

Despite the strict vigil he kept on the floor as he walked, Lazarus navigated the winding maze of corridors and chambers with a surprising degree of success. The trip was not entirely without difficulty, backtracking or rerouting here or there, but that was the case more often than not of any extended journey through the keep. Lazarus liked to believe he knew the layout of the castle better than any - except maybe Bastian - and even he could get lost. Visitors had very little hope of reaching their destination without escort.

The castle itself was ancient, one of the oldest structures in all the realm, from a time when function mattered far more than form. At one point, the complex arrangement of passages served a purpose, but these days much of the castle was empty, the important sections often separated from each other by larger sections of abandoned halls and rooms, dust-covered and forgotten long ago.

One of the first things Lazarus had done after his ascension had been to instruct the staff to light torches only along the most direct and well-maintained routes. Then, he'd removed the sentries from the empty hallways; rather than have them continue to patrol wasted space, they became guides for people unfamiliar with the castle. Rarely were there reports of missing guests or woeful tales from freshly-hired workers, though the latter was always good for a laugh.

When Drakasha was first built, the town at the base of the foothills hadn't existed yet. Everything for the castle, from servants to soldiers and all the requisite supplies, had to be kept inside the walls. So they built the structure to be massive, with hall after hall of rooms crammed full of crates and sacks of gear and food, or lined floor to ceiling, end to end with hard cots and bunks.

They even built a sluice to reroute part of the vast Lenore River into the castle, the swift, churning current strong enough to push itself up the mountain, through the underground channel, into a cavernous aquifer beneath the Keep. There are detailed written accounts of sieges against the

fortress, kept in the castle's archives for strategic purposes as well as historical, and even centuries apart, the scribe's recordings were similarly praising of how much of an advantage their hidden water supply was, making sure they could not be outlasted even by the best-supplied armies.

There was another, less-obvious reasoning behind the muddling architecture. One that Lazarus had discerned from his own studies, and shared only with his closest confidants. The original architect had left notes behind, written in a language no longer spoken. While he certainly had no ability to translate it, Lazarus had spent months pouring over them, along with the architect's hand-drawn maps and blueprints of the castle and the surrounding area. The architect had also been a court-sponsored cartographer, drawing the first maps of the Shadow Isles and the Eastern Provinces, some of which they still relied upon for their accuracy.

The architect knew the isles and the outer Stormlands as well as anyone ever had... and yet most of his knowledge disappeared with him one day, the journal entries suddenly ending without any obvious reason. There was no record of his death in any of the translated logs, or any tomb to someone who was, without a doubt, one of the most important figures in the Isle's long history.

Something about the castle was never written down. Something the ever-adventurous, rarely cautious architect never saw coming. Or, if he did, the truth then lay in his words that could no longer be read.

Lazarus came to a stop at last before a pair of sooty, gray glass doors, with rusted brass frames and handles, and a frown curled over his lips at the sight. He'd always meant to repair these doors, but there was just never enough time. His mother had installed the doors by hand, to serve as a portal between the rustic castle and the flourishing garden beyond. When she passed, it was as if she took the soul of the garden with her. Nothing would ever grow there again, and without the greenery, there was little desire for him to maintain it. Not when he had an entire nation

to run. What had once been his mother's gift to the castle was now just an eyesore to anyone who happened upon it. Not that they did - the garden was left, intentionally, far from the lit path.

As he passed through the portal, it was as if his kingly mantle fell off at the door. One step onto the cobblestones, pressed nearly flat with the black soil to either side, and he drifted back to the time he'd helped place the stones as a child. It must've been twenty years since they'd converted the empty storage hall into a garden, a monumental task, but one that his mother had insisted on in her last few years of illness. He'd been young then, and barely allowed to help, but this... this was still *his* little part of the castle.

Wistfully he remembered, as a youth, scouring through the chunks of rock left from the demolition of the outside wall, carefully selecting some pieces and leaving others for later. He'd used the big pieces first, occasionally needing the aid of his mother to carry the stones - his siblings were far too busy with more important things, like learning how to fight and lead and whatever else his father deemed them worthy of and him not. But what did the proper use of a sword matter, compared to improving the lives of the castle-workers who would frequent the garden? To compare the two made swordplay seem trivial to the young wolf. Many things had seemed trivial then, things that now were of grave significance.

