

## “Nobody’s Hero”

The hero of this story was lying near death at the foot of the villain while I was standing in awe at his defeat. There was no way that he could’ve been beaten so easily, but his blood now stained the concrete of this darkened chamber. I was only the companion to the great hero; I carried the bag with our belongings and food. I was no hero.

The villain laughed maniacally as he pushed the hero’s sword farther into the ground, through the hero’s body, cracking the stone beneath the hero. Screams of strife filled the room. His anguish made me clamp my eyes shut, for I wasn’t ready to see him in agony. He was the hero. He wasn’t supposed to get hurt like this. He was supposed to win. Wasn’t he?

A hand on my shoulder snapped my eyes open. The villain was looming over me with his gloomy composure. It took everything I had to not cry immediately. After ripping the hero’s sword out of the ground, he placed the flat of the blade on my shoulder. His eyes were full of malice, but there was a flickering behind them. What was that about?

My hands refused to stay strong as I fumbled for my small knife.

“You can’t beat me, even if you gave it everything you had,” he mentioned realistically.

“I-I can try.” I tried to sound brave, but fear ate at my vocal chords.

“You don’t want to do that,” he opposed as he flicked my knife away.

I stayed silent because I didn’t know what to do. He had brutally tortured the hero. I was the hero’s companion. Wasn’t I supposed to be brave too?

“This sword is far too light for my taste.”

He threw the sword to the side with ease, but that didn’t make the comment any less strange. That sword was heavier than most blades I polished. After unsheathing his own dark

as-night-blade, a smile crept on his face. Every ounce of my fear turned into pure confusion as he then *offered* me the sword.

“We’re on different sides. Why are you giving me your weapon?”

He dropped the sword into my hands, but it may as well just have been dropped to the ground. No matter how hard I tried to lift it, it stayed glued to the floor.

“Lesson one: it doesn’t matter which side you’re on. You can choose to do whatever with your life, yet you define your life by sides.”

His hands wrapped around my arms, and he lifted my arms so the sword wasn’t completely on the ground anymore. What was happening?

“Lesson two: you’re only as strong as you allow yourself to be. If you believe you’re only here for that idiot’s character development, then that’s all you’ll be.”

“Why are you telling me these things?”

I tried to lift the sword again, but once the villain’s hands left my arms, it fell straight to the ground.

“Every hero I’ve ever faced treated their traveling companion as garbage. They’ve pushed people all their lives, and they receive praise for being awful.”

“That’s not true!”

“Don’t lie to yourself, kid. I’ve watched your progress this whole time. You’d have to be dense to not see it. You did everything to keep him satisfied. You cooked while he rested. You stood watch all night as he slept soundly.”

“He’s a Lord. I’m a servant. That’s the way it is.”

“That’s the way it is? This world is far more damaged than I thought.”

He stole the sword from the ground and replaced it in his sheath. The light seemed to fade as the fire basins dimmed dramatically. The villain stood right in front of one of the basins. His arm stretched into the flame, but he didn't wince. Was he crazy? When he pulled his hand out, it was covered with soot.

The weight of his steps were the only sounds that echoed in this large hall. He stopped right in front of me, and the silence crept on. An eerie vibe filled every square inch of the room.

“Will you join my ranks?”

It took me what seemed like a lifetime to process the words he said. He wanted me to join his ranks? Me? I can't even talk without stuttering.

“If you choose to return to your 'side,' then you may leave the grounds without persecution,” he added.

This villain was unlike others I've met. His actions seemed unorthodox.

As if the villain's words were magic, the hero, who I thought was dead, mustered enough strength to oppose, “Do not listen to him... You can not betray your kingdom...”

Something deep inside me wanted to scream. The hero, no, *my* hero, the man I've looked up to since I became his servant was telling me I couldn't do something. He was saying that I was not capable of something. Of course, he told me I couldn't do many things: draw a bow, kill a boar, talk back to him, and many more. Somehow, this was different.

I had been exposed to someone who cared. Someone who didn't care about titles. That's all the kingdom was worried about. Lord this, Lady that. Then again, if I betrayed the kingdom, I could never go back. My family lived in the rural part of that kingdom, but I haven't seen them in years...

What was I thinking? There was absolutely no way that I could betray the kingdom! There were too many people that would judge my decision. Too many people would try and force my decision to be the right one.

“The choice is yours alone, kid.”

His words echoed through my brain. He was giving me a genuine choice with no strings attached. My world was spinning, and my mind was racing. Everything I was worried about – what people would think, how it would make me look – wasn’t even a thought in his head.

