

## Who Is A Hero?

The day was stiflingly hot, the busy street and its contents baking under the high midday sun, the slabs of sand-coloured stone scorching the bare soles of the street urchins' feet to a texture not dissimilar to leather. Small eddies of dust rose above the desiccated ground, clogging throats and initiating bouts of wracked coughing like death rattles from all sides, prophetic of the future of many of these street children, who, even if they managed to avoid the emerging violence which was eking into the country from its war-stricken neighbours, would be unlikely to escape their hunger, which was the reaper that shadowed them in their every waking moment.

Nevertheless, despite the heat, the street thrummed with life, plugged at one end by a bustling market, creating a veritable forest of once brightly coloured awnings, now faded from many years of relentless use under the unforgiving rays. They stood straight, protecting the network of tables beneath them, which groaned almost audibly under the weight of the wide variety of goods they promoted. Around them bumbled great personalities, many of whom had trod these flags for the majority of their lives, some as old and tired as the banners above their heads, yet all managing to maintain at least something of their original vibrancy, be it in the witty rapport with their neighbouring stallholders, or in their skill at fending off cheeky barterers, countering their impertinently low offers with cheerful silence, their weathered faces, for the most part as brown and wizened as walnuts, crinkling into wide smiles, exposing their strikingly white teeth.

A little way down the street the smell of cooking permeated the warm air from the local taverna, its owners good naturedly doling out the unwanted food scraps to the waifs lingering hopefully beside its doors. A group of soldiers were settled at one of the tables here, their dog-eared cards, having seen years of active service spread haphazardly across the tables between them, their rifles resting casually against the back of their chairs – with the pressure of their duties out of their minds for the moment, their raucous laughter resonated through the street, a pleasant addition to the soundtrack of urban life.

In a quiet corner, tucked away from the hustle and bustle of the main thoroughfare sat an old man wrapped in swathes of light fabric which blended almost seamlessly with the stone on which he rested, regarding the scene before him fondly, content despite the harsh hand fate had dealt him. Indeed, the mere fact that he had secured this spot in particular, was in itself testament to his years of hardship, for it was highly sought after, and it was only out of the respect of the other beggars who had been witness to his plight; walking the streets of this region as long as many of them had been alive, that he was left undisturbed by the street's other inhabitants.

He watched with contented apathy as a young family entered the street from the far end, the mother, dark-haired and with the golden skin and perfectly straight, almost feline features, native to his people. Her face was lit up by a dazzling smile as she strolled along at an easy pace beside her husband, who by comparison seemed much less at ease, his expression stoic, although apparent anxiety was barely concealed by the determined set of his sharp features. Between them scampered a young boy, a huge grin splitting his small face as he swung off his parents' arms. Suddenly he let out a loud whoop and ran off towards the market, his spindly arms windmilling as he tore towards his favourite stallholder, a kindly old woman he had

come to know through his regular visits here, who already stood waiting for him, her arms outstretched.

With a bark of rebuke from the boy's father which escaped the notice of the boy, the old man's attention was once more drawn to the parents, his awareness piqued by the note of urgency in the man's voice, his cloaked head whipping round just in time to see the panic in the young man's face, to see the thing he had clutched in his hand, and to notice what before he had missed – the additional bulk unmistakable around the man's waist, at odds to his otherwise lean form. It had previously been concealed by the father's loose fitting clothing, but was now starkly exposed by a light breeze which whispered through the street – something which moments ago would have been a welcome addition to the scene, but which now spelt out their doom. The man's wife remained oblivious to the danger, her focus on his face as she looked questioningly up at him, her trust unwavering.

The old man knew enough of the horror stories that haunted this region to know he had no chance of survival, although he was near the outer edge of the average blast radius, 'near' was not enough in these situations, and yet, as the certainty of his death stared him in the face, the old man felt calm, at ease with the fact he was finally about to succumb to the invitations of death that had tempted him all his life, been his constant companions through the hard times. He readied himself for his departure, with but one regret, although large enough alone; the regret that, as much of a feat as it was, all he had done, all he had achieved, was survival. And as the child careened towards him, almost level with him now on the path of his trajectory towards the market, he knew what he must do.

With that the old beggar lunged to his feet, reminiscent of some wayward spirit as his robes whipped around him, putting into harsh clarity the slightness of the man's frame, exaggerating the curvature of his bowed back. A strangled cry escaped his cracked lips, for many around him the first indication that something was amiss, arriving far too late. At the taverna, the soldiers fell silent, some craning around, others half rising from their seats, already reaching for their rifles to ready themselves to neutralize any threat. But over this threat they had no authority, no amount of training could save them here. So they merely looked on as the old man threw himself into the path of the child, watched perplexed as he barreled into him with all the strength he could muster, leaving the two of them rolling across the slabs, the boy shocked into silence as he grappled futilely against him. When they finally came to a halt, the old man lay spread-eagled across the child, attempting to afford the best protection he could for him, looking for all the world to be an angel the likes of that which you make in the snow, although there was no way he could ever have experienced one of these.

This was how they lay as the explosion occurred, filling the street with a flash of blinding light which reached the boy, even swaddled under the folds of the man's robes, searing into his retinas the image of the body, motionless above him. A blast of earsplitting volume followed, and a wave of superheated air, which made the earlier complaints about the temperature seem trivial by comparison.

After that, an eerie silence fell across the area, the boy pinned to the ground, although the restriction meant little to him, paralyzed as he was by his shock and fear, unable to shut his eyes, even to lift a hand to cover his face as a stench which he could not yet attribute to any entity known to him filled his nostrils; the odour of

death, causing the bile to rise in his throat, triggering a sound deep in his chest of something akin to a wounded animal. Above him the man, the body, did not stir.

And so who here is the hero? The boy's father thought himself one, sacrificing himself, and making the ultimate sacrifice of his family to his cause, acting under the belief that he would be far more useful as a martyr, taking as many 'enemies' with him along the way as he could, to make the world take notice. And perhaps he thought this loss of life was justified, that what he fought for was worth dying for. And for all we can say, maybe it would have been, but then, the soldiers, our side, thought exactly the same thing.

Are the soldiers the heroes? They thought of themselves as such, fighting and dying, killing whosoever opposed them, 'for the greater good'. Undeniably, it is often the case that their conflict is justified in cases where the suffering inflicted by the opposing party far exceeds the suffering necessary to halt it. Yet still, that waste of life, however necessary, is inexcusable, is not something to be celebrated, to be rewarded with the title of hero.

And so it appears the only character here that can be attributed the true, unsullied title of 'hero' without reservation, is the old beggar man, whose name we do not even know, whose name will never be inscribed upon a monument, for whom heads will never be bowed in reverie, who will depart from this life in one great final defining act.

And who will be forgotten.

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