Lazarus had spent the next week fitting the walkway together. It reminded him of the puzzles he often poured over, little painted pieces of carved wood that, when separate, meant nothing - only when complete did their true beauty shine. Though never had he attempted one nearly as vast as this, reaching from the outer doors to the back wall nearly twenty full strides away!

As the holes grew smaller, the pieces became harder and harder to fit, but with a little help from then blacksmith, now Guard Captain, Bastian Orashen, they chipped and filed down the stone until, at last, there were no more holes to fill. His heart had soared at the accomplishment as he

placed that final stone, and without a single outside rock needed! How his mother had smiled - she'd been set on preserving the castle as much as possible, not having to bring in outside stone was a feat even she hadn't thought possible. And yet his father said he wasn't worthy? In that moment, the true Stormlord's words were naught but nonsense.

There was a bench at the end of the cobblestone walkway, two thick, gray posts with a slab draped over them, and with a sigh, Lazarus seated himself on it. The last of the stone from the wall, fashioned into a simple but adequate design, without frills but wide enough for two to sit. Perhaps not a whole lot more comfortable than the throne had been, but at least it was quiet here.

In front of him and just before the gaping hole where a wall had once been, a pool of murky water stared back at him, tatters of his reflection visible through narrow slits in a living carpet of green and brown moss. His rich black fur, laboriously cared for by servants at the council's decree - a king should look the part just as much as act it - and the cerulean hair crowning his lupine features, spilling lower than the pond would've revealed unless he were standing at it's very edge. Most of all, he stared into his matching blue eyes, grateful for his mother's influence in them. In every other way, he looked like just like his father. If he had his eyes as well...

"Laz?" A voice snuck up on him, high-pitched but not squeaky. Like a note from a harp, it was melodic, even soothing, compared to the gruff, rattling voices of the elder councilors.

"Yeah, Briar." He didn't bother to turn around, merely waving him forward with a single forward sweep of his hand. When he heard his friend's steps draw close, Lazarus held up a still hand, signaling for him to wait. "How'd you know I was here?"

"You think I don't know your hiding places?" Briar said, halting at the behest of his king. "Or were you under the impression monarchs did not have hiding places? I assure you they do, and you are no less of one for

seeking it out."

Lazarus chuckled softly and dropped his hand. This time, he gestured with his head, nodding to the place beside him on the bench, which Briar quickly occupied.

Something brushed Lazarus' arm, and he gave a cursory glance in his friend's direction. The wide swath of fire-hued fur trailing behind Briar fidgeted in the air, less stoic than the squirrel's words had been. It swept back and forth over his arm at a frenetic pace, causing a prickling static to leap over his nerves, like so many tiny sparks on his flesh. Lazarus didn't want to draw attention to it, but the sensation became too much to bear and he tried to slide himself subtly out of its range.

Briar must've noticed when Lazarus moved as he quickly swept his tail away, tucking it behind him on the bench. "S-sorry, it gets away from me sometimes. You know how it is..." He busied himself by picking at a clump of dirt he found in the fur of his tail.

"Can't say that I do." Lazarus eyed his own much shorter, narrower canine tail, then looked back at him, nonplussed.

"Oh... I suppose not." Briar attended his tail with much more tenacity, intent to avoid Lazarus' gaze. "Let's just say bigger isn't always better..."

Lazarus snorted and turned his gaze away from the self-conscious squirrel. In his periphery, he could see Briar silently exhale and sweep his tail underneath the bench. Out of sight, out of mind.

They sat there in silence for a long moment, before Briar finally chirped up again. "You know you can't just storm out of court like that." He said hesitantly, like testing the water of a bath. Plunging in headlong was a surefire way to get burned, and Lazarus could at least appreciate his friend's aversion to the abrasive subject. It didn't make his temper flare any less, but it did convince Lazarus not to unleash the whole of his frustrations upon the squirrel.

"Are you my father now?" Lazarus spat, and considered that about as

checked as his anger would get right about now.

"Merely an observer." Briar said calmly, though he blanched at the remark. "It's what they want, you know. To make you look weak, so that they, the almighty Shadow Council, can look all the more important."

Lazarus shook his head. "They just want my father to return. In the meantime, they'll use me as their sport, knowing I have no choice but to allow it."

"Any word on that?" For the first time, Briar ventured to catch his gaze. He failed.

"Thankfully... no. I should have plenty of time to continue being indecisive and ineffective."

