

Doran grits his teeth as he rams into the man underneath him, riding out the last wave of his orgasm. With a huff, he moves off of the man and stares up, his eyes tracing the lines that made up the mural along his ceiling. After so many years of gazing up at it, connecting faded lines and putting names to faces he would never know – well, he had given up trying to make any sense of it. It was now simply that, a mural that someone thought was wise to adorn his ceiling.

“Ah, that was nice,” the man beside him hums, drawing the last word out lazily. He stretches out, admiring the feel of the silk sheets against his body. He gazes over at his partner, placing an arm around him and attempting to cuddle.

“It was sufficient,” he answers. With a nonchalant shrug, Doran gains his body back and gets to his feet. He stretches sore muscles that beg for him to go back to bed.

“You remember your way out?” he questions, turning to the young man who seems oddly at peace with the change of mood.

“And here I thought you’d stay in tonight,” he chuckles as he rises from his seat, grabbing his clothes as he approaches Doran. But Doran had already moved on to other things. His mind going through all of his responsibilities and what he had to do. In his mind, they were all far too much. Depending on the time, he was probably already late for his lessons. Perhaps he could make his swordplay lesson.

“Are you even paying me any mind?” the young man questions. Doran jumps at the feeling of warm hands sliding across his stomach and up to his chest.

“You’re still –,” he begins right as the door opens and a boy, younger than both of them enters. With a raised brow, the boy’s eyes take in the situation with a glimmer of disapproval evident in his gaze. Young, he was, but not so young that he was not knowledgeable about what went on behind closed doors and what scattered clothes meant. Doran had entered his twenty-fifth year, while the young man had entered his nineteenth.

“Doran, father wishes to see you.” His eyes flicker over to Doran’s guest for a second, “with haste.”

“Does he now?” Doran chuckles, motioning for the young man to leave. With a blush and a nod of understanding, he gathers the rest of his clothes and, with swiftness, leaves the room behind. The young man, Julian, moves out of the way and watches his retreating figure before turning back to his older brother.

“I almost feel like I’ve seen that one before,” he comments, “have you fucked your way through the entire city already?”

“No,” Doran sniggers darkly. He pulls on his undershirt and grabs his vest before making for the door, “but if you give me another year, then I’m sure I will have met such a milestone.”

Julian shakes his head in revulsion, “you have no shame.”

“Why should I?”

“I shall remind you, similar to how everyone else has been doing as of late, that you are to be the next Lord.”

“Yes, you are right,” Doran sighs. He turns to his younger brother as he fusses over his hair, swiftly restraining it into a loose top knot. “Everyone has been reminding me, so do not join those ranks.” He turns on his heels, rolling his eyes, “Darkness knows I can do with fewer reminders.”

“I can only hope that you find a future partner in one of them.”

“Ha!” Doran snorts, throwing the doors open to the throne room, “I have no use for a lover.” Rarely was the large room ever empty. Even when there were no events, the room still found itself active with advisors, generals, and guards. In fact, it was such a rare occurrence that Doran could count on one hand how many times it has been devoid of life. Each time looked like a similar scene to what he was facing. He rounds on his brother, grabbing his shirt and yanking him closer.

“What is this?” he harshly whispers through gritted teeth.

“Does it look like I know?” he growls back, swatting his hand away, “father told me to fetch you, and I did so.” Doran mumbles something to himself as he stands straighter and approaches the dais.

“You honor me with your presence, my son,” the man on the throne states, gazing down at his son with unfamiliar emotions in his black eyes. Doran performs a short curtsy as he gazes over at his sibling. He didn’t wish to be forced into listening to another lecture. “You may take your leave, Julian.”

“My Lord,” Julian states formerly, turning to his brother with a warning glare, “brother.” He took his leave, and the throne room became quiet. Doran debated whether or not to speak, to attempt and guess why his father sought out his presence and if it had anything to do with shirking his responsibilities.

His father rises, “come, Doran. Sit on the throne.” In obedience, he walks up to the dais and sits.

“Now, close your eyes.” Doran did as he was asked, unaware of his father’s intentions but knowing that there was to be some lesson somewhere in all of it. “Imagine this room is full of your subjects. Generals and advisors, farmers and merchants, countrymen all who seek your guidance for their problems. How easily do you see my words?”

Doran opens his eyes and the many attendant's fade. The noise lessens and the grand spectacle was reduced once again to nothing but an empty and dark throne room.

"It is ... obtainable." Ruvian groans, leaving Doran's side as he grumbles incoherently. "Father, I have two years left before I am to take anything on. Have I not proven that I am ready to carry this burden?"