“I’ll do it,” was all I said.

“No!” the hero rasped. “He has a silver tongue!”

“I have no such power as that. There is only truth,” the villain muttered.

I tried to look the villain in his eyes, but his head was bowed. What was he doing? I’m not royalty. If anything, he should be looking down on me, not bowing.

“I’ll join your ranks.” There was no stutter in my words.

“Mutanist!” A fit of coughs followed the hero’s word.

“This is what you want, right?” the villain wondered aloud.

“Yes.”

“Then, it is done.”

He raised his head to look me in the eye. His hand, full of soot, placed itself on my forehead. There was a subtle warmth still lingering from the ash. I took one final look at the hero. The expression on his face held pure disgust, and that’s the face he died with.

“You must be tired,” the villain placed his hand softly on my shoulder. “You should rest.”

He didn't speak the rest of the way. As we walked through cold hallways made completely out of stone, our footsteps were the only noises bouncing off of the walls. Not one soul was seen as we walked farther and farther away from where I left the hero to die. Something deep inside of my gut dropped as I remembered the face the hero made.

He trusted me, and I left him to die. Did I make this choice for me or did I make it out of spite? I was given power, and I completely ignored my life leading up to it. How stupid can I be?

As if the villain could see the gears turning in my brain, he said, "You have nothing to worry about, kid."

"Are you sure?"

"More than sure," he stopped in his tracks. "I'll come by to get you in the morning."

"Ok..."

"Sleep well, kid."

He lurked down the dark hallway and disappeared into the shadows. Trying to ignore the eeriness that surrounded me, I pushed the door open. The minute I saw the room, I immediately wanted to chase the villain down and ask him if I was in the right place, but he wasn't anywhere to be found.

Cautiously stepping inside of the room, I wondered if this was a trap. There was no way he actually *meant* to take me to this nice of a room. This was nearly ten times bigger than my closet space back at the Kingdom of Carlyn. There was a bed with a blanket. There was a desk with a jar of ink. There was even a shelf full of scrolls and books! He must have taken me to the wrong room.

Although there were all of these things, it did seem quite empty. There was nobody here to tell me what to do at random times. My Lord was dead, and I betrayed him. I have given him everything. My service, my patience, my everything. He still hadn't understood how much I did for him. Maybe that's a sign that I should start making my own decisions.

Lying down on the forgiving bed that felt entirely different than what I was used to, I tried to sleep. Unfortunately, I have spent so many nights with sleepless fatigue that I feared that I wouldn't be able to sleep. Also, this bed was drastically different than a floor. Hoping that I'd find it easier to fall asleep, I crawled onto the cool stone floor. Everything I was used to flooded back to me. Yes, this was much more comforting.

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"What are you doing on the floor?"

The voice was foggy, and I couldn't tell who spoke. I lifted my head up, expecting to see my Lord ready to give me my list for today's service, but I only saw the villain peering down at me. Immediately sitting up against the bed, my fatigue evaporated into thin air.

"Uh, I... I don't know?"

There was absolutely no confidence in my voice, and the villain could tell. I'm lucky he shrugged it off.

"I'll be taking you with me to a neighboring kingdom today."

"O-Ok," I mumbled as I rose to my feet.

He opened the door and waited until I exited first. This just kept getting stranger and stranger. Slowing my pace so I was behind him, I let my head hang so it only looked at the floor.

Servants were not supposed to look royalty in the face in the Kingdom of Carlyn. I learned that the hard way.

Something cold snatched my wrist, and my head had snapped upwards to see what it was. It was the villain looking back at me with a smile. His smile was genuine as he gently pulled me forward so I was walking beside him.

“How long will it take for you to understand that we are equal?” he laughed.

His laugh was beautiful. It was powerful like a waterfall, but it was also filled with pure heart and feeling. I’ve never heard such a laugh; it seemed sublime. All I could do was smile meekly in response. Once he was satisfied with my reaction, he continued to look straight.

“Where is the neighboring kingdom, master?” I spoke smally.

He stopped dead in his tracks.

“Do not call me that. Ever. Do you understand?”

His tone had completely changed from the sweet moment we just shared. There was nothing happy about what his voice held. It was as if he knew nothing of joy and only knew of strife and darkness. It was quite jarring to see such a sudden change, and I tried to cope by swallowing the lump that formed in my throat from fear.

“Y-Yes, sorry.”

He ran his hand through his hair out of embarrassment. I half expected charcoal to rub off on his hand because it had seemed his hair was drenched with it, but nothing like that happened.

