

They came for him the day after the fall of Stendynn Castle.

Vardin had spent a sleepless night in his cell. He'd shut himself away expecting it to be the last night of his life. The leopard stood at the sound of footsteps approaching. Even though he'd stood for countless false alarms the leopard simply couldn't help but stand and face his fate. Heart racing and paws shaking he nevertheless faced the door ready.

The door to his small cell didn't have a lock. No of the servant's quarters did. It opened with a simple pull and Vardin watched as those coming for him were revealed. The rat stepped out of the way as fast as she could once the door was open. Two enormous reynard were left literally blocking the doorway.

He couldn't blame the rat for scurrying out of the way. She stood at five foot nothing while both foxes topped eight foot in height. Tough looking and silent as they stared in at Vardin, they were clearly trained fighters even without the easy hint of plate armor. They both wore the colors of Lord Rice over their plate. The small leopard failed in his attempt to stare back impassively. With a gulp and very obvious shudder that passed through his body he looked at the floor at his feet.

"Mage Vardin, Lord Rice wishes to speak with you." One of the massive fox declared.

Vardin relaxed just a little at the announcement that they were his escort him to an audience with Lord Rice. He would at least get a chance to give one last act of defiance should he be executed, not that it would matter. Anything he might do would be reversed by the huge lord. Steeling himself he stepped forward and followed as the smaller fox turned and lead the way. Once he'd passed the other that huge male crushed any idea of escape with his overbearing presence at Vardin's back.

He was familiar with the castle but between the two behemoths it would have been far too easy to lose track of where they were going. He found it difficult to feel at ease walking between the huge pair of heavily muscled as well as armored warriors more than three times his current size. Vardin felt sandwiched between the pair. A tiny tender piece of flesh hanging between two halves of an immense moving grinder. One misstep from either of them and he felt he'd be nothing but a red smear they'd have to clean from their polished armor.

As Lord Nicholas only shrink mage he'd been forced to expose himself to the counter spells of their adversaries. The siege had not been kind to him. He'd taken the brunt of at least three other shrink mages on a daily basis. Even starting at just over six feet he now was forced to scurry along under the two comparative giants.

At barely over two and a half feet tall the hem of his borrowed robe threatened to trip him up at every step. Perhaps, Vardin thought he should be thankful the siege had only last as long as it had. As his towering escort lead him down and into the keep's courtyard Vardin was able to asses just how the new lord felt about his acquisition. The leopard looked around with keen interest.

There were none of the expected signs of plundering and pillaging. In fact things were being cleaned up beyond what had come to be normal within the castle walls. Knowing where to look he also saw the few remaining signs of damage being repaired. He could still see the orange and green of Lord Nicholas' colors here and there, easily outnumbered by the blue and black of the new lord. On seeing the colors of the former lord still openly displayed without retribution he felt a little less self conscious about still wearing them himself. It gave him some hope that Lord Rice would be somewhat more compassionate than Nicholas had been.

As he was lead up the stairs toward the top of the wall Vardin allowed himself to relax a little more. His fox escort had paused to let a wolf in orange and green finish descending. They had both even given the seven foot wolf a respectful nod in passing before taking to the stairs. Even among Lord Nicholas' own solders there had rarely been such courtesy shown to each other.

On gaining the top of the wall Vardin had to stop and take in the scene. The fox standing just outside the wall was the largest macro Vardin had even seen. Easily sixty feet and wearing a black robe with a deep blue slash down either side. Even standing on top of the wall Vardin was only chest high to the massive fox. He would have to be a strong growth mage to reach such stature. This huge male could be none other than Lord Rice. Vardin had only seen the huge male from a distance during the siege. Up close, being in the reynard's presence was just shy of terrifying.

Looking away from the intimidating sight Vardin noticed Nicholas was still being held several hundred yards away. The tiger had surrendered to the inevitable the day before. Now he sat alone in the field outside his one time castle surrounded by those that had defeated him. Thankfully for everyone it had turned out to be a relatively bloodless takeover. It had been obvious early on that they were outnumbered not only in terms of warriors but in mages as well. Their lord, unable to conceal his huge frame had lost three feet of height in a matter of days.

