

The Cost of Betrayal

He never slept well anymore.

Perhaps it was the fear. Perhaps it was the danger. Perhaps it was the ever-present weight of the responsibilities piled upon him, lurking at the back of his mind and teasing him into wakefulness and anxiety whenever he attempted to drift off into peaceful oblivion.

Whatever it was, it kept him alert for days on end, stealing the sleep away from his eyelids in what felt like an endless battle waged over the territory of his mind.

He couldn't understand it; he had worked for this— even lied, cheated and betrayed to get here, so why was he so unhappy now that he had finally achieved his goal?

He rose from his bed in a frustrated rage to stand beside the window, hanging open to allow the fresh night air in. He leaned over the sill, gazing out over the castle walls and beyond to the fields and hills of his kingdom.

Was it wrong that he would trade it all away for a single night of peaceful sleep? He hadn't experienced one in weeks, and it was taking its toll; making him irritable and irrational and unfair, unfit for the rule he had thrust himself upon. Only today, he had ordered one of his attendants executed for a simple annoyance, which on a better day would have earned the poor man a simple gesture of dismissal from the king's presence. By the time he had recovered his senses and come to regret the decision made in a split second of pure anger, it was too late; the unfortunate man was under a thin layer of dirt outside the castle walls, in a place that should have been reserved for the bodies of traitors and thieves— like himself. The thought crept unbidden into his sleep-deprived mind, and he immediately shoved it roughly away.

He deserved this. He had worked for it, hadn't he? For years, he had toiled and schemed behind the scenes, suffered his share of betrayals and downfalls, until finally he had burst out of the shadows, claiming his rights and securing what he deserved.

So why had the victory felt so hollow? The people loved him, far more than they had the cruel, tyrannical brother he replaced. They had freedom now from the power that had so long kept them in chains, and many of them owed him their lives. So why did he feel hunted every time he stepped foot out of the castle? The faces of the grateful villagers around him only served to inspire a primal fear in his chest, a terror that urged him to run and take shelter, their glances turned predatory in his perception. His inability to shake off this senseless phobia had kept him locked within the castle walls, confined to his rooms for days on end, with only his most trusted friends allowed within the

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barred doors.

He turned away from the view projected before him, shutting the window with a resounding clack. Every open window or door seemed an invitation, a danger. He returned to sit on the bed, his head between his hands. It was only a matter of time, he knew, before they turned against him, as he had managed to rouse them against his brother. They would find something to be angry about, and their ranks would rise up once again— or perhaps it would take only a single person to assassinate him in his bed, as he had done his brother, slitting his throat with their father's knife while he held his hand over his mouth to muffle any sound the dying man might emit. He could still feel the stickiness of the warm blood on his fingers, along with the shadow of the satisfaction and elation the act had brought that had long since faded.

Now only the coldness of fear remained, seeping into his bones and causing him to shake despite the roaring fire. He shivered and pulled the bedclothes around his shoulders, then jumped at the sound of the doorhandle creaking as it turned.

He rose quickly to his feet, turning to face whoever it was that was disturbing his obsessive musings, relaxing slightly as the heavy oaken door groaned open to admit Edward— his closest friend and advisor. Edward grinned as he entered, taking in his friend's ridiculous appearance, standing in his nightclothes with the heavy quilt draped around his shoulders; like a child playing dress-up as a king with the bedclothes for a cloak, rather than the real thing.

"Still can't sleep, my Lord?" Edward queried as he stepped further into the room, shutting the door firmly behind him, as he knew his friend preferred. The king shook his head in moody affirmative, retaking his seat on the bed. Edward dragged a chair over and sat straddling it backwards. "I've only come to say that the revolt in the east has been suppressed. Most of the townspeople surrendered easily, and the very few that were loyal to your brother have been taken into custody, and will be executed over the coming week."

The king's head snapped up. "No, now. There must be no time wasted. you must kill them now." Edward blinked in surprise. "But, my Lord, we cannot execute them until we have put them all on trial; some of them may be loyal to you, given the chance, and some might sell out other rebels in exchange for their freedom. That will be useful to us, in the long run..."

He trailed off as he saw his friend had been shaking his head vehemently throughout the entire duration of the speech.

He sighed heavily, knowing he would achieve no success by fighting his point. "Very well, my

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Lord. We will see to it that they are all executed by tomorrow morning."