“Heh, sorry about that. Before we leave, you’ll be changing into some nicer clothes.”

His reply was as if he hadn't just turned into the Rebel Lord of Shadows as so many call him. Hearsay goes that he was once a part of our kingdom, but he left. He must have not agreed with something. I must remember to ask him about that later...

“Are you coming?”

His smooth voice snapped me out of my train of thought. I saw that his hand was outstretched as if it were beckoning me forward. Without even thinking about it, I took his hand and firmly gripped it. Somehow, I knew I could trust him with anything. It's strange. It took years and years for my Lord, I mean Prince Ian, to accept my company, but it only took me a moment to trust this man. Does that make me a fool?

As he led me through the damp, dark hallways, he was explaining to me where we were and where each corridor led to. It seemed as if his voice was the only one that these walls have heard in a long time. I listened to every word he said, but I was also captivated by his appearance.

Men called him a vessel of evil, but his eyes were filled with passion and comfort. Men called him the Rebel Lord of Shadows, but his personality wasn't sinister at all. Men called him a criminal larger than any in history, but his smile was blinding. After meeting him, there isn't any way I could believe he was those things anymore. It must have been his choices that made people think that because there is nothing about this man that is intimidating.

Except for his physical stature. He could probably pull a cart full of metal work if he wanted to. After I experienced how weighted his sword was, I can only see how he was built for battle. His height created reach, his weight created leverage, and his lean muscles created better



recovery. In short, he was dragging out the battle between himself and Prince Ian. He could've beaten him in no time, but he sat there and played with him like a cat.

“Kid, why are you looking at me like that?”

I could feel the blood rush to my face as I realized that I had been staring at him. Quickly, I tried to come up with a lie to cover up my gaucking.

“Uh, I was just wondering what your name was...” I muttered.

“My name?” He looked at the ceiling fondly. “I remember when I had one of those.”

“Had? You don't have a name?”

“I did, but the man that held that name is dead. So, no. I don't have a name. What about you?”

“People call me Leon deGray.”

“Leon... That reminds me of one of the great warriors of old. A powerful name that is.”

“Yeah, I guess...”

I could see in his eyes that he wanted to say something, but he held back. Instead, he just opened the nearest wooden door and ushered me in. He pulled out a chair for me to sit in while he went to a trunk along his wall. As he shuffled through small piles of clothes, he eventually came back in front of me with five items: a shirt that showed no dirt, pants that were far nicer than mine, socks that were worn but not damaged, scuffed leather boots, and a leather belt. These clothes looked as if they would take every penny I had scraped together in my entire lifetime to buy.

“I trust you can dress yourself?” he chuckled as he handed me the clothes.

“Uh, yeah...” I gingerly took the clothes from his hands.

“I’ll be in the hallway. Just come out when you’re done.”

He left without another word. Anxious about taking too long, I quickly changed into the newer clothes. Don’t get me wrong, they were used and old, but they were in far better condition than my own clothes. The boots were almost too big, but it was far better than being barefoot. Therefore, I dealt with it.

Just like he said, he was waiting in the hallway for me. Although, he was leaned against the opposite wall with his eyes shut which seemed strange. During his fight with Prince Ian, he seemed as if he was aware of his surroundings at all times. I sat there for a moment just waiting for him to notice I was there, and, eventually, he did notice I was there.

Rubbing his face, he murmured, “Well, that’s embarrassing.”

I’m assuming he fell asleep, but I can’t be for sure. Trying not to seem as awkward as I was, I looked down again to avoid eye contact. Most people don’t like to show people their weaknesses. Especially Lords and Ladies.

“Alright, we better head off. I’ve got a horse ready for us.”

He began to walk off again, and I had to slightly jog just to keep up with his brisk walking pace. As the corridor twisted and turned, we finally made it outside into the crisp air. He readjusted his belt with his sheath so it sat more comfortably on his hips. There seemed to be a dagger sheathed as well as his sword. I didn’t quite understand why he held two different weapons, but I didn’t question him about it either.

Somehow he could feel where my eyes were, and he smiled to himself. He pulled his dagger out flipping it in his hand skillfully.

“I first learned to fight with this. Maybe it’ll do you better.”

Tossing the dim blade into the air, he unlatched the sheath from his belt, caught the knife before it fell on the ground, slid the knife into the sheath, and then handed it to me like he didn't do anything that took an impressive amount of skill. I hope that he wasn't thinking that I could do anything like that because there was absolutely no way that that was going to happen.

