

Sneezing The Way Out

by

Varian Quill

From rags to riches. Everyone likes these types of stories, when a poor fellow somehow overcomes massive obstacles or defeats powerful enemies, just to turn their life around, whether with money and gold or just the richness of their heart and soul. But, whenever the hero of that story is just a scoundrel who wants to take treasure by force, the readers or listeners are divided, whether to cheer on their adventure or wish for their failure.

Carmine, a purple-maned hyena wasn't the type of adventurer who would try to rescue a damsel in distress or a village from a mighty beast. He would prefer to pick something easy enough with a rather high reward. He was not only a scoundrel but a lazy one as well.

The young daredevil wasn't even properly dressed for such an escapade, wearing his usual red vest, white shirt, and long pants, along with a flat cap. He looked more like an urban thug than a gold-hearted explorer, but even then he lacked not only gear but experience in these woods as well.

Carmine walked for quite a while, trying to avoid any traps laid by nature itself, while occasionally reaching to his bag for a badly, hand-written map. Frankly, it seemed to be made by a child than someone who claimed to be a famous adventurer. But the price was fair and Carmine took the bait, hearing all the stories about vast riches.

The directions were pretty vague, leading him to the edge of the forest, where a hippogryph's lair was supposed to be, filled with gold, silver, and gemstones. Why nobody didn't come here earlier? Carmine didn't care about the such question, blinded by the occasion of getting wealthy quickly with little to no effort.

Eventually, he found the entrance to the cave, which didn't look even half as impressive as he was told, seeming to be more like a bear's den, than a home of a mythical beast. Shrugging on it, he finally decided to enter, barely prepared and equipped for any kind of danger.

While he didn't have much of gear, there was one vital thing in his possession. A small crystal which, when rubbed, shined a rather dim, blue light. Many times this tiny trinket saved his skin while doing not-so-legal work back in the town.

Guided by the soft shine, the hyena sneaked into the lair, focused on the potential dangers ahead, proving to himself that he didn't have an empty head as some people claimed to be true.

Not making any noise, Carmine went deeper, scanning the surroundings for anything, when suddenly he heard something while stepping on a tiny, hard object. He gritted his teeth, hoping that nobody else heard that, before checking under his boot.

He almost gasped, finding a small ruby, glistening dimly between his fingers. Hyena quickly pocketed it, before resuming his escapade, helping himself with the crystal.

Moments later, he noticed a sudden movement. He froze in place, while his heart skipped a beat, sensing a life-threatening danger. Luckily for him, nothing attacked him just yet, but he had to be on guard. It weren't the docks anymore, filled with half-drunk nightwatchmen, easily manipulated.

He raised his arm with crystal in his palm, trying to get a better view ahead, suddenly trying his best not to gasp.

Jackpot.

While the piles of treasures weren't even as half impressive as in man's story, it was still more than enough for him to retire for the rest of his life. It was quite logical too, because how a wild creature could get the literal mountains of gold and gems, without leaving any trace?

Then he started noticing other items, like soft, silken pillows. Those didn't look that much expensive, probably being just a commodity for the beast.

Speaking of the creature, the hyena scoundrel wasn't alone. Not only the treasures were real, but the hippogryph as well, napping quietly on one of the piles, hugging the wooden chest close to her. She was indeed beautiful, with a red and yellow colored, incredibly long mane, resembling a dancing fire. Although, the talons looked sharp like razors, able to cut through him easily like he would be warm butter. He was so close to fulfilling his dream, to just be killed and left to rot.

Not wanting to wake up that humongous beast, Carmine decided to not be greedy this time, even if he always made that same promise, breaking it all the time. Then he thought that it will be true this time, since the stakes were much higher, although he made this same promise a few times as well already.

He opened the bag, another item that he somehow remembered to bring, before starting to fill it with mostly gemstones and diamonds, since those were better options than just golden coins. Each time he tried to put the stolen goods carefully into the bottom of the bag, instead of stupidly pouring without care, causing potential, death-causing sounds.

The more his sack was filled, the more reckless the hyena was getting, being quicker and more nervous than before, trying to finish it fast, risking waking up the beast who still was sleeping soundly on the golden coins.

He wondered why hippogryph needed such riches for herself. Because those were shiny? There are many more objects even shinier, while not being particularly expensive. But it wasn't that important to him, especially so close to his demise.

Being ready to leave while being the potentially richest man in this region, he just had to look over at the chest the hippogryph was holding. He had no more money than anyone would need, even being able to buy his hometown, but he was just too curious to look over something that the beast deeply cared about.

