

In Limbo

a *Zorro (TV 2024)* fanfic

by Rodo

for *argentum_ls*

“THEY MUST BE around here somewhere. Keep looking,” the bandit leader barked. His remaining men started to flood the forest like ants. Diego could hear them down below; they were still some ways off but getting closer. He grit his teeth against the pain in his side, and the one in his left arm, which pinned a dazed Monasterio against the trunk of the tree they were hiding in. Diego had almost dislocated his shoulder heaving him up into the branches. The cover of thick needles was their only chance – neither of them was in any condition to make a run for it. Even on his own, the cut in his side would slow Diego down too much. Not that he could leave Monasterio to die. The man didn’t deserve it. How had something so simple ended up getting so out of control?

Someone must have tipped the bandits off. It was the only conclusion Diego could come to. They hadn’t been prepared for Zorro, but they had been for the army. Honorable captain that he was, Monasterio had led his men into battle himself, expecting to take them by surprise in their hideout, a cave in the mountains. If Zorro hadn’t happened to be there at the same time – to get back at least some of the corn they had stolen from the natives – Monasterio would have been as dead as his men.

“What...”

Great. The man chose the worst moment possible to regain his senses. Diego could hear the bandits move below. He put a finger to his mouth (still covered by his scarf) and awkwardly bent around the tree trunk to catch Monasterio’s attention, then pointed below. He saw the man’s eyes widen for a second, but to his credit, he kept quiet.

“Find anything?” one of the bandits asked another. Diego could see him through the canopy of the fir they’d climbed. A good tree to hide in, but if they looked upwards, Monasterio’s bright coat and trousers would give them away. *Please don’t look up*, Diego prayed, keeping his eyes peeled to the dark head below.

“Nothing, you?” a voice replied from a couple of trees away.

“I bet they’re gone.”

“And how would they’ve done that? The boss got Zorro pretty good, and the captain could barely walk.”

Diego clutched the wound at his side. If he got out of this, there was little doubt in his mind that Bernardo and Mei would have a lot of unflattering things to say about his performance when he got back. If he was bleeding quite a bit, and a couple of drops began to make their way down his side, pooling at his hip and soaking his trousers, until a couple of drops threatened to fall. He cast a look at Monasterio to ensure the man was properly back to reality before slowly relaxing his grip on him. He snapped his hand back just in time to catch the blood.

“Zorro’s got a horse, haven’t you heard? I bet he left it somewhere around here and they rode away, tails between their legs.”

Diego heard Monasterio huff at the image and grit his teeth. If only Tornado was a great horse, but he wasn’t quiet, and Diego hadn’t known where exactly the bandits’ hideout was. He’d left him about two miles down the mountain.

“Should we look for tracks, then?”

The bandit below shrugged, then moved on, searching for them elsewhere. When he was out of sight – and halfway out of earshot – Diego let himself relax a little and leaned his head back a little. They would be here a while. At least until they’d stopped searching the slopes – their only way back. And it was only a matter of time until Monasterio remembered just who he was sitting in a tree with.

“Let’s make a deal,” he suggested to the captain. Quietly. He looked upwards. The sun was past its zenith, but he doubted they’d be able to move before darkness set in. “We’ve got a better chance of making it out of here if we work together.”

Monasterio scoffed. “I’m not working with an outlaw.”

“This outlaw just saved your life,” Diego pointed out, idly wondering how long it would take for him to start feeling lightheaded. He could only hope the wound started to scab over before long.

“One right doesn’t erase a lifetime of wrongs.”

Diego sighed and closed his eyes. He liked the man, he really did, but his inflexible morals were quite an inconvenience right about now. “Don’t you want to get back to your wife?”, he retorted. It was a dirty trick, bringing Lolita into this, but she was Monasterio’s only weakness, as far as he knew.

For a while, Monasterio said nothing. With the bandits gone, birds were starting to sing around them again. It would have been almost peaceful if it wasn’t for the pain and the danger and Monasterio occupying the branch next to him. The bleeding still wouldn’t stop.

“Once we are free of these thugs, I’ll arrest you.”