Briar nudged him with his shoulder. "Kings may hide, but they certainly don't sulk. Being the most sought-after bachelor in the Isles of Shadow hasn't worked out all that poorly for you." This time, Lazarus did glance over at him, catching the sneer painted plainly across his pointed features. "If I recall correctly, you've bed more lovers than you've had birth days... unless my memory is not what it used to be. I should think you'd be more enthused about your situation."

Lazarus nudged him back, feeling his inner conflagration wane the more they spoke. He'd never been good at holding back, and nearly shoved the squirrel off the bench and into the stagnant water. "Now the scholar has become the priest? You're the one who comes to me, hungry for details! Under the pretense of 'curiosity', no less!"

Despite his near-bath, Briar's features lit up with mirth. "Ah, now there's the king I serve!" But then his face clouded, eyebrows scrunched tightly. "Wait, now *I* am the one who comes to *you*?! You're the one who simply *must* describe every curve and indecent detail! 'Oh Briar, she was pinker than a rose! Oh Briar, she was wet like-'"

Lazarus started to laugh. "Alright, alright! Light be damned, must you remember everything in that vault you call a mind?"

"Must you lay with any woman that sways her hips at you?" Briar

laughed too. "Of course I keep track of them! Someone must make certain, once you're done with them, that they don't slip into the castle and murder you in your sleep. I wouldn't be doing my job if I let myself forget even one!"

There was a nagging truth to the squirrel's words. Most of them had been political emissaries, messengers, or potential suitors. Once they realized he wanted nothing further to do with them, they weren't too pleased about it. Such persons had a good deal of access to his castle - to deny them entry would be to publicly shame them. Many of the nations they represented would be more than content to consider that a provocation of war.

Briar however, as castellan, was in the perfect position to handle the disgruntled women. In truth, he had nearly as much power as Lazarus, just in a less obvious way, so it might slip under the Council's notice. The position had been an early creation of the wolf's, knowing that he could never run a castle by himself, much less an entire nation and, Eonru forbid, a Province! He needed someone that could oversee both the civil and military duties of the castle - a middleman, between the captain of the staff, the captain of the guard, the Shadow Council, and himself.

Officially, the title meant little more than a messenger, but Lazarus had made great exception to let everyone know - besides the Council, of course - to treat Briar as they would treat the Stormlord. Which meant Briar could keep the women from entering his castle, and since the order didn't come from the Stormlord himself... it could hardly be cause for public outcry. While the title had been frowned on at first, his staff learned quickly that, at least in this one case, Lazarus had been wise far beyond his years in appointing himself not only an advisor, but a failsafe.

They did it together, Lazarus somehow held the Shadow Isles together and Briar kept both their heads' attached to their shoulders and kept a roof over them. Along with the irreplaceable help of Bastian and Dahlia - chief stewardess and high priestess of the wards - they'd survived this

long, almost in spite of the Shadow Council, who wanted nothing more than for Lazarus to fail, either through giving up or through steel between his ribs. In either scenario, the throne reverted to them until his father's return. If he ever returned at all.

"Laz?"

Briar was staring at him inquisitively. How long he'd been staring, Lazarus realized he had no idea. His thoughts were getting the better of him lately, it seemed. "What?"

"You know you're going to have to settle down eventually, right?" Briar said and immediately turned back to face the water, as if flinching from an expected blow. A blow that had never and would never be delivered by Lazarus' hands, though the squirrel might yet believe the opposite based on appearance alone. The remains of a scar that even Dahlia's rejuvenating salves could never mend.

The question bit Lazarus like an annoying insect that he couldn't quite seem to swat. Just when he thought it was gone for good, there it was again.

"...I know."

"Do you?" His voice lacked his usual snark, and seemed to have gained a fleck of concern. "Every day that passes makes it seem less and a less a certainty. I..." He trailed off, like the words he was looking for were on the next page of the book in his mind, but he couldn't turn the page.

After a couple moments, he still didn't pick the thought back up, and Lazarus clapped him on the shoulder. "You don't ever have to filter your words around me, Briar." He said, then quickly thought to add. "Even when I'm angry, I'm *not* my father. You know that."