Nicholas himself had only ever had the stature of fifty five feet, and that from his mother. She had been considered a strong growth mage in her own right. She'd attained a very respectable fifty five feet at the height of her powers. With her passing it had only been a matter of time before her son of no mage skill whatsoever would be overthrown. Now that he had fallen he was already below fifty feet, never to regain that lost stature. It was up to Lord Rice just how small his vanquished foe would become.

Vardin saw from the corner of his eye the two fox at his side salute the giant before them. The massive male turned his attention their way at the salute.

"Ah, this must be Nicholas' mage I've heard about."

Vardin looked up at the massive fox at the statement. Lord Rice had refrained from using the somewhat derogatory term in classing him a mage. Lord Rice had not called him a 'shrink' mage. With so little to look forward to it meant a great deal to the diminutive leopard. He felt as if his heart had started beating once again.

Cheered by the subtle encouragement Vardin was tempted to copy the salute the fox had been given. Instead he gave a neutral and much safer bow. "Sir, I am at your disposal."

The hum of the massive vulpine almost rattled the timbers of the wall. "Yes, a somewhat diplomatic answer. I'm becoming used to such from Nicholas's former servants." The fox's lips gave an upward twitch of humor. "Makes one wonder how he treated those under him."

The two fox at his sides were relaxed, almost standing casually before their lord. Their behavior was a stark contrast to that Vardin was used to in the presence of his former lord. Vardin took a deep breath. He was about to take what would have been a huge risk were he addressing Nicholas in his power. "Indeed, the question of the day is how the new Lord of Stendynn Castle plans to treat his new subjects."

Vardin couldn't help his reaction. His body had tensed even as he spoke. It was impossible for him not to, having been physically disciplined multiple times for so much as speaking out of turn to Lord Nicholas.

Lord Rice smiled. "Yes, it is."

The two fox at his sides hardly reacted. Only the one to his left even bothered looking down at him, and even then it was with a grin that let Vardin know he shared his lord's humor.

Vardin cleared his throat. "I've already noticed a change in attitude."

Lord Rice hummed again. "I've heard Nicholas was less than favorable in his treatment of his subjects."

Vardin coughed. Just the massive fox's hum had vibrated the bones of his chest. He watched as the Lord idly scratched under his ear as he looked behind himself. Vardin could stand within that ear huge and his paws would not reach to the top lobe. Just one of the reynard's fingers were larger than his entire body. The massive fox could end him as easily as crushing a grape between his fingertips. He'd long been inured to constant physical threats at the paws of Lord Nicholas' minions. The casual might this lord displayed made it hard for Vardin to stand his ground before him.

"As for myself," The Lord continued "I tend to believe fairness and kindness fosters loyalty better than fear and brutality."

Vardin was shocked at the statement. "Are you not afraid to be seen as weak by your enemies, speaking so openly?"

"Let them come if they wish to challenge me." The fox replied. Vardin took a step back. The sudden change in the male's attitude sent a chill of terror down his spine. The fox on his left put a paw on Vardin's shoulder. Looking at the huge male he saw he'd had to lean down to do so and yet he saw only encouragement in the face of the towering warrior.

Vardin felt as much as heard the rumbled chuckle of Lord Rice. "I apologize. I'd forgotten how much you'd suffered from my own mages."

Varian sighed and looked to the floor. It was yet another reminder of his new lack of stature. Smaller now than even a squirrel he would be seen as cursed. It would be assumed a lasting punishment for some unlawful act. He'd have no status at all. Humiliating too, to be a leopard smaller than even a mouse-born. No one would help him.

He'd paid a heavy price in service to a powerless lord that had done little but threaten him in return. He felt foolish but he'd also had little choice. Those that had still sided with his former lord would have jumped at the chance to punish the shrink mage in their midst.

"So, to the matter at hand. Eskoff Vardin, once mage of the former lord of Stendynn Castle, I declare you free to go as you please."

He gave the massive lord a deep bow. Having been granted his freedom he was grateful to know that he would at the very least be allowed to live. Vardin took a step back in preparation to turn and leave only to have his eyes settle on the figure of Lord Nicholas. The tiger was idly sitting in the fields outside the castle and guarded by three warriors wearing Rice's colors. He paused and looked to the fox lord. Lord Rice was in turn watching him.