Stepping closer, he dropped the filled back and carefully, talon by talon, removed her fingers from the container. Hoping that the old wood will not squeak, he slowly opened it and look inside, shining it with his crystal. But it wasn't needed.

Inside there was another gem, shining a red, dim light. It didn't look like a ruby to him or any other gemstone, but he decided to take it. Smirking to himself, the hyena took the bag and left, sneakily as before, without making any sound.

Suddenly, he realized that his sack gets heavier with each passing second while he got much slower than before. He was forced to drop the bag, which was now a few sizes bigger than him, while he couldn't understand what was happening to him. The light got brighter as well.

"Turn around."

Carmine looked back, seeing something that almost took his breath away. The glistening eyes approached him, filled with fury and immense power, while clouds of hot air were coming out of flared nostrils. A whole head of angry hippogryph filled his field of vision, growling deeply at him.

"How dare you take my precious gem, interloper? Out of all the treasures, I don't care that much about, you just had to take this one, huh? With my magic, I was able to shrink you to the proper size. You're not a man, but a squirming, cowardly worm. And this will be your end too!"

Before he could speak, the beast swiftly snatched him off the ground, grasping his body hard. Smirking mischievously, she took him closer to her opened beak, extending a long and wiggly tongue, which licked him from the head to boots.

"Yuck. I forgot about clothes. But that doesn't matter..." she said, shoving him inside her mouth, to his ultimate demise.

But he just started fighting.

The insides of her mouth were wet, warm, and a bit sticky as well. Luckily for him, he still got that blue crystal with him, lightening the surroundings but it was for naught. Knowing it was his end, he still looked around for any potential solution, hoping for anything that will help him out of this ridiculous, fleshy prison.

He wasn't swallowed just yet, wondering if the hippogryph was just toying with him, or just wanted to let him suffer for longer. His hope was quickly disappearing, not seeing anything that would help him. Except one, particular object.

An oval, dangling thing just at the end of the throat looked inviting enough, to try something sinister with it. The giant uvula seemed like it was calling him, inviting him for unclear purposes. And just maybe, it was his way out from this fleshy, moist, and slowly suffocating prison.

The gigantic tongue under his boots wasn't a perfect floor, moving most of the time, trying to guide him towards the opening behind it and ultimately, towards the stomach where it would his horrific death. But that gave him an idea. Trying not to panic and think clearly, he stomped hard on the tongue several times, trying to get the reaction, while looking for an opportunity to strike.

Just like he thought, the hippogryph female didn't enjoy it even one bit. It was not clear, that the beast tried to swallow him whole, fed up with his shenanigans. The hyena almost lost his balance, after her muscles tries very hard to move him around.

He was suddenly launched towards the back of her throat, giving him only a second to react. And by the sheer luck of the dimwitted hyena, he reached the fleshy uvula firmly, holding onto it. knowing it was the only thing preventing his gruesome death.

The mouth opened wide when he felt a massive gust coming from her lungs, going towards the outside with a loud, sudden cough. Then another one. The uvula swayed hard with him, but he decided not to use this way to escape, knowing that the mouth could close any second. He needed something else.

Still having his surroundings laminated with crystal, he examined the throat, seeing that the passage below was parting itself to two destinations - her lungs and stomach. But when he looked upwards, there was another way, apparently towards her nostrils. That should be his ticket to freedom.

Still causing the beast to cough uncontrollably, he used his strength to sway the organ even further, using it like some kind of thick, fleshy rope. The wind coming from below didn't help him at all, but maybe it could be used to his advantage. After counting to three, he finally launched himself towards the wall, being somehow carried by air, now clenching the flesh with both of his hands.

The wheezing continued, while the hyena knew what was the cause of all these windpipe problems. Not feeling any remorse, he started climbing, lighting his way upwards. Not long after, he saw an opening behind him, looking like another passage that ended with two holes. Bingo.

He turned himself around, holding on to only one hand while preparing for another jump. Thinking about all the treasures he left in the cave, the hyena found the inner strength to eventually leap towards the ledge. Carmine grunted, barely catching it, feeling the slippery, moist surface. The cap on his head fell down the windpipe, holding onto his head long enough during his adventure. He had to embrace this loss, having much more important problems at hand.

Breathing heavily, he raised one of his legs to move it over the ledge for extra support, eventually overcoming yet another obstacle. After standing up, he slowly moved towards the exit, feeling it was incredibly difficult to walk.

The hippogryph was breathing hard as well, creating powerful winds in her nasal passage, making hyena practically impossible to leave her body. But the scavenger still had a trump card in his sleeve, knowing that he can manipulate her anatomy for his purposes.

