day building a bridge. The two fishermen, who it turned out were both named Dan, ferried us back and forth across the river while we unwound the unbreakable thread, securing it on the stone posts that were the only part of the old bridge still standing.

My opponent was old and clearly not as strong as he had once been, but I could see glimpses of skill. This man had been a great swordsman in his day. Unfortunately, he didn't need much expertise to spear me with the sharp point of a blade.

I heard hooves striking the ground and looked up, half expecting Albert to be fleeing the scene. But my horse was only a few feet away, attempting to hide behind a boulder that was a third his size. The hoofbeats came from a large dark horse that was cantering toward us.

Hero's home was exactly how I had imagined a castle should look. The tall stone walls were capped off with battlements. Enormous towers stretched up into the sky, complete with flags snapping in the wind. There was even a drawbridge that lowered to span the moat.

Before turning north into the mountains, the road to Rona dipped south to trail along the coast. Mildred's almanac predicted snow, so of course we were covered in sweat. We were all glad to see the ocean and feel the breeze that blew in off the water.

The rain was slowing down, and the fire was growing. The flames licked at the trees, spreading and expanding as they chased us through the woods. I ran harder than I ever had in my life, with Hero racing along beside me, her dark hair billowing out behind her.

From that side of the river, we watched the fire rush up and down the far bank, until finally another wave of heavy rain surged through and beat out the flames. The rain reached us, covering us in deluges of water, but no one minded. We had made it through, together.

Hero taught us how to thrust and parry, how to slash and block. Tate and I took turns practicing the skills with Guardian. Hero's way certainly felt more effective. After that night, Hero gave Tate and me a swordsmanship lesson every evening while the stew cooked.

A festival was breaking out. As people reached their fill of turnips, they began to dance and sing, grasping handfuls of the small red vegetable in their upraised hands. There was music and singing. The children started to laugh.

The path wound around the mountain like a snake. There were no shrubs or trees. The entire mountainside was bare. As the castle grew closer, we could see that all of the outside walls had been blackened with fire.

On the second floor of Castle Flamegon—which was thankfully built for human guests—I stretched out on the feather mattress and stared up at the underside of my canopied bed. As I had traveled up the mountain, all I could think about was how could I kill a dragon? Now all I could think was how could I kill this dragon?

We often hear about fantastic feats performed by knights. But may we never forget that a knight is first and foremost a servant sworn by the oath of chivalry to care for and protect those in need.