"You have proven only that you will do everything within your power to do as you wish. Hear me and hear me well, Doran. If you bring down this dynasty –"

"Bring down this dynasty?" Doran bellows, standing as he looks his father over, "the last thing you need worry about is me bringing down what you and our ancestors have created. The last I remember –"

"That prophecy means nothing to me!" Ruvian screams, stepping up onto the dais so that he and his son were now eye to eye. "Witches foretelling's mean nothing. If you believe Fate has not written multiple endings for you, then you are a fool."

"As foolish as you were to think Kaibo would fall so easily?" The slap echoes through the throne room and Doran moves his jaw, shaking the hit off.

"You have been getting loose with your tongue."

"And you have been holding back with your strikes," he snorts. He takes a step forward, eliminating any space between him and his father, "I told you that I am ready, and that is what I meant. If you doubt me then pass over me and give Julian the burden. Otherwise, retire with the last shred of dignity your old bones can afford you." Doran pushes past his father, leaving the throne room the same way he came in, proud.

Ruvian sighs heavily as he collapses onto the throne, rubbing his face tiredly. He tried his hardest, and yet, it never seemed to do much. Each day that passed saw Doran growing more wildly, more independent, and stubborn. Perhaps he was right. Maybe it was time for Ruvian to step down and hand the burden over to Doran. But then what of tradition and the Cimmerian way? He disliked the idea of giving his son what he wanted.

"It's that damned prophecy," he growls to no one. And it was his fault for telling him about the prophecy in the first place. Now, he had to contend with Doran believing himself the messiah of all Cimmerians. The man knew not what humility was, and despite a sharp mind and tongue, he still had much to learn. Ruvian could no longer take his hand and show him the world. He missed the young starry-eyed boy, the one who pointed at stars and wished to learn of their origins. The boy

who would sit in his study and quietly pour over every word his books had to offer before glancing up at him and asking for another.

Ruvian's eyes grew soft and watery as he stares at the door. He wished to see that boy again. But the sad truth was, he never would. That boy had long since died, and a cold man had taken his place.

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He walks down the hall, almost wishing that he hadn't sent the young man away. He felt like going another round now.

"This siblings," a voice starts, causing Doran to stop in his tracks, "is foolishness walking with a touch of ignorance in its steps." He turns to see Julian leaning on a wall, two more familiar faces joining him. His younger brother Illinias and sibling, Alaer.

"And pray tell how long the three of you have been standing here?"

"Julian told us that father had called on you. We were worried –," Illinias starts, and Doran snorts, about to state how ridiculous such worry was.

"For father," Alaer finishes, raising their brow and causing Doran to close his mouth. Instead, a sneer appears. "Why must you make his life harder?"

Doran points to his face where he hoped the remnants of the strike were, "do none of you care about my health? He struck me."

Julian roughly grabs his chin, rolling his eyes as he shoves him away, "your face will recover. And I'm sure you earned it. You have made it your mission to get under his skin lately. Do you wish for an early death?"

Doran motions for his three siblings to follow, allowing himself a moment of peace amongst their presence. "Of course not, but I do wish he would retire already."

"There are formalities," Alaer reminds.

"Alas, I care none for them," he laughs.

"You grow too bold, brother," Alaer sighs, "father has made mistakes, but he is still a wise leader." Doran stops, turning to his three younger siblings. For a minute, he takes all of them in, a genuine smile appearing as he does so. They had grown up before his eyes, and he couldn't be prouder.

Alaer, as young as they were, was already showing excellent proficiency in diplomacy. Their intelligence was astounding, and their way with words always warmed him, even when he was the target of their acerbity. Then there was Illinias. Quiet and reserved Illinias. Yet also the wisest

among them. He watches and listens and prepares. Both were not of his blood, but they might as well be. He cared little for their mother, but mothers meant little in the life of Cimmerians. It was the siblings that were far more important. Then finally, vocal and protective Julian. Despite his brother's attitude towards his activities, Doran trusts no one like he did Julian.

Doran clears his throat and looks all three of them in the eye, "do you believe I will make a good ruler?"

Illinias remains silent, but when Doran catches his eye, he gave a solemn nod. Alaer sighs dramatically, leaning on the closest wall, "you will, but I fail to see why you ask." Doran chose not to answer them just yet, his eyes resting on his brother.

Julian looks him over and, with narrowed eyes reply, "you will be a pain in the ass. Beyond that, I cannot say."

Doran throws his head back as he grabs hold of him, "you are too kind, brother." He releases him, and an air of seriousness came down upon all four of them. Doran stands straighter, "you question why I no longer listen to father; it is because he has proved inept in leading. You all saw how his last venture faired. He wasted not only the valuable lives of our people but resources and time. Time that could have been spent on greater things."

