

Rest for the Wicked

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It was just before sunset when it happened. A few minutes later, and he might actually have succeeded. At least, a competent assassin might have. The man slumped against the wall, his mangled right hand on the floor as his left vainly attempted to stem the blood flowing from the mortal wound in his side, most certainly was not a competent assassin. He'd been quiet, I had to give him that, but coming through the window with the sun still up was an amateur mistake. My sword was still hanging by the door, so I'd waited for him to get close before whirling about and disarming him, breaking most of his fingers in the process.

The look of surprise on his face as I gutted him with his own blade brought me back almost ten years to this very room. The assassin was, of course, much younger than my father, and the dagger he'd brought was plainer than the one I'd used. Not to mention, I'd had the sense to wait until the sun had sunk beneath the horizon before climbing through the window that night. Nevertheless, the face of a would-be murderer betrayed by his own weapon bore an uncanny resemblance to the face of a king betrayed by his only son.

I stand by what I did that night, brutal though it was. What value does the life of one man, even a king, carry compared to the freedom of a nation? He would have submitted to the southerners, just because he was afraid to fight them, afraid to get his hands dirty. He would have given away the empire that his ancestors, *our* ancestors, had fought so hard to create. And I couldn't allow that. I tried reasoning with him, begging him, but he just wouldn't listen. So I killed him.

I burned the decree of surrender that he had written up before I returned to my chambers, and prepared myself to grieve for my dearly departed father. No one ever suspected it was me; not then, at least. I'd made it look like the work of a southern assassin, and that's all they saw. I wept false tears, they buried the king, and I was coronated within the week.

I couldn't stop there, of course. The kingdom I'd just inherited was on the brink of war, one my late father doubted we could win. War is never the time to develop a conscience, least of all when you're facing overwhelming odds. My father was right in one sense, but wrong in another. It was a war he couldn't win, but it was one I could.

My father, for most of his reign, had the luxury of being able to be both a good king and an effective one. Only at the end of his rule did he have to choose, and as I see it, he chose poorly. I can only hope that my actions will mean my heirs never have to make the choice that my father and I had to.

Sacrifices had to be made. Not my sacrifices, of course. My people couldn't afford to lose another king so soon after the last. We lost good men, but they lost so many more. They had the numbers, at least in the beginning, but we had the ferocity. They intended to crush our armies but leave the rest of the nation relatively unharmed, so that there would be something worthwhile to claim afterwards. I had no such intentions.

Eventually the southerners must have realized that even if they managed to conquer us, all they'd have to show for their losses would be the barren shell of a nation. Or perhaps they simply lost their stomach for war. They sent me a messenger, bearing a perfectly reasonable peace treaty. The look of joy on the faces of my advisors, when they heard that this war would finally be over, was almost heartwarming. I sent the southern king back his messenger's head.

We finally had the chance to be done with this horrible conflict, to start to heal after the damage that had been done, and I threw it away. That's what they said, anyway. I saw things differently. If I had accepted the treaty there would have been peace, yes, but for how long? How long until the southerners rebuilt, or some other would-be empire turned its gaze our way? I hadn't done what I'd done just to forestall the inevitable. No, I made sure that the world would know that we were not to be trifled with.

They put up a good fight, now that the tables were turned. They had far more spirit when they fought to be survivors than when they fought to be conquerors. I have to admit, I was rather impressed. It wasn't enough, of course. In the end, their armies were slaughtered to the man.

We suffered heavy losses as well, but we lost nothing that couldn't be replaced. Damaged castles were repaired, ruined towns were rebuilt, and while nothing can be done for the dead, there are still plenty of the living to keep going strong. While the southerners didn't have much left for us to claim after we were done with them, we put their lands and remaining resources to good use.

That bloody war has so far bought us five years of peace and prosperity. We've regained our strength, and our neighbours know what happens to those who cross us. There's been some unrest from an insurgency, formed by those who despise me for what I've done. They've caused a few riots, staged some botched assassination attempts like the one tonight, but done no real damage.

They say I'm a tyrant. A villain. A monster. I'll argue the first; while I can be harsh to those that threaten the order and stability of my kingdom, I am perfectly fair to those who simply want to live their lives. As for those who call me a monster, I ask: how can those who are not monsters bear a child who is? My father was a good man, a kind man, just as my mother was a kind and gentle woman. I am a man, no more, no less. But villain? I denied that such a title suited me at first, but I now realize I was wrong.

I've done terrible things, no doubt about that. But everything I've done, I've done for my people. A good man can do vile deeds, for the right reasons, just as an evil man can do good deeds for the wrong ones. It is not my actions that condemn me to the title of villain, not in my eyes at least. I'm a villain not because I've done what I've done, but because I can live with what I've done.

They say there's no rest for the wicked, but I couldn't disagree more. Only the wicked could rest with a past like mine. I suppose I should regret what I've done, feel remorse for those I've killed or sent to their death, but I don't. A good man would toss and turn in his bed, haunted by nightmares of guilty conscience. My slumber is sound and dreamless.