He suddenly got on all fours, scratching the moist surface with all of his fingers and the edge of his boots, wanting to create a wind strong enough to launch him away from this terrible, smelly prison. Hyena could feel all the nasal muscles tensing up, as well as hearing the beak opening and closing, making noises similar to an old wooden chest. With all his remaining strength, he prepared himself for the upcoming hurricane.

And finally, it happened.

"Aaaaaah.... choooooo!"

Incredibly loud sneeze filled the cave, causing walls to shake a bit, while some of the coin piles jingled as well, tossing the treasures around. Snot-covered, the tiny object was launched out of a hippogryphs beak, luckily landing one on of the pillows the beast was hoarding. Filled with joy that he somehow survived the inevitable and awful death, he still had to return to his former self, get the bag, and escape. But one thing at the time.

The chest with the mysterious gem inside was now closed and he was too small to move the hinges of the heavy lid, but there had to be a way.

Hippogryph female sneezed powerfully again, still feeling ticklish inside her beak, furious about how was she easily tricked by the hyena. And she somehow knew, he escaped.

"I know you're in there somewhere!" She yelled, before sneezing once more. "Don't you dare leave this place before becoming my snack? That's the punishment for trying to take my gem, you greedy runt!"

Carmine sighed, knowing how stupid he was for being unreasonably materialistic, but it was too late for that. Plus, even if he could kick his arse for having stupid ideas, it would not help his current situation. But her constant sneezing gave him an idea.

The pillow before him had some brushes at the edges, probably made with equine hair. The hyena grunted, trying with all his might to pluck some of it, eventually ending up with two handfuls of it.

Trying to get her attention, the hyena ran towards the chest, before climbing it and jumping up and down on the top, trying to lure the hippogryph over.

"Come on, stupid bird! I'm over here! Come and eat me!" He yelled, but due to his size, it sounded more like the squeaking of a mouse than the shouting of a strong, urban thug. But the tiny, dim light, combined with the strange noise coming from the top of the chest was enough for her to come closer, still incredibly furious.

Not thinking through his entire plan, the hyena watched in fear how her featherly, beak-ended head came close, piercing him with a cold-blooded gaze. He was so shrunk, that he could drop dead from this horrific view alone.

"I've found you again, rodent. Now, don't you use any of your dirty, little tricks? To my mouth you go..." she said, opening her beak once more. Her lively tongue attacked like a snake, trying to snatch his brittle body with one single crack of her long, fleshy whip.

He learned enough about the attack pattern of her tongue, knowing where she tried to aim. With a carefully calculated jump, he not only avoided her bizarre weapon, but he also used it to bounce himself on top of her beak, hearing the disappointed grunting of his enemy.

Sweating hard and already feeling sore from all of these gymnastics, he shoved both handfuls of the equine hair to both of the nostrils, hoping for the best. Although it would be a chance like a million to one, that the gust of her sneeze would be aimed directly at the chest. It was a silly idea, but the only one he got.

"Come on, sneeze already!" He shouted while hippogryph tried to pluck the brushes out of her orifices, taking a deep breath before the inevitable. He looked at the chest below, waiting.

This time, the sternutation felt even more powerful, with enough strength to cause the ceiling to fall. Hyena lost his balance, trying to hold himself on the featherly side of her head. But even with such power, it wasn't aimed directly at the contained, barely touching it but causing it to tip over.

Not enough to be opened from the force.

Hyena dropped down himself with a souvenir in his hand. Even if it was the smallest feather, the weight could be a problem in the long run. But since he loved to improvise, it could prove itself handy.

Thinking about his options, using brute force again will probably end up in failure, but it could be the only way for him to gain freedom and all the riches he could handle. It would be impossible to talk his way out. Or maybe it was?

The hyena carried the heavy feather around, using it like a shield, preventing the light from the crystal to go in all directions, giving him better chances around and gathering some clues about the beast.

The hippogryph in question raged, being forced to sneeze all over her lair in an idiotic tactic of a tiny scoundrel. It made a fool of herself, not able to defeat someone so insipid, like a wingless fly. It was now a matter of honor to find him and devour the puny body.

While hyena looked around, he didn't find much more than more pillows and currently worthless gems and gold. After all, no treasure could grant him freedom, maybe only a bit of motivation for him to not give up. But he found something else.

On the silver platter, he found some of the stale pastries, pies, and buns. The hippogryph couldn't bake, so she had to steal? If that was a clue, the hyena wasn't smart enough to connect the dots. But maybe somehow he could use it in interrogation.

