

No Man's Right

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A young man stood watching the procession, his shoulder resting against the wooden wall of his home. The knights sagged in their saddles like rag dolls, trotting over the worn road towards the gates. They rode in double file with their faces downcast. The onlookers watched them with pity, knowing the Lady would be watching over them if but one of those departing would ever return.

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The royal standard of the king did not fly, for no wind blew on this mournful day. Each and every rider bore their blazing emblems as if with pride, yet their faces were nought but an echo of the sombre thoughts in their minds. The thoughts of broken men. The thoughts of damned men. It was a cruel world indeed; where a man was not allowed to choose the terms of his fate; where some soft-handed politician dictated how and when honest, hard-working men would die. Such a cruel world.

The young man dragged his eyes from the column of knights as his mother came scurrying towards him, her expression mimicking the look of dread on the other villager's faces. Her voice was etched with a hint of urgency as she spoke "Cor on now Dancus, this is not something you need to see, come, hasten inside lest somebody see you."

Dancus wiped his untamed hair from his face, so his mother could clearly see the cold look in his eyes. "You can't keep hiding me from them ma, sooner or later they will learn that I have come of age, and then you will not be able to stop them, no matter how hard you plea."

His mother backed away slightly, her eyes rimming with moisture at her son's blunt truth. No matter what she did; no matter how much she loved him, it would not help. Dancus did not offer her any sympathies. In a broken voice, tears streaming down her cheeks, his mother spoke "You are my child Dancus; if you go I will have nobody. I couldn't bear to live alone, never knowing where you were and powerless to help you." She laced her finger around his smooth cheek, like she had when he was a child. "I couldn't bear to carry on without you in my life."

He looked away, caring little for his mother's obvious compassion. "Ma, I am not your child anymore; I am nobody." Sooner or later you will have to come to terms with that fact. I have loved you in the past, as much as the blazing sun on my shoulders as I laboured on our farm." He paused, startled at how the memory had affected him. It had been so long since he had dwelled upon his past. "Then father died."

His mother looked away as a faint whimper escaped her, the anguish blatant upon her small frame as she recalled the memories of her beloved. She couldn't withstand that torment a second time. She couldn't let her son die. "I cannot let you go." She said, her voice barely audible "Not the same way I lost him, I can't, I, I can't let that happen, I can't let my palm to her face so her son would not see her weeping, though the pitiful sound of her sobs and convulsions were more

than enough to betray the action.

Dancus glanced back at the procession of knights as his mother mourned the inevitable, and he wondered how many of the patriots riding past had been forced from their families to do the duke's bidding. It should be no man's right to separate a family, even one with as much power as a king.

The young Bretonnian looked back at his broken mother, his gaze as stern as the voice he spoke with "You won't lose me. And he meant it.

It had been the same, ruthless routine for over a week now: everyday those men deemed strong enough to fight were dragged from their homes, and sent out to join in whatever battles the armies of Bretonnia were engaged within. None had yet returned. Widows mourned the death of their husbands and children grew up without the presence of their fathers, the love and compassion every parent dreams of bestowing upon their child stolen from them by the conscription policy of their duke.

Unable to sleep while such thoughts haunted his mind, Dancus lay awake upon his thin straw bed, watching the stars drift across the sky through a small hole in his roof. His own father had died many years ago, killed protecting a village smaller than his many miles away. He had been ten. It's hard to describe what that feels like: to be so young and have a person who has been there for you since the day you had your first waking moment suddenly ripped away from you while you are still too young to understand why daddy is never coming back. He had grown up watching as his aging mother grieved over her husband's death, without a father and without anybody to share his troubles with, save for himself. It had changed him. He wasn't given a choice, it just happened. He had to become a man before his time, he had to wipe away his tears and grind into the dirt when his legs were barely long enough to do so without sinking.

The young man allowed the memories of his youth to wash over him, filling his half-consciousness as he drifted between the land of his home and his dreams. He would need his strength for the coming morn. For with it events would unfold that could shape his life forever after. Dancus bolted upright as a loud banging rang throughout his house, the sound of a gauntleted fist hammering against the thin wooden frame of his door. "Open up!" came the shout, "Open up in there!" Dancus looked around his room frantically for somewhere to hide, eyes darting desperately from one area of space to the next. There was nowhere in his room that wasn't painfully exposed, bar the underside of his straw bed which was so obvious a hiding place he doubted a mouse could have hidden under it. But he had to find somewhere, if the soldiers found him, for he was certain it was they that were even now bellowing at the wooden door, he would be dragged from his home kicking and screaming, something he had every intention of avoiding. But where was there he could hide? All there was in his room was his bed, the small cupboard and bedside desk that occupied his room, and a window. He stared at the latter. Of course. He threw the covers from him and ran to the small square view of outside. He placed one leg through, and for once thanked his family's poor state and that he didn't have to smash through a glass pane to flee.

