

THE HERO

BY LEE STODDART

THE large chamber feels cold and has a smoky dampness about it. Windowless, lit only by a few guttering torches and several large braziers which do not quite succeed in either warming or lighting its extremities. Huge tapestries depict epic battles and portraits of noble men and women hang from the shadowy walls.

Towards the back of the room, an oak dining table of massive proportions, heaves with exotic fare.

The only diner, clad in chainmail and partial plate armour, is seated at the head of the table, shovelling food into his mouth. Occasionally he nods, says words I can't make out into the darkness behind him.

Muzzled, hands and feet chained, I'm forced to hobble into his presence. Rough blows to my head and body keep me moving forward. I endure this, knowing that it brings me closer to him.

The guards shove me in front of the General, the world's greatest hero. They expect me to fall to my knees; yet, somehow, I keep my feet on the slick stone surface.

The General continues to gorge whilst consorting with whoever is behind him, obscured by his bulk. Someone who has never sought the light.

Sharp pain shoots across the back of my knees as a guard thwacks me with the shaft of his spear. Whilst off balance, a second guard pushes me over, so I end up sprawled on the floor.

The clammy flagstones feel good against my face.

Curled in a protective ball, I peer out through arms wrapped around my head, afraid of more punishment. I'm not brave or good with pain. I'm not really sure how I've managed to get this far, but my mission is too important to give up now.

The General's polished armour clanks as he stands, lumbering into full view. He doesn't look much like a great leader; age has turned him to fat. I can see the sweat glistening on his flushed skin; hear him as he inhales and exhales deeply, his corpulent body overwhelmed by the effort of walking a few steps. Perhaps that's

why he wears his armour in the castle, away from any battle—to remind everyone who he is.

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The fighting itself had been a one-sided affair. There were no survivors from the five-dozen or so poorly-armed and inexperienced skirmishers that had been press-ganged into taking-up arms. At least we'd made a show of defending our homes against a war band of a hundred and fifty assorted knights, archers and foot soldiers.

It was slaughter.

They'd found me wandering dazed at the edge of the field of combat. If the soldiers hadn't immediately recognised me, they would have put me to the sword; but, as soon as they came to realise they had captured a special prize they reigned in their murderous appetites. After that, they brought me to the nearby stronghold for some special attention from the General.

His pudgy sausage-finger points at me. "This is the leader of the rebel-scum? This... thing crawling at my feet?"

"Apparently so, Lord." A shrivelled, grey-skinned man, in a plain black robe, leaning on a staff, emerges from behind the bulk of the General. He makes a show of inspecting me, disdainfully peering over a pair of thick spectacles.

I know of this one too. He is the thinker. The designer. The architect-in-chief of our downfall. I want to kill him, right now. But I have to hold back. Play the longer game.

Prostrate on the floor, I'm well aware I'm not overly impressive. Certainly no warrior. Females tend to be smaller than males, but even so, I'm quite short and weedy. Not exactly the embodiment of Goblin might and vigour.

But I'm smart. I won't tolerate the injustices humans have committed. Somehow, someone has to take the war to them. Right now, that someone is me.

I groan. It's not entirely unwarranted. I'm exhausted, battered and bruised from my ordeal. Even so, I call on inner reserves. I have to finish the mission—one way or the other. I pray I have the strength to see it through, yet wish it could all end, here and now.

It can't. Not quite yet.

The General waddles over. He looms over me, looking down in contempt. I glare back.

The General gestures at a guard. "You. Tie *it* to that chair."

"Aye, Sir!" The guard hauls me up by one arm, nearly wrenching it from its socket. He drags me to the chair and throws me roughly into it. I put on a great show, snarling and thrashing around, only to receive a punch in the gut. I can't have them thinking I'm too unusual, too smart. They might start thinking there's more to this than meets the eye.

A second guard joins in. His spear butt goes straight in my face.

"That'll larn ya to show some respect'," the brute growls. He's right, I've had enough. There's no more fight left in me. There's a coppery tang of blood in my throat and my nose feels like it's on fire. Broken for sure.