Awkwardly placing the sheath on my belt, I wasn't used to having a weapon so close to me. I mean, I did have a knife with me on my travels here, but it wasn't anything more than a woodworking knife, so, in battle, it wouldn't do much of anything.

"Thanks."

"Of course."

Briskly setting off again, each stride he took was about three of my steps, and in no time we were at his stables. They really weren't that impressive. There was one sleek chocolate horse, and the rest of the stalls were empty. Shouldn't there be more than one?

Without any hesitation, he swung the wide door open. The horse nearly ran me over as it sprinted out of the stall. It's beautiful mane rippled by how fast it ran. It was stunning, but I was more worried about it coming back. I've never seen a horse do that. The villain must've seen my expression because he just laughed at me.

"Don't look so concerned," he laughed.

He gave an ear splitting whistle, and the horse immediately turned and raced back to us. When it got back, the villain just started to pet and rub it. Without the horse even realizing he grabbed the bridle, he slipped it over the horse's head. Swinging himself over the horse with ease, he looked down at me.

"Coming?"

I didn't exactly make any words, but I mumbled something. Awkwardly trying to figure out how to mount the horse, I shuffled around.

"Don't be so scared. Bareback riding isn't that hard."

He outstretched his hand and beckoned me forward. The second I took his hand, he hoisted me onto the horse, and, let me just say, I was not expecting it. I almost fell off right as I got on. How did *he* not fall off?

I didn't get too much time to think about it because the horse took off after he gently kicked its sides. Nothing could have prepared me for how fast the horse began to move. Out of sheer luck, I managed to grab the villain for support. Pressing my face into his back and wrapping my arms around his abdomen, I prayed to every fallen soldier that we didn't fall off.

I could barely hear anything, but the growl was plain as day. Trying to rip my face from his back, I looked behind to see what it was. First of all, I was extremely surprised by how fast we were going and how we didn't crash. Second off, there were two vaguely familiar hound dogs chasing us. Oh no... They were the kingdom's hunting dogs.

"Uh, I think we're being chased," I yelled above the whipping wind, clattering hooves, and aggressively barking dogs.

"It seems so. Hold on," he yelled back. "Full speed, Tempest!"

Obedying his command was probably the best thing I could do, because once he spurred the horse harder, we were flying. Everything was blurry as we raced through the progressively dense woods. I had no control over what was happening. Every step the horse took made it seem like I was only a fraction away from falling off. The dogs were still behind us, but the villain never gave up.

He kept urging Tempest to go faster. The way he rode was incredible. There was no way that any of the knights could ride like this. Tempest trusted him, and he trusted Tempest. It was the perfect harmony.

Weaving in and out of trees, we eventually lost the dogs far behind us. The villain slowed Tempest down, but Tempest didn't seem too happy about that. It seemed as if he wanted to continue to fly through the woods with no thought of getting hurt, but that's not what happened. The villain slid off of Tempest, and I followed suit. We continued our trek on foot for now. Personally, I was more than pleased to have my own two feet on the ground after that.

"How did we not die?" I muttered to myself.

"It wasn't that bad," chuckled the villain as he pat Tempest affectionately.

"How do you think they found us?"

"Probably just a fluke.

"I wouldn't be so sure."

"What do you think happened?"

"They know my scent relatively well, and there have been numerous times where the kingdom almost captured you. That means that they have both of our scents."

"Yeah?"

"They'll be back, and hunters and knights will probably come with them next time."

"We'll just deal with them when they come, then."

"But-"

"If they come back, you take Tempest and run. I'll get rid of them."

"I don't-"

“Do you know how to fight?”

“Well, no.”

“Then you’ll run, and I’ll find you afterwards. I’m not letting a friend get hurt.”

Something ethereal overtook me. He called me a friend? He truly thought that we were equal. I didn’t know what to say or what to do, but I just nodded. I felt like smiling and laughing and showing how happy I was, but I just nodded. I nodded to hide how I felt because I knew what it felt like to lose a friend.

“I’ll give you a few tips about how to ride Tempest while we walk, ok?”

“Ok.”

“The most important thing to remember is that he has better insight than you and me both so trust him. Don’t try to control him too much because he will buck you off. Just let him go, and he’ll know what to do.”

He stopped, but he didn’t continue. I expected something a little more in depth.

“Uh, is that it?”

“Yeah, pretty much. Other than always wanting to run as fast as the wind, Tempest is pretty relaxed. There’s not much you can do to irritate him.”

Almost on cue, Tempest shook his mane and whipped my friend in the face. All I could do was chuckle silently.

“Ok, there’s more that can irritate him, but I’m positive it’ll be ok.”