This earned a more positive response, as the knot in the king's chest loosened slightly. By tomorrow morning, more of those who would oppose him, who might rise up and turn others against him, would be gone. This would temper the danger somewhat, though it would by no means abolish it altogether. For there were many more lurking about who might harbour hostility towards him in their breasts; they could be in the castle at this very moment, biding their time as they wormed their way into his affections and trust. He looked up into the concerned eyes of his companion. Even every friendship could be a ruse, a ploy to get within closer proximity to him, only to be within range for the time when they could pull out their weapon and strike. Had he not done the same to his own brother? If family could not be trusted, then who could?

But surely Edward, who fought by his side every step of the way and never once betrayed him, even when it would have been in his best interest— surely he would not turn his back on him now, in the height of his triumph? Unless he looked at the shivering, cowering mess of a man before him and thought that he was not fit for the post he had stolen; unless he thought that he himself could make a better ruler than the poor specimen before him, and was only waiting until he gained the people's trust before he took the role for himself.

It would be easy; he could let himself into his chamber whenever he pleased, could come and go as he liked; he had free rein of every corridor, every hallway and secret trapdoor in the castle. This smiling, friendly man before him could even now be hiding some sinister plot behind a front of concern and care for his king. He flinched as Edward's hand lifted— but he only placed it gently on the king's shoulder, squeezing it as he attempted to look his friend in the face.

"The unrest will all be put down soon enough. We'll take care of all of it, don't worry. Just rest up and get better so that once we've done all the work, you're ready to take over in earnest. You know you'll make a much better ruler than your brother ever was."

What was this? Was it flattery, getting under his skin and gently mocking him to keep him off guard? Was he trying to make sure the king stayed locked up and out of the way while he turned the tide of the common people in his favour, telling them they had a weak invalid for a king, one that could be easily overthrown, and another, better man set in his place? He shrunk away from the friendly touch, letting the hand drop away from his shoulder as he spoke.

"Just see to it that the executions are taken care of. I want all this over with as quickly as possible."

Edward nodded, sighing. "As you wish. I'll send the order out as soon as I leave the room. Is there

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anything else you require from me, sir?"

He flinched away from the simpering tone, one that only thinly masked the betrayal lurking beneath. Edward leaned forward, the fake concern ever more evident as it spread sickeningly across his face. "Is everything all right?"

Of course he would ask, testing the waters and trying to smooth things over to ascertain whether he needed to set his plan in motion more quickly, if his enemy had caught on. He shifted forward, his hand disappearing behind the back of his chair— the king imagined it sliding towards his waist, towards the dagger he always kept hanging there, the same style as the dagger he himself had used to extinguish his brother's last breath. Perhaps he was growing impatient, and wished to end this now.

The king's hand crept towards a slit in the bedframe, where he kept one of his many knives stashed away for situations just such as this one. If his brother had only thought to do the same, then that night may have ended very differently for them both. Edward leaned forward again, just as the king's hand closed around the hilt of the knife. He kept it frozen there, unwilling to draw any attention to it, exciting his opponent to early action.

"I could call someone, if you're feeling unwell."

He imagined his enemy rising from his chair, yelling out for an ally to run in and help him overpower the weak king cowering below him. He rose from the bed, using the movement to disguise his hand as he drew the dagger into it, keeping it concealed in his gaping sleeve.

"You must think me a fool and a coward," he hissed through his teeth.

"What?" Edward faked surprise well, but likely had his own dagger in hand now, and was waiting for the perfect moment to use it.

Suddenly, Edward rose, stepping towards the king— with an animal shout, he plunged the dagger into Edward's chest, directly into the heart. He raised his hand to deflect the blade he surely thought was coming towards him at the end of an upraised arm, but he met only empty air. He looked up confusedly, only to see that his friend's hands were both empty, devoid of weapons of any kind. He glanced downward, into Edward's eyes, which were filled with surprise and betrayal— genuine feelings, not fake facades put up to mask some sinister plot.

The king's own eyes filled with horror; he let the knife slip from his grip and clang to the cold stone floor, catching instead his friend's body as it fell, dropping to his knees beside it.

He sat there, cradling Edward's body on the floor, long after the last breath had seeped out along

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with the blood pooling around them, warming the cold stones.

And still sleep eluded him.