Briar gulped and nodded. "Y-yeah, I know... I just don't want to go back to the way things were, when we picked up the pieces mas-" His hands and eyes clenched tight for a moment, appearing to hold something visceral inside him. "... I mean, your father left behind. The people, they're happy I think. Before they were just sorta there, like they existed for the sole

purpose of tilling the fields and producing the next generation of toilers. You can still see it in the elders, they're too jaded to change. But the younger ones... they have hope where there was none before. That's what I'm afraid of losing the most."

Lazarus sighed, turning back to the pool. After a long moment, he cast the squirrel a sidelong gaze and received one in turn. "I know what you mean, I don't want to lose that either, believe me. I'm trying to figure out a way to make it work - to be rid of my father and his wretched council for good. I just need time..." So much of his time was spent at the council's twisted court, there was precious little left for anything else.

Another frustration of their design, he suspected, to keep him so perpetually occupied he'd never manage to destroy them. If nothing else, they were consistent in their approach. Unfortunately for the council, his frustrations paled in comparison to the importance of that which Briar spoke of - hope, sewn fresh in the people of Alcarra. *His people.*

Without losing his balance on the narrow slab of stone, Briar drew his legs up underneath him in a single, fluid motion. Just watching him do it made Lazarus sit a little straighter, suddenly very aware of his posture.

"I'll just have to play matchmaker a little harder, then." Briar said, his face brightened, faith restored. "In the meantime, I'll try to get the Council off your back a bit, distract them with some scandalous gossip that will have them at each other's throats for once, instead of yours." He grinned. "I've been saving some choice bits of dirt on a couple of them for months now, seems as good a time as any for a little mischief, don't you agree?"

"I wouldn't agree." A powerful voice pierced the serenity of the garden, resonating from the back of the room and reverberating off the walls forward through the chamber. "But then I *deplore* mischief, as well you know, little squirrel.

Lazarus whirled around on the bench. There in the portal was Bastian, in his 'casual' uniform. A ringmail hauberk, cinched by a strip of black

leather, and linen trousers, also black. A sword held fast at his left hip, while he carried a pike larger than even he, which was no simple accomplishment. Bastian was a behemoth of a man, taller even than the royal bloodline, with shoulders that would look at home on a stallion. As it was, his tiger-orange fur contrasted boldly with the steel on his chest, with sharp green eyes that could pierce the deepest darkness. The long tube of his striped tail hung no less than a breath from the ground, but never touched.

"Are you ever going to let that go?" Briar called out, but his voice betrayed a quivering inside him. He and Bastian were close, it must've been something instinctual that made Briar always so nervous in his presence. Whenever Lazarus brought it up, the squirrel avoided the question and started mumbling about books, a clear a sign as any to drop the subject.

"Perhaps if I forget, I will forgive." Bastian flashed him a toothy grin.

Briar shrank down into the bench and sulked. Just as the squirrel could remember everything he read, Bastian had a perfect memory regarding everything *other* than books and scrolls. Recite to him a poem or a decree, and it would be forgotten the moment it passed through his other ear. Swing a sword at him one time, and he'd never forget the strength, speed, or direction of the strike, as if an artist had painted the scene in his mind with painstaking detail.

"What did you do this time?" Lazarus asked, curiosity finally getting the better of him. "It's not like you to leave me out of the loop when you set a scheme in motion."

"Nothing!" Briar blurted out with a blatant lack of his usual decorum.

"Nothing, indeed." Bastian chuckled. "Hate though I may to interrupt your conversation, your grace, but there is a visitor 'seeking your attention', as she put it. And if I may be free of tongue, from her rather revealing dress and from the sort of visitors you are in habit of receiving at this twilight hour, especially as of late... I do believe she meant her

words in more than their literal interpretation."

For a moment, Lazarus stared at him, dumbfounded. Not at the implications, that had been almost forgotten beneath the much wilder conclusion. "How exactly do you know what 'sorts of visitors' I've been receiving in my quarters?" In a sudden strike of realization, his attention and ire flipped to the squirrel. "Has my confidant turned traitor? Who else have you regaled with the stories of my private hours? Dahlia, the staff, perhaps the Council, even?"