"If I may ask, what is to happen to Lord Nicholas?"

The fox turned to glance at the fallen lord. Looking back down to the tiny leopard he answered "He'll eventually be down to the size of an average tiger. At that point he'll be free to go as he pleases as well."

He knew better than to show the anger he felt. Keeping his face down Vardin bowed again and turned from the massive lord.

"You have your freedom, or" The giant fox said, causing Vardin to stop and listen "you could swear fealty to me. There is room in my plans for another mage of your capabilities."

He turned and looked up at the fox. "If I may be so bold as to ask, in return for what?"

"I make no promises to those who swear an oath to me." Lord Rice answered. He stared down at the tiny leopard unwavering.

Vardin had little to look forward to at his current stature. Should Lord Rice treat those under him the same as Nicholas had he'd at least have some protection. Considering how the two large fox that had been his escorts acted he just might hope for better treatment. Looking at the impassive yet massive fox face above him Vardin took two steps toward him and took a knee.

"Lord Rice, Liege of Stendynn Castle, I, Eskoff Vardin sh-, erm, mage, pledge my service to you."

Lord Rice said "Your service is accepted. Rise Mage."

Gaining his feet again Vardin felt vitality flow into him. He looked up at the massive fox, surprised. He could feel the cloth of the robe slide around him as it began to fit slightly better than before. He could see his perspective inch higher with every second. Looking at the stones of the parapet in front of him Vardin estimated he'd grown a full four inches.

Even as he heard the two fox at his side chuckle Vardin saluted his new Lord.

"As your first act in my service, I order you to daily reduce the stature of your former lord."

Not wanting to seem too eager Vardin simply stepped up to the edge of the parapet and exerted his power. He could see his former lord look up and turn his head searching for the cause of his slight shrinking. Vardin smirked knowing the tiger could trace the cause to him. The tiger would just be able to see him standing before the massive fox lord. True enough, vardin's eyes barely rose above the edge of the parapet but the feline stared right at his position. He almost wanted the tiger to see the smile on his face.

"When we leave to return home you'll accompany me. It'll take some time to get you back to your proper stature. Until then, Toronto shall be your escort."

The fox shifted his focus to Vardin's right. "Toronto, see to it that our new Mage is dressed in the proper colors as soon as is possible."

"Yes, Lord." The smaller fox replied.

"That will be all." Lord Rice declared.

As the two fox escorts stepped back and saluted Vardin stayed. "If I may ask your indulgence for one more thing, Lord?"

The fox's eye ridges raised "Hum?"

"I have family here."

The lower jaw of the massive fox dropped in an expression of comprehension showing a cavernous maw the could fit several leopards Vardin's size. "Ah, yes, if you wish them to come with you that can be accommodated, should that also be their wish."

"Lord?" Vardin asked.

"I'll not have any of my subjects forced into anything they do not wish."

The leopard couldn't help but smile up at the huge fox.

"Will there be anything else?" the enormous reynard asked, the humor obvious in his tone of voice.

Vardin let the smile stay on his face. "Thank you Lord Rice. It will be a pleasure serving you."

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This turned out to be a bit of a challenge. It took a bit of thought to even come up with something even remotely satisfying as a story. I don't usually have to do this as I often feel there's enough explanation in the story, but here's the meat Neopuc's request:

"So, the setting is a world where a small number of people are born with either the power to shrink people or grow people, but not both and they can only change a person's size a few inches a day at most. This is the way the world has always been too. The max size a person can reach would make them a more modest sized macro (somewhere in the 40 to 60 foot range) while the min size they could be shrunk to would be around an inch. Any children a woman has would grow to be around the size range of the mother at the time of birth.

I was thinking that those in the max size range would be on top of the social order and would try to tightly control the size changing populace, even going so far as keeping them locked up unless they are needed. A grower among the max sized population would not be of that much interest to them since they are already on top of the social order while they would be extremely valuable among the smaller population for their ability to either advance their social status or the amount of money they could bring in by selling them to the larger populace. However, a shrinker being born into a max sized family would be viewed as unfavorable for their ability to reduce the status of others while the min sized population would not care much about them, except when it comes to price they could get once again get by selling them."

That might help understand the story a bit more, although I hope it wasn't really necessary.