"Everyone—clear the room," the General yells.

"My lord?" The wheedling query comes from his bespectacled advisor.

"Of course, I did not mean you, my friend—we have no secrets. Besides, what would I do without you? You must stay."

The old man smiles pompously, nods his assent, then retreats into the shadows, to loiter until needed.

I must have lost consciousness. When I wake, I'm bound to the heavy oak dining seat. My jaw throbs. Probing with my tongue, I feel a loose fang. Weakened, not cracked, thank the Gods.

The General notices I'm conscious and turns his attention to me again. "Little green bastard. Where's my translator? Bring me my translator. Immediately!"

"No translator. You won't need one. I speak Human," I croak.

I don't like to speak their language—it reminds me of where I learnt it, when I was a youngling. When I was forced to labour in the master's 'big house', as the rest of my family slaved in his fields and died in his mine.

The warthog of a general leans on the edge of the table, looking a little less smug. I can almost feel him wondering what I might have overheard and understood. "So, the rumours are true. You're an educated green-skin. We are so lucky to have your company—"

"We aren't brutes. You Humans like to portray us as such, but we have...we *had* a civilisation—"

“A likely story, you mutinous little shit. Anyway—”

Unwilling to allow him to interrupt me, I plough on. “That was until you Humans came along. At first, we thought you’d come to trade. Some chance. You wanted our land and the gold in our mountains. Gold we had no use for and didn’t value. We would have given it to you—with our blessing.”

He advances on me. “How dare you speak to me like that?” Thick veins stuck out on his neck and throbbed on his forehead.

I plough on regardless of his indignant bluster. “You wheedled and charmed your way in. We invited you in to live amongst us in peace and harmony.

“You set about systematically stealing everything of value. When that wasn’t enough, you surreptitiously built up your numbers until you could attack in force. Not honourably, underhandedly. You betrayed our trust; oh, *great* General.”

The General paces up and down, looking like he is going to speak, but I cut him off again.

“Twenty years later all we’re left with are a few shanty towns on small parcels of land you magnanimously dole out to us.” It hurts to draw breath, I think I have a broken rib.

“We give you more than you deserve, maggot,” the General roars.

“You breed us like farm animals. You make slaves of us. You work us to the bone and expect gratitude, whilst you destroy what little remains of our culture.”

“Soon—very soon little gobbo—it will be over. You won’t have to worry about your precious culture anymore,” he snorts his derision.

“If Goblins are one thing, it’s determined. We will prevail in the end.” I can’t keep this up. This has to end soon.

The General glowers at me, anger, perhaps even a little fear, bubbling to the surface.

“Are you quite finished? A common house-goblin, grown bold because you know some big words and can string a sentence together,” he sneers. “Well, you’ve had your little rebellion. I came all the way out here, far from the capital, and crushed it.

“You agitate amongst your kind. You spread hatred for Humans. Good people are beaten and murdered, crops are burnt,

machinery is sabotaged, gold production stops and trade is disrupted.” The General leans forward and spits a great ball of phlegm into my face.

His sputum slowly oozes into my eye, down my cheek. I can feel it’s disgusting snail’s trail of a path. I can’t do anything about it, roped to the chair.

“The Elders strategy is for economic disruption only,” I throw back at him. “A few hotheads go too far—they don’t represent all Goblins!”

The General turns away. He shouts incoherently as he goes back to the table, grabs a chicken leg and forces it into his gaping maw as he throws himself back into his chair. “Goblin scum!” he bellows furiously through the food, spraying it everywhere.

When I speak, my voice is low and measured. “I have a name, though you don’t care to speak it. My name is Greckna. I have a family too. I have feelings, hopes and ambitions. I dream of a better life for my tribe.”

The general is occupied, snuffling once more at his trough. Does he hear what I say, let alone care?

I raise my voice and find an energy in my anger I did not know I still had. “What gives *you* the right to steal *our* ancestral lands and oppress *us*? To bring a once proud peaceful folk so low?”