Diego laughed. “You can try.” Between himself slowly bleeding out from a cut to his side and the blows Monasterio had suffered, only God could tell who would win. “Deal?” he steadied himself with his left hand, leaning around the tree trunk and offering the other to Monasterio. After a moment’s reluctance, the captain took it. Now all they had to do was wait for the sun to set.



Diego’s feet hit the ground with a thud. Monasterio’s followed a moment later. Diego noticed him shaking his head a little once he’d steadied himself as if to shake off a pesky bug. A part of Diego was worried that the blows the captain had suffered were more serious than he’d thought. Another was glad; in this condition, Monasterio was less of a threat to him.

“What now?” Monasterio asked.

“Tornado is waiting for me down by the river,” Diego explained. “And we need to get off this mountain either way.”

“That’s the way the bandits went.”

Yes, Diego was very aware of that. “It’s the only way.”

Monasterio grunted and started shaking his head to ward off invisible flies again, even if it wasn’t working. Diego found himself doing the same, dizziness rising the longer he stood. He cursed. The blood loss must be worse than he’d thought. He wouldn’t make it down the slopes like this. Without making a sound, he leaned his back against the tree trunk and let himself slide down to the ground.

“What?” Monasterio asked.

Diego didn’t answer. Instead, he freed his shirt from his waistband and started to tear off some of the hem. It wasn’t going quite as planned, so he took out his knife. After some silent cursing, he ended up with a long strip of black fabric and a bared strip of skin.

“Give me a hand?” he asked.

Monasterio hesitated, evidently still not sure about where they stood, despite their temporary truce. Diego tried to apply the bandage himself, but to little effect – he merely winced with pain whenever he tried to wrap the strip of cloth around his back. That was enough to spur Monasterio to action. He crouched down next to Diego and grabbed the fabric without a word of warning. He wasn’t gentle as he wound it around Diego’s waist while Diego kept watch on his face, grunting whenever Monasterio pulled the bandage

too tight. They were uncomfortably close, and the intent look in the captain's eyes was one Diego hoped to never see from this distance again. He'd rather stare him down across the barrel of a gun.

"Done." The captain eventually pronounced, even going so far as giving Diego a hand up. They'd have to hurry. The sun had set a while ago, and dusk was fading fast. It was all well and good if the bandits couldn't see them, but they'd need to see their own feet to crawl down this cursed mountain.

They walked in silence. It was almost comfortable. Diego could imagine he wasn't Zorro right then, and that Monasterio wasn't his sworn enemy, but rather his childhood friend's beloved spouse. They weren't trying to get past hostile bandits but instead got separated from the others on a hunt. If only that was the truth. And if Diego was being honest, that would make for an even more awkward situation. What would Diego de la Vega and Monasterio even talk about, without the buffer of society and Lolita smoothing things over? At least as Zorro, he knew where they stood. He kept an ear out for any bandits, and another for the enemy following him through the forest as the moon rose above their heads and bats replaced birds in the sky, their high-pitched shrieks echoing through the valley. And then there was the cut still bothering him, even though the bleeding had slowed...

All of a sudden, Monasterio grabbed the back of his coat. Diego almost fell and turned his angry eyes backward, even if he knew they wouldn't be seen. With his mask and the scarf, he couldn't be more than two eyes glowing in the dark to Monasterio.

"I heard something," the man hissed.

They froze, silent. After a moment, Diego heard it too. People were coming up the mountain. He and Monasterio had just enough time to scramble out of the way, hiding behind some boulders before torches began to light up the forest around them. Some light even highlighted Monasterio's white trousers and tense posture as the group walked past. If Monasterio had hoped they'd be soldiers, looking for their comrades, he was disappointed. They looked like bandits in their rough-spun, mismatched fabrics and straw hats, sabers at their hips, and rifles on their backs.

Diego and Monasterio exchange a look. Diego motioned at Monasterio to remain calm, moving his flat palm downwards. It was instinct, and a moment later he cursed himself for it. Few people were used to communicating with hands rather than words – and Diego de la Vega was one of them. Zorro should not be. He could only hope Monasterio was too distracted to notice.

