



"I became insane, with long intervals of horrible sanity." - Edgar Allan Poe

Once upon a time, beneath a radiant moon that refused to wane, a warrior remembered his promise. His lips bore the ghost of a practiced smile, and he felt the cracks in his psyche deepening. The Soulmender opened the window, allowing the cool air to seep in before moving behind his lover, their eyes locking in the mirror's reflection. He pressed a sharp blade against the Shadowbearer's neck, and the urgent kraa of a raven sliced through the air.

"Hurry up, Tii-rak, we're gonna be late."

"Yes, my lord," Edan replied with a soft sigh, his focus unbroken. He guided the razor along Micah's jawline, sculpting away the fine stubble like an artist refining his masterpiece.

Wiping the blade clean, Edan tilted Micah's chin upward, angling his face to catch the light. "How many will be in attendance tonight?"

"Thirteen." Micah's lips twitched with his smirk. "I invited Nong Riayh to—" He hissed sharply as the blade caught his skin. "Damn it, Edan!" he jerked away slightly but remained still enough to avoid further mishaps.

Edan froze wide-eyed as blood beaded beneath Micah's jaw. "I'm sorry!" he blurted, setting the razor aside and reaching for a washcloth. He pressed it to the shallow cut, then placed it into Micah's hand. "Here, hold this," he murmured.

Micah huffed, still irritated but unable to resist a wry chuckle. "Next time, aim for the jugular." He pressed the washcloth to the wound, a sharp sting drawing a wince from him.

"I have a jar of His Majesty's healing balm around here somewhere." Edan turned away, his breath catching as his eyes settled on the blood-streaked blade lying on the

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table. He lifted a trembling finger, inspecting the crimson stain on his skin before pressing it to his lips. Tasting the sweet venom, heat surged through him, forbidden and consuming, as his lashes fluttered shut for a heartbeat.

"It's just a nick. No need to be dramatic." Micah said, tossing the washcloth onto the sink with a casual flick. The open wound closed almost instantly, fading as if it had never been there.

Edan turned around, their eyes meeting in the mirror's reflection again. "Shall I continue, my lord?"

"No." Micah stood, gripping the Shadowlord's waist and pulling him close. "Our guests await."

Edan's knees buckled as Micah's crimson eyes bore into his. "Yes, of course. We shouldn't be late."

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The grand dining hall of Shadowrealm Castle was a study in muted elegance. Its long, obsidian table glinted under the low-hanging chandeliers, which bathed the room in a silver glow. Shadows danced along the dark stone walls, cast by flickering flames in blue-tinted sconces. Thirteen warriors sat at the table, their postures stiff, their gazes darting between one another.

The Shadowbearer stood at the head of the table. "It is an honor to host you tonight. I trust your journey through the veil was uneventful?"

A broad-shouldered warrior with a silver-plated helm tucked under his arm, inclined his head. "The veils were... manageable, Shadowbearer. Though their intensity grows with each passing season."

"Ah, the tides of moon dust," Micah said with a melodic charm. "Ever shifting, ever unpredictable. A reminder of the balance we all must strive to maintain," he said, almost convincing himself.

Edan, seated at Micah's right, lounged with a casual elegance that seemed out of place in the formal setting. He swirled a goblet of dark wine, and his gaze swept the table, lingering on each warrior just long enough to unsettle them. He leaned closer to Micah, murmuring something that drew a low chuckle from him.

"Do share, Shadowlord," Micah said, his tone teasing as he placed a hand lightly on Edan's forearm. "Our guests might appreciate your wit as much as I do."

Edan's lips curved into a faint smile, his eyes dark with amusement. "I was merely observing how well our guests' armor reflects the firelight. A testament to their preparedness. Though I wonder if they expected a battle instead of supper."

Unease rippled through the warriors' countenance. One of them, a woman with a sharp jawline and even sharper eyes, straightened in her seat. "We come not as adversaries, Shadowlord, but as envoys of our people."

"Of course," Edan lifted a hand, signaling the servants to continue. Silver platters



laden with exotic dishes floated gracefully from shadowy tendrils, depositing delicacies before each guest. “This dinner is a gesture of goodwill, a symbol of our shared commitment to dialogue and unity. Please, eat. Drink. You’ll find our hospitality unmatched.”

“The policies you’ve implemented have raised... concerns among the citizens,” another warrior began, his tone measured but tinged with apprehension. “The redistribution of shadow magic, the restrictions on cross-realm trade and levying of tariffs on kingdoms outside of High King Ryuji’s domain—”

Micah raised a hand, his expression placid. “Our policies are designed to ensure the stability of all realms. Change often feels uncomfortable at first, but I assure you, these measures are necessary.”

Edan’s fingers tapped idly against the stem of his goblet. “Necessary for survival,” he added, his voice carrying a cold edge. “We’ve seen what happens when balance is neglected. The Lytherians’ Kingdom of Aetheria has proven to be the most loyal ally of our higher realm. We reward good behavior. Would you prefer chaos?”

“And what of the Oryshian Realm? That is where your focus should be. We would prefer transparency,” the sharp-eyed woman countered, her voice steady. “Soulmenders deserve clarity, not dictates issued behind a veil of spurious foreign... and internal affairs.”

Micah’s laugh was light, almost musical. “Transparency? In the Shadowrealm? In this economy? My lady, you flatter us with your idealism. But perhaps we’ve strayed too far into politics this evening already.”

“Warrior Sasha’s body... disappeared. Vanished after the last VeilTide Battle in Song Crye,” someone called out, reaching for a Twilune and taking a bite out of it.