"But Kaibo," Alaer begins but stops when Doran raises his hand to continue.

"Kaibo is but a mere ditch residing on the side of the road. He wished to test the strength of his plan, and it failed. They call him the Firestarter, and they are right. He did indeed start a fire. But he knows not how to fan it. He either blows too much or provides too much kindling." Doran takes a step closer. "We are not fire starters; we are fire raisers. And we will burn Baryon to the ground."

Alaer watches as Doran nods at the three of them and then turns on his heel and walks off.

"He sure is hard on himself, is he not?" Alaer jokes, gazing over at the two who seem to not share their teasing behavior.

"I worry for him," Julian sighs, "he has always been this way due to the prophecy, but father's latest failure seems to have pushed Doran down a dark path."

"A dark path?" Alaer questions.

"Perhaps dark is the wrong word to use. I admit, father is a horrible strategist, and Doran is clever. But darkness resides in his heart. Doran is brilliant, but he is impulsive, and that impulsive nature leads him towards the worst decisions. To make matters worse, he is stubborn. He listens to a degree but then shuts himself off."

“It is his confidence,” Alaer adds, “we all know that he holds himself up on his own self-made pedestal. It is a flaw, and yet, our brother wields it as sharply as any weapon.”

Julian sighs, “we can only pray that he remembers that such a weapon is double-edged.” The two of them turn and head down the other hallway, leaving Illinias standing there. And just as silently, he turns into a shadow and disappears as well.

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Doran closes his eyes, attempting to hear what his instructor yearns for him to hear. And yet, all he could hear was his own voice, the many formulating ideas, and the steps to get what he wanted. He saw the possibilities and their outcomes. He calculated the risks and weighed them against the consequences. He knew –

“Doran!” the woman shouts, tapping his head in a reprimanding way.

He pouts, moving away and glancing up at her with a frown, “was that needed?”

“Were you doing as I asked? Or were you yet again envisioning your future.”

He shrugs, “if it helps me meditate, then what is the problem?”

She touches the crease along his forehead, “this, my dear, this is the problem. Meditation is meant to relax, not strain.”

“They are only there because of concentration.”

“Meditation does not require concentration.”

“Mother,” he groans, grabbing her hand and placing a kiss on her hand, “this is not necessary.”

Nazien takes a seat in front of her child. Out of her two children, Doran looked the most like her. From his silky black hair to his piercing sooty eyes, even the way his brow would twitch when he was unnerved, all her. Julian had taken more from his father and even from her father, red eyes and pale skin.

“It is. If you do not learn this now, then I fear you will never calm when you are pronounced Lord.” She pauses, closing her eyes before saying, “your father told me that you yet again antagonized him.”

“He does so love to dramatize things, does he not?”

“He loves you,” she chides, “and you treat him like a burden.”

“I love him as well,” Doran answers honestly, “but I will not stand and coddle the man. He made a grave mistake, and all anyone can seem to say is, ‘it shall be okay.’ It will not, and it should not be.”

“Mistakes are part of life.”

“Mistakes are for the weak,” Doran snarls, getting to his feet. “Mistakes are what allowed Cimmerians to be run from ancestral grounds and corralled like goats for slaughter to one specific area by those who had no business gracing our shores. Mistakes are why we are dying. Mistakes, from what everyone says, is what a Cimmerian is.” He takes a step closer to his mother, “I am not a mistake.”

She places her hand against his cheek, “no one ever said you were, my love.”

He squeezes her hand but removes it. “If I am to lead, then I am whatever my people are. If they are mistakes, then I am. If they are weak and foolish, then I am too. Father has spirit. I will give him that. He has done an adequate job leading, but the Cimmerians need more than that. They have needed much more for a long time.”

“And you believe you are that change?” Nazien questions, taking a step back and looking up at him, “you believe that you, one man, can change all that has been set in place.”

“Our name will live on forever in the hearts of all,” he exclaims, reaching for her hands, but she avoids him.

“And what of your happiness? What of love?”

“What need do I have for happiness and love? They are trivial.”

“As a mother, I wish to see my children grow and live happy lives. I yearn for the days where I will be able to tell stories to grandchildren. But I am forced to watch as my eldest voluntarily grabs the world and places it on his back, so excited for it to break him.”

“If that is what it takes to bring back the pride we left behind, then I will shoulder that burden happily, you are right.” He takes a step forward and kisses his mother’s forehead. “You will not see your eldest with grandchildren. But you will see your eldest restore the glory that all Cimmerians should hold. That mother, is a promise.”

He turns and heads back inside, his gaze steady on the horizon.