“Just you wait,” Monasterio mumbled, looking after his prey with the promise of swift and violent retribution emanating from him.

“Try finding the spy first,” Diego suggested dryly. “Or your next attempt will end like this one.”

Monasterio turned to face him, but it was too dark to read his thoughts on his face. It didn’t matter either way. Soon, Diego would be free of him. For the time being, at least.

Once the bandits were gone, they continued their descent. It was an uneventful one, except for the odd stumble due to blood loss, concussion, and hidden roots and stones. They helped each other up and kept each other safe. Diego would almost call it camaraderie if it wasn’t for the sour tension poisoning the air between them. The moon lit their way as best it could, and finally, Diego could spot a glittering band winding its way past them in the distance. He was sweating despite the cold, his body exhausted and at its limit. The river.

Tornado was where he’d left him – waiting by the bend as if he’d known Diego would come. He could almost see himself riding home, where a warm bed and a warmer meal were already waiting.

“We’re safe,” he said – more to himself than to Monasterio or the horse.

It had been a mistake.

“Hands up.”

Diego hadn’t expected the order. He really should have, rather than letting his mind get wrapped up in thoughts of home and safety. Tornado whinnied and scratched at the dirt with his hooves. Slowly, Diego turned to Monasterio – and found himself face to face with the man’s pistol. He didn’t know if it was still loaded, after the battle and the chaos, but Diego couldn’t chance it. He obeyed, raising his hands.

“So this is it.”

“We had a deal,” Monasterio reminded him. He had a point. Diego was the one who had forgotten. Or maybe he’d forgotten that he was Zorro, not Diego. That this man wanted him dead, even if the feeling wasn’t mutual.

“We had a deal,” Diego echoed, voice hollow.

“And I don’t much care,” another voice interrupted. This time it was Monasterio who found himself staring down an enemy. Only he was faced with a bow and arrow being held by a familiar shadow crouching in the brush a couple of yards away, wearing a red mask, face paint trailing over her mouth in a thick, black line. Nah-Lin. “Lower your pistol,” she ordered.

Monasterio didn’t react and so Diego didn’t lower his hands either.

“Lower. Your. Pistol,” Nah-Lin repeated, punctuated by a slight downward swerve of the arrow, pointing it where no man wanted to be poked by something sharp.

Even in the murky light, Diego could see the captain weigh his options. If he kept this up, Nah-Lin would kill him. Diego knew it and Monasterio knew it too. She was not as kind and forgiving as Zorro. With a sigh, Monasterio finally lowered his pistol, dropping it to the ground. Diego felt his shoulders relax even though he hadn’t known he’d tensed up. Nah-Lin didn’t lower her bow, but she nodded toward Tornado.

Diego didn’t need to be told twice. He mounted his horse, gritting his teeth against the pain, and readied himself to leave. He turned back to Monasterio one last time. “Another day,” he promised the man with a nod, tipping his hat.

“Another day,” replied Monasterio, his seething resentment obvious.

But Zorro didn’t care – he merely disappeared into the shadows, the Red Snake following in his wake.



“You should be more careful around him,” Nah-Lin admonished Diego later when she was about to deliver him to his people. Bernardo had been worried when Diego hadn’t returned before sunset. Worried enough to go to Night Crow for help, who had turned to Nah-Lin. By now, Bernardo must be going mad with worry. Diego sighed. The lights on the porch did not look as inviting as they had in his imagination.

“He isn’t a bad man,” Diego told her.

“He’s one of you people,” Nah-Lin argued. “Zorro is not. He is your enemy, whether you see it or not. He sees it.”

Diego shook his head. “Thank you,” he told her, too tired to argue his point.

“Don’t thank me. Do better. My people still need their corn.”

He smiled and Nah-Lin smiled back while a worried Bernardo hurried out of the hacienda, followed by an equally anxious Mei. Monasterio could wait. A problem for another day. And maybe he’d take care of the bandits himself. Whatever the case, Diego couldn’t bring himself to follow Nah-Lin’s advice. Maybe that was what made him Zorro: he could see the good in the captain, even when he shouldn’t.

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