From out of the shadows, the vizier emerges, wraith-like. “Heathen filth. *We* are the Creator’s chosen people. He crafted the lower-races to serve *our* needs. You are... *resources*—and we may do with you as we wish. We have chosen to use your repulsive little race for our own profit.

“You, on the other hand, we choose to torture. You will betray all you love. With your help, willing or otherwise, we will end this war once and for all, *Greckna* Goblin-bitch.” The brazier coals light up his eyes, filling them with a fervour I have rarely witnessed even amongst the few Goblins who still worship the dark Old Ones in fear-filled narcotic frenzies.

I have to try one last time, for the good of future generations. One final effort.

“Even so, I would parley with you for the good of both our races. I’m empowered by the Great Council of Elders to negotiate

with you as their emissary—to come to a solution we can all live with. Please. No more killing.

“*Together*, we can build great things. We have much to offer, we are an ingenious people if you see beyond your prejudice. Can’t *you* see the benefit in working together? Before it’s too late.

“The only alternative we foresee is an eternity of war, death and destruction—”

The General is out of his chair again, shouting me down. “I have a better solution. We will solve the Goblin problem by exterminating every last one of you. We will wipe your squalid little race from the face of the land.

“My associate and I have just agreed a strategy. We will move into the Goblin ghettos, herd your disgusting green friends together, and slaughter them like cattle.

“That’s where you come in. They trust you. “Help us and I might just torture you for a little while, but spare your family.

“Of course, before I give the order, I have to make sure the council will go along with the complete eradication of the Goblin race. We’ll need to make sure the good citizens of the Empire understand exactly how very dangerous and untrustworthy you little green-bastards are. That should be easy once we stage some rather... *tragic events*. Then, popular opinion will demand we go ahead.”

“And what will you do for slaves then?” I ask in desperation.

“We can always find some other, more compliant... servants. Some foetid sub-human race: the Halflings or Elves, perhaps?”

Frustrated and angry, I rock in the chair, hoping to loosen my ties; but, securely bound, I succeed in no more than turning it over onto the floor, me in it.

The General’s counsellor sniggers. He shuffles over and aims a boot at my gut. His kick, feeble as a Goblin cub, catches my already broken rib. I cry out, despite myself.

“Look how weak and pathetic this hideous creature is, my Lord. It is time to destroy them once and for all. We should start with this one. We don’t need it.”

The General, encouraged by the old man’s venom, crouches besides me. He yanks back my topknot until my neck is arched, my

face pulled towards him so I can see his terrible, deranged grin, feel his rotten stinking breath.

“Yes. Yes, my old friend. You may be right.

“Your days *are* numbered little gobbo. But, we won’t kill you straight away. Oh, no—you will beg for the release of death before we have finished with you.”

Death.

There is no other option remaining.

I bite down hard on the already loose fang, implanted by our most artful surgeon. It breaks in half with a great crack. The small quantity of liquid it contains seeps into my mouth.

I exhale with all my might into the face of the General, the world’s greatest hero, the Goblin Killer.

He looks confused. His ugly face quickly swells, turns purple, darkens to an almost blue-black. He splutters and struggles to draw breath as the poison takes hold of his ageing, flaccid, human-weak body. Collapsing to the floor, he grasps at his throat, blood-flecked froth dribbling from his mouth.

“Guards, guards! Quickly!” the advisor cries out and moves to his lord’s aid, arthritically bending to see what the problem is. “Lord, what ails you? Are you unwell? Are you choking on something? Is it a chicken bone?”

The principle architect of the plan is right in front of me.

“Old man,” I croak, through the pain that is searing my throat.

Without thinking, he turns and looks me deep in the eye. I have never seen such hatred. “What have you done?” he eventually manages in a whisper.

My breathing is ragged and laboured. Each gasping lungful burns my gullet as I try to hold enough in for one final breath.

His indistinct form looms over me, his puny arms outstretched to wring my neck. I can’t wait any longer. I get one last spluttering exhalation out before my throat closes and my lungs collapse completely. Through vision blurred by tears, I see the ancient human throw up an arm to ward off the meagre poison cloud.

Wracked with pain, the world recedes. As I go to join my ancestors, I pray I have done enough.