Then he realized, that this lair, aside from the piles of coins and jewels, could be similar to a typical household. He noticed more pillows, blankets, plates, and a fancy stool. Probably it was all just a coincidence, but he had at least leverage for conversation.

"I'll find you. No more goofing around, runt. Just show yourself and give up. I promise to swallow you whole and quick!"

After coming back to the tipped-over chest, he threw the feather at the top, before climbing it. He made sure to be visible again for her, with a strange plan in his little head.

Sound of loud thumps spread through the cave, making a few loose stones fall over from the walls and the ceiling. Her eyes were burning chaotically with fury, made fool of herself for far too long. In her mind, it was her right to eat this truly annoying hyena.

"No more games, runt! I assume you finally gave up? Is this your sign of surrender?" She growled at him, tired of this play of cat and a mouse. She unfurled her wings, trying to make her point.

"Of course, whatever you say. But first I need to know, why we fight. Aren't you lonely here?"

The hippogryph squinted her eyes, not liking where this was going. Was he going to bore her to death? Talking a way out was the most foolish tactic in her mind.

"What's in it for you? You'll be eaten in a few moments. Why do you need such knowledge at the maw of your demise?"

He had to keep his head up, acting brave and confident, while his legs were shaking in fear. It was now or never.

"It's incredibly important, oh winged, gorgeous lady. What's your name if may I ask?"

The beast exhaled, almost knocking him over with hot air alone. But she eventually sat down, still looking at him like at a meal.

"Eris. Is that all you want to know about me?"

"On the contrary!" He pointed at her, putting a smile on his muzzle, the same one he used to woo the ladies in the inn. "I noticed you're all alone here, surrounded with all treasures you can't use, just letting them tarnish in this darkness."

"Because I like shiny things. Can I eat you now already?" She sighed, getting weary of all this, in her mind, pointless talking.

Hyena knew he was running out of time, so he had to choose his last words carefully. He almost felt her along and tongue wrapped around his tiny, feeble body.

"I also noticed plates, pillows, blankets, and food. But not just typical food that beasts... I mean... magnificent creatures like you would eat. Eris, you're quite envious of people, right? Wanting to live with them like a normal person, eating cakes and sleeping in bed?"

The hippogryph was left in deep thoughts, not entirely understanding what this tiny hyena meant and wanted from her. But even if it was true, it didn't change her plans. None at all.

"Perhaps..."

"So, maybe we could help each other out? You'll let me free and I'll help you out with this place. Maybe add some furniture? What do you say?"

The beast raised her head, taking a better look at him. After a long moment of silence, while the hyena's heart tried its best to leave his body from all of this anticipation, she finally spoke with a smirk.

"Nah. You'll be better as a snack."

Fearing that it would end that way, he raised the feather and locked it into position like a spear. Waiting for her to come closer, he knew it was now or never for a final strike.

This time she tried to shove him down her throat with a simple movement of her neck while opening her beak wide, like an abyss in a gigantic hole. With his remaining strength, the hyena struck her nostril with the end of the feather, sliding it deep inside her.

The hippogryph roared, flailing her talons around and trying to get rid of her quill. She eventually removed the bloodied plume, shrieking in pure rage.

Carmine jumped next to the chest, hoping the plan will work. He even jumped in place, waving his arms towards the best, shouting the loudest he could.

"I'm here! Let's just end this!"

Hippogryph came closer, ready to strike again with her opened beak. But before she could do anything to the scoundrel, now just inches away from her face, she closed her eyes, rapidly taking short breaths.

She tried with all her might to not sneeze, but eventually, a hurricane of air gushed towards the hyena and ultimately, the chest. The wooden container flipped over with such strength, that it finally opened, while the red gemstone fell to the floor. Yelling triumphantly, the hyena grasped it, quickly returning to his former self, but limb by limb.

It didn't work like he wanted when massive legs were supporting a tiny body with flailing, thin arms ended with sausage-like fingers. But he still grasped the bag with stolen goods, running away from the furious beast. When he eventually looked normal enough, he tosses away the gem and escapes, not looking back.

After a full mile of the interrupted run, he eventually collapsed on the ground, exhausted from all of this silly, little adventure. As a reward, he reached for the bag of all of his treasures, realizing something grim.

"Where... where is it?"

He reached deeper, taking out something that looked like colorful snow or glass shattered into millions of tiny pieces. Remembering a red gemstone that he still had while grabbing the bag, he groaned

Hyena covered his face with both hands, completely defeated, before being lost in thoughts. What if...? That's right!

"Oh, just you wait, Eris. It's not over yet..."