Murmurs spread across the table as the warriors exchanged glances. The mention of Sasha’s disappearance seemed to pull at an old wound. Micah’s eyes narrowed, but he said nothing, watching the unfolding tension with quiet detachment.

“He was the Shadowlord’s closest friend,” another warrior muttered in disbelief. “They fought side by side, and yet, no one can explain how his body and soul simply disappeared. It’s unnatural.”

Edan stiffened in his seat, increasingly agitated by the mention of that name. He unconsciously rested a hand on his side as his pulse quickened, squeezing the scar.

“And what’s more,” a third warrior chimed in, “The Shadowlord seems to have moved on already. He doesn’t even speak of it. Not a word about his closest friend’s disappearance. How is that possible?”

Edan’s heart pounded, a flood of emotions surging within him, but his gaze remained fixed ahead, refusing to meet the accusing stares of his comrades. His silence, however, did nothing to ease their growing frustration.

“How could you be so callous?” the first warrior continued, now more heated. “It’s



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like Sasha's death meant nothing to you. Can you guarantee that one of our bravest warriors ascended to the Dusk Watch? We want answers, Shadowlord! Where is Sasha?"

Edan's breath caught, and his shoulders tensed, ready to rise and lash out at the warriors who dared question his grief. But before he could move, a firm hand landed on his knee.

"Tii-rak," Micah's voice was low, commanding.

Edan turned his head, meeting the Shadowbearer's eyes for the briefest of moments.

Micah's grip tightened, holding him in place, a silent warning. "Let's not forget," Micah smiled warmly, "we all have our burdens to bear. And Edan has his own way of carrying his grief." He shot a piercing look at the warriors, silencing the next wave of murmurs. "Lord Sattory's death weighs on him more than any of you can understand. So, unless you want to test the limits of your loyalty, I suggest you leave it be. The Sattory family and the Stonewielder Clan have already been compensated for his sacrifice to the Shadowrealm. Whether or not he has ascended to the Dusk Watch is none of your concern, as it is the Shadowbearers who decide the fate of your eternal souls."

The room fell into an uncomfortable silence. Micah's hand remained on Edan's knee, a quiet anchor amid his storm. The words never came, but Edan could feel the weight of Micah's understanding, his loyalty—his devotion. He took a deep breath, forcing himself to settle, though the fire in his chest smoldered, ready to burst forth at the slightest provocation.

Finally, after a long, tense pause, Micah spoke again, his voice softer but still carrying authority. "Tonight is about coming together. Let's not waste our time tearing each other apart."

Edan remained silent, his fingers idly tracing Micah's hand as he watched him with quiet admiration. As if on cue, a servant approached with a tray of glittering purple and blue desserts. The warriors hesitated, their wariness evident as they regarded the offerings. Micah picked up a piece and offered it to Edan, who accepted with a sly smirk, his tongue brushing against Micah's finger as he savored the dessert. Their exchange remained intimate, charged with an undercurrent that made the warriors avert their eyes. A fleeting touch of the hand here, a knowing smirk there, it wasn't overt, but it was enough.

The faint creak of the dining hall doors broke the delicate web of strained pleasantries. Edan's expression hardened as he regarded the scout.

"Ah, Nong Riayh, just in time," Micah greeted him with an amiable nod. "Would you do us the honor of pouring the wine for our esteemed guests?"

"Shadows embrace you, my lord." Riayh gave a sharp nod and moved to the sideboard at the back of the room, where a line of crystal decanters waited. Edan stood smoothly to his feet, and Micah's gaze followed him, a fleeting look of approval exchanged between them. The scout worked in silence, carefully filling each goblet with



dark red wine. Edan reached into the folds of his tunic and retrieved a small vial. The substance inside shimmered like liquid gold, catching the flickering light of the sconces. He placed it into Riayh's hand with quiet precision, and Riayh looked up, startled, his mouth opening slightly to speak.

Edan silenced him with a sharp glance, his voice low and firm. "The Shadowbearer's orders." He picked up two goblets and left the scout to his task, returning to Micah's side.

Riayh's grip on the vial tightened, his knuckles white as he sighed. Edan slid into Micah's lap and settled against him, the press of his body molding effortlessly to the Shadowbearer's. Micah's arm curled around his waist, fingers splaying over his hip, a silent claim. The warriors stiffened at the sight, eyes flickering between the two but never daring to linger too long. Edan smirked, tilting his head just enough to catch Micah's gaze, a silent, wicked amusement dancing in his eyes. Let them squirm.

Micah raised his goblet, his voice carrying over the murmurs. "To new beginnings and a stronger bond between us," he declared. "To show my sincerity, I offer you a gift unparalleled in the realm, a gesture of goodwill. My Shadowbearer, there is nothing to fear."

Edan's fingers tightened around the goblet, his tongue flicking over his lips to capture the last lingering taste. Each sip felt like a revelation, and yet, it wasn't enough; he craved more, drowning in the Shadowbearer's gift with an obsessive fervor. Riayh retreated to the shadows, the last servant slipping away. Edan's movements languid and entranced. Excitement crackled among them, their murmurs rising in an eager crescendo as they looked between Edan's euphoric reaction and the tray of goblets in Riayh's steady hands.

"Is it truly that potent?" one of the warriors gaped, leaning forward, his eyes fixed on Edan as he licked a crimson drop from the corner of his lips and moaned. "It must be," another whispered, his tone edged with eager anticipation. Edan seemed oblivious to their stares, his focus entirely consumed by the wine as Micah offered his goblet to him. His throat bobbed as he took another slow sip, and the

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