I wanted to laugh more, but I yielded and attempted to start another conversation.

“Why are we going to a neighboring kingdom?”

“I’m going to persuade them to follow my command.”

He said that way too easily.

“What?”

“Yeah. It’ll be fine. I’ve got good history with these guys. They basically follow my command already, but it’s not exactly official yet. Don’t worry, nothing bad will happen.”

“Ok...”

“Trust me. It’ll be fine.”

We continued to walk in silence for a while, but Tempest stopped and would no longer walk beside us. My friend was upset by this, but it was like he knew how to fix the problem. After rolling his eyes, he took a knee and cupped his hands together.

“Go on. Get on.”

Stepping on his hands, he lifted me up, and I swung my leg to safely mount the horse. After I was situated, he swung himself without any difficulty, but something was different this time. I was in front of him and not the other way around. Did he seriously expect me to ride a horse correctly?

“Stop worrying. Just hold the reins, squeeze with your thighs to stay on, and you’ll be fine. Also, keep your head up. Light kicks are all you need. Keep it easy, Tempest.”

Gingerly tapping Tempest’s stomach, he didn’t even bat an eyelash.

“Ok, you have to kick a little harder.”

Not as gingerly tapping his side this time, he began to walk. Keeping the reins loose, he kept a steady pace. This was nice. The pace wasn’t too bad, I was comfortable, and it was pretty enjoyable.

“Let’s speed it up a little.”

“No thanks.”

Too late. As he jabbed the horse with a bit more power than I did, Tempest began to canter. I felt like screaming because this was entirely too fast for my taste, but I held it in and tried to keep my head up. This wasn't nearly like the pace he was at earlier, but it was still faster than I would've preferred.

“Tempest, take the scenic route,” he told the horse.

What was that supposed to mean? What was “the scenic route”? Should I be worried that I have no idea how to control this horse while taking a scenic route? I felt like screaming again, but I managed to keep it to an internal scream.

We escaped the woods, and we were now on a ledge of a hill that rose above most. Tempest slowed to a walk without any command. As he walked, I saw how beautiful the horizon was. The farther it stretched, the foggier it got. What was out there? I've never felt the urge to explore as much as I do right now just looking out at the mountainous horizon.

“It's amazing, isn't it?”

“Yeah, it really is.”

“I thought you ought to have seen this. You need to know that there's so much out there that it's almost stupid to tie yourself down. Why stay in one place doing the same thing everyday when there's an unexplored world out there? Why let people say you can't when there's a world that doesn't know what you're capable of?”

His words struck me like a punch in the gut, but it was a good punch in the gut. It was something I needed to hear, and I'm glad he was the one who told me. Everything seemed to fall



into place. I didn't have anymore questions, and I knew what I wanted. I knew that I made the right choice for me even if others thought it was the wrong one.

“Wow...” I couldn't help being as awestruck as I was.

“Here, let's stay a while.” He slid off of Tempest.

“But, I thought you needed to go to another kingdom?”

“Oh, that? I lied. I just wanted to bring you out here.”

I was baffled for a moment, but I eventually stumbled off of Tempest. My friend just laughed at how awkward I was, but he should know by now that that should be expected. Unsheathing his broadsword, there was only a flicker of fear that passed through my brain. But, I remembered that he was my friend, and he would never do anything like that. He wasn't that kind of man.

Plunging the sword into the dirt, he sat in front of it and leaned onto it as if it were a backrest. As he patted the ground beside him, I knew that he was offering me a spot to sit, and that was that. I finally understood how life could be so sublime. I was sitting beside a friend who cared, looking out at the world beyond my knowledge, and I didn't have to worry whether or not I was doing the right thing. Right now, I felt as if everything in my life was right.

“What's it like living without a name?” I asked without fear.

“There's no use in having a name when there isn't anyone to call you.”

It all made sense now. There wasn't anyone at his castle; he did everything himself. He was alone all the time. Every kingdom he obtained was by talking, not war. That's why Prince Ian called him a silver tongue because he had convinced others to join him without violence.

How could he do all of that by himself when a whole kingdom can't agree on one thing without proclaiming war?

“Well, I'm in your ranks now, and I need something to call you.”

“You aren't going to let this go, are you?”

“Names are important. They create an identity for us that a nickname can't.”

“I suppose...” he didn't seem too excited about the idea. “I'll think about it later, but let's not worry about the future. Right now, the horizon is calling out to us and we should listen.”

That's exactly what we did. We sat together, we looked into the horizon together, and we let our silence speak volumes to each other.