The banging intensified behind him as his shoulders moved through the small exit window, as if the soldiers could sense that Dancus was close to escaping "I will count to three!" came the booming voice again "Then I will smash this door down and have you dragged before the duke for the whole of the village to see, now open this door!" Dancus didn't even hear the first count; he lifted his other leg through the gap and rolled away into the dusty tufts of grass that grew at the rear of his home. He scrambled to his feet, coughing as sandy powder tickled his throat. He took only a moment to wipe what he could from his clothes, then ran behind the shadows of the other village houses to safety, and towards the home of the man he despised with all his being. Duc d'Eperon

Dancus clung to the wall as he spied on the procession of soldiers marching from house to house, dragging men little older than Dancus along on their knees while their families stared on, helpless to do anything but shed their tears. What man could order such a thing to be done to his own people? The answer was obvious: one that was at war. "All is fair in love and war" even among the peasantry the phrase was known, but Dancus thought quite the opposite: war and love were no excuse to tear sons from their mothers, or to force fathers to bury their sons.

Dancus reeled his head back into the cool shade behind the building as a soldier walked past, spear pointed towards the sky. Dancus had seen enough. The young rogue kept low as he ran from his vantage point to the next, his feet padding against the sandy road. It was lucky the soldiers were already occupied, for his scurrying left plumes of dust in the air even a half blind dog could see. Dancus glanced at his surroundings. The Duke's house was only a few blocks away, with any luck Dancus would be able to sneak there without being located, or worse, detained. Once again, he scuttled across the road from the cover of one building to another, kicking up yet more dirt clouds as he did so. Once he was sure he was hidden from view again, he placed his hand to his belt, and cursed as his hand brushed against nothing but coarse leather. In his haste he had left his knife in the small kitchen of his mother's; how could he have been so stupid? It wasn't much use in a fight, but still, the sight of any sharp blade would be intimidating to most men you would encounter in a village such as this. He needed a blade, but where could he find one? The blacksmith was too far away. He could wait in another house whilst the soldiers completed their rounds and then go, but for some reason Dancus disbanded the thought. He wanted the challenge. He wanted the threat the soldiers posed.

Dancus heard the soft beat of marching sounding from behind him and cursed himself for not checking his back. Hoping the soldiers were too busy talking amongst themselves, Dancus ran towards the village inn, thankful its guards were away on their own business.

The inn was full of bellowing laughter and the smell of slightly-off rum. Even the floor seemed to reek of its pungent scent. Holding his nose, Dancus walked past those sitting at the bar and made for one of the tables, kneeling so that he would be hidden from the soldiers by the mass of people between him and the door. As he recovered, he realised the table he was hidden beneath was not vacant, and he poked his head out to see the silver helm of a knight staring down at him. "You flee from the soldiers?"

Dancus nodded, his eyes pleading the message he then voiced "Please sir knight, do not betray my presence." "Why do you hide? Is it not your wish to serve our King and Lady?" asked the knight.

Dancus replied "I do sir knight, but not before I have attended to matters such as this village's duke."

Even through the thick steel, Dancus could tell the knight had arched an eyebrow "You intend to kill him?"

I shook my head "Only to repay the debt he owes me and my father."

"You need a blade to fulfil this debt?" asked the knight again, apparently not surprised by the young boy's presence and intentions.

"That I do, sir knight, that I do."

The knight passed a small knife under the table, and Dancus felt a rush of affection for the stranger. "Then go now, and exact your vengeance on the man that has wronged you."

Dancus placed the knife in a small scabbard and attached it to his belt. "But why, sir knight, do you help me?"

The knight pondered the question for only a moment, then replied "My duty is to the lady, my king and my people, not the king's pawns and my people's oppressors. Now quickly, away with you, soldiers approach." Dancus felt the light breeze

upon his face once more, and he inhaled a deep breath as he rid himself of the putrid smell of the inn's interior. He could see the duke's home just up ahead, a good storey taller than any of the smaller houses bordering it. Getting in would have been difficult if any of the soldiers were on duty, but as it was they were all out upon their respective rounds; there was nobody standing between Dancus and his prize. He walked with confidence towards the house, having glanced both left and right before-hand to assure himself he was in no immediate danger.