Briar shook his head desperately, hands thrown up, palms forward, as he tried his very best to appear innocent. "O-only Bastian, I swear!" Well, the squirrel admitted that easily enough. "I had just a touch of wine in me! Well, more than a touch. Actually quite a lot, damn the Light, and it just sorta slipped out!" Bastian snickered, and Lazarus hardly had a chance to learn why before Briar had drawn his breath and started again. "In fact I barely said anything at all! But then he started asking questions - truly it's his fault, it was his wine too - and then--"

Lazarus clapped his hand on the poor squirrel's shoulder again before his heart gave out. "Calm yourself, my friend. As long as it was no small amount of wine to loosen your tongue, our enemies will at least empty their purse to learn our secrets!" In the background, he heard a mighty laugh bellowing from the tiger, and all Lazarus could do was sigh in resigned defeat. "Let's... let's just keep it to only Bastian then. I'd rather people not get the wrong idea of my guests, especially the scrupulous ones. I doubt they'd much appreciate rumors spread of an event they weren't allowed to enjoy." He said, managing a wry smile despite Briar's betrayal.

"With your honor secured once more," Bastian tapped the end of his pike on the stone, "Shall I be escorting you to your chambers?" He flourished his open palm to his left, gesturing toward their destination. "The lady was insistent that you two not be seen by wandering eyes, so I escorted her there already. Felicia was her name, as I recall, though she would not give me her family name. Before you ask, I have already allocated

an extra pair of my finest men to your cadre, proficient in the use of nonlethal force, should such be required."

"You spoil me, Bastian." Lazarus drew languidly from the bench, the weight of the day finally beginning to show its wear. He left Briar to his own devices with a low bow, then crossed the garden, drawing face to face with Bastian, or rather face to chest. The tiger was the only one in the castle Lazarus had to tilt his head up at to make eye contact. "My father was a fool to leave you behind." He said, near enough to the tiger to whisper.

"Aye." For once, Bastian chose to be brief, though he still spoke in his low, drawling voice. Lazarus found it mesmerizing to listen to the tiger speak, as often they did, the seductively slow tempo mixed with a graceful, almost poetic eloquence that could hold him in for hours and make it feel like mere moments. His voice was a constant blend of a purr and a murmur, never one to shout even in anger, quiet enough to draw people in close to hear, then it held them there with his silken cadence. "Your words are an undeserved kindness, your grace, but may the Eternal Storm wrap you in Her darkest velvet for the honor you bestow upon me with them."

"Undeserved is hardly the word I'd use, my friend. But we should go before my visitor thinks *I* am the undeserving one." Lazarus shot Bastian a tired look as he passed him and stepped into the hall, his posture beginning to droop the minute he stepped from the cobblestone and back onto the violet carpet. Given the opportunity, the tiger would explain, at great length, why his praise was undeserved, and Lazarus would have enjoyed to debate him on the matter.

Unfortunately, he had other matters to attend to, and thus he started off down the hall, the tiger keeping a respectable distance behind. Like trying to find a woman that wanted actually wanted more than his physical and monetary gifts. That maybe, Eonru forbid, actually cared about the people of Alcarra and the Shadow Isles, and would support him when his father eventually returned and brought his army down on their heads.

As much as Lazarus enjoyed the bachelor life, the reality of the situation frightened him in a way that he wasn't sure anything else had the ability to. Beyond diplomacy, beyond stability, beyond even love - Lazarus struggled with that thought, but it was as true as any other - he knew that there was one quality paramount to any other. Whoever was to be his mate would have to be willing, whenever the true and rightful Stormlord returned to the Isles, to stand up against the collective might of the the Eastern Provinces and fight to their last breath for Alcarra. The Council said fertility was the most important, but in truth, Lazarus wanted a mate who knew the meaning of sacrifice. And that was rare, if not absent entirely among the pampered offspring of nobility.

When the day came that his father should return, as he knew deep in his heart it would no matter how much time elapsed, Lazarus knew that the most important thing wasn't that they survive. They needed to show the people who trusted him that freedom wasn't so frail a concept that it can perish with its champions. That, when the tyranny of the Council and his father once again plague the land... that they know what his blood was shed for.

None of the women he'd met so far would ever be ready to accept a death sentence for him, and truly he wasn't sure he could put the noose around their neck by going through with it, even if he found the right girl.

Lazarus sighed and shook his head, even as Bastian slowed his pace to match the king's diminished gait. May as well enjoy the benefits of mate-searching while they last, right? One day the war in the West would end, and reality would come back to the Isles. And with it, the Black army would come as well, to take from him everything he'd grown to love and protect with all his heart. By then, if he hadn't found the woman to stand with him, then the Council had won and there would be no army of his own to stop them. He would die alone, and somewhere inside him, he just hoped he didn't bring all his friends down with him.