The sun beat down upon his bare face, its blistering rays prickling his skin. But Dancus paid the heat no heed; he had eyes and thoughts only for the house that lay in front of him, with its high steel gates and towering walls. The duke certainly lived in luxury, he mused. As far as the youngling could tell, the easiest way to get inside was the window left carelessly open upon the first floor, although the wit of simply walking through the front doors was incredibly inviting. But as inviting as the prospect was, Dancus knew his luck was already stretched thin, and so positioned himself facing the eastern wall. He almost laughed at the irony: he had escaped his home through a window, and now he was going to break into another's home through a window. The house had no side gates, a result of the Duke's ego that he was safe within his little mansion. It was likely he only had the gates constructed to show to whatever nobles walked through his small domain.

Besides the wall lay a tree, it was so conveniently placed it was almost as if the house's designer had intended for Dancus to enter via it. Taking a deep breath, Dancus ran up the vertical wall, one foot, then the other, and then kicked off the stonework, looping his hands around an outstretched branch. He hung there for a few seconds, recovering from the manoeuvre he had just attempted. Succeeded; he corrected himself. His hands burning from the strain, Dancus lifted himself up onto the tree, no doubt looking completely stupid to whatever onlooker glanced his way. Still, what he looked like didn't matter, he was where he wanted to be, and the entrance to the duke's home was only feet from his fingertips. He groaned as he realised he would have to jump if he was to reach the exposed ledge. Bending his knees first, Dancus jumped forwards and up, his hands grabbing hold of the window ledge while the rest of his body followed and slammed into the wall. Grunting at the pain, he hauled his bodyweight up through the open window and then fell onto the rich scarlet carpet on the interior of the duke's house. He was in.

Dancus rose back to his feet, his muscles burning slightly from the effort it had cost him to get this far. He walked towards the door, and glancing back saw a trail of his dusty footsteps leading back to the window ledge. He didn't quite know what to make of the fact, he didn't particularly need to cover his tracks, so he simply shrugged and carried on; heading to what he thought was the Duke's private study. He was not disappointed. The Duke lay in an elaborate armchair, facing away from the doorway from which Dancus crept. An open fireplace crackled to both men's left, casting peculiar shadows around the crimson room. The Duke himself didn't notice Dancus's approach, nor the unsheathing of his knife, for his head was buried into one of the many novels that lay scattered on his maple desk. Dancus made himself known, speaking clearly so the Duke would not mistake his words "You don't know me Duke, but know you. I know you as the man who sent my father to his grave."

The Duke closed his book, but didn't turn to face the trespasser "I have sent many men to their graves, each one has done so for the pride of their king and country."

Dancus felt anger rise inside him. Somehow, he had always managed to imagine the Duke would hold an excuse that would make everything alright, but instead he spouted one of the greatest lies that Dancus had ever been told "They died because you took them away from their families and sent them off to war. As far as I am concerned that makes you a murderer."

Again, the Duke did not turn to face Dancus "So what then would you have me do? Let barbarians run unchecked upon our borders? Abandon my people and their safety?" Dancus stepped closer, brandishing his borrowed knife tightly in his hand "They would rather forsake those than their freedoms." he retorted. "You really think so? You think the men I see would rather keep their own freedom at the cost of their family's safety?" he sounded almost amused "There are no men who would do such a thing, not in this noble land." Dancus stepped forwards again, raising his voice in anger "Noble? Your men are dragging children out of their homes and from their loving mothers' arms! What is noble about that?!" he accused "Everyone must do their duty, their duty to the Lady, to the King, to their Duke and to their country." replied the Duke, his amused tone replaced by something darker. "Duty!" snapped Dancus, anger seething from him "It is your duty to protect, not to sit idly by while good honest men die so your treasury can grow ever larger!" The Duke stood up and rounded on Dancus, allowing him to see his reddened face for the first time. His domed head looked outraged, and his booming voice almost forced Dancus to stagger backwards "How dare you! You insolent, stupid peasant! I am a Duke,

and you are my subject!â€•Â Dancus clamped a hand over the Dukeâ€™s mouth, and twisted his body sharply, throwing him against the maple desk. Dancus raised the knife above his head â€œIt is no manâ€™s right to decide who lives or dies!â€• He embedded the sharp blade into the dark wood. â€œNot a Kingâ€™s, not a Dukeâ€™s, and not mine!â€• He finished, walking from the room while the blade he had wielded lay glistening less than an inch from the whimpering dukeâ€™s head.