

The woods Zanarin walked were ancient; twisted up between craggy, moss bedecked rocks, roots netted across the earth like spider webs. Loam carpeted pathways dug into the earth by generations of deer and various woodland beasts criss-crossed through the trees on hidden highways well tread. A thick fog had moved inland from the shoreline and hung heavy between trunk and branch, shortening sight to a mere foot or two ahead.

Not ideal traveling conditions by any means.

The air was crisp and cool, a lingering, rich scent of rain and decaying leaves. Fall was a pleasant time of year when the weather held out, but Zanarin was damp from trudging through the fog and weary of walking. He blew a strand of fiery hair out of his face and scowled.

Zanarin was faced with two options; he could try and make camp here, out in the open or see what lay a bit further ahead. Either option was low on his list of favorite activities.

"I'm not out here to play it safe." He quietly reminded himself, pushing forward despite how dew clung to his lashes and attempted to slick his hair to his face. A fire would have been nice.

Someplace warm... mulled wine.

He sighed and tossed damp coppery hair out of his freckled face.

When not on duty he often wandered; taking pleasure in seeing new places, meeting new people. This jaunt had taken him down an unfamiliar coast with little in the way of populated city. What there was of towns were small fishing villages and long abandoned settlements. There were some he avoided on purpose, such as the cliffside towns of shore goblin. They were not hard to handle but he was but one and their goodwill could shift with the tide. A rowdy lot that even a skilled swordsman could find too much to handle.

The human, or as they were commonly called the fae-touched, villages were much the same. The forest he traversed was bent and gnarled by seaside storms, more open and strange compared to the woods he knew back home. There was beauty in their difference and though the day had brought less than welcome weather he at least was grateful that the fog had not heralded a storm.

"I'd be in trouble then..." Zanarin chuckled dryly.

His chuckle died off as he came around a natural bend in the path and crested a hilltop. He stopped sharply in his tracks.

Before him rose a somber gray archway, half hidden by fog. A wrought iron gate half hung from decaying hinges and a partially fallen wall disappeared into the mist in either direction, gray stone weathered and pockmarked with moss and lichen.

"...Ruins...? All the way out here?"

There had once been a crest carved into the archway, long worn away by time and difficult to make out. Whoever had owned these lands was long since gone, even the roads to it lost to the march of growing things and the passage of years. But for a place like this to be out in the middle of nowhere, far off from any sign of town or even a village... It was odd.

Zanarin approached, bent down and slipped under the partially collapsed gate. He paused to look closer at the swirls of iron, taking in shapes of birds and strange flowers growing from what looked like bones. Interesting, he thought to himself, brow quirked. It was not often that he found such motifs outside of shadowshifter cities. Few other cultures were so worshipful of death and decay. What an odd place indeed.

He looked out into the fog ahead.

From what he could see of the courtyard it was massively overgrown. Weeds and plant life of all sorts poking out between cobblestones, trees growing on the near side of the walls, a couple of them on top of them, their roots making a twisting net down to the ground below as if trying to anchor crumbling stone and keep them from full collapse.

There appeared to be an old keep ahead, shrouded by mist and difficult to make out. Multiple buildings from the look of it, sprawling about the gated courtyard like a child's tossed about blocks. The largest appeared in disrepair, but not nearly so bad as one of the smaller that had been partially collapsed by the weight of a tree growing on its roof.

"Haven't found ruins like this in a long time..." Zanarin murmured, eyes wide, heart thudding. There was something to be said for cautiousness but this was intriguing and his curiosity needed to be sated. How long ago was the last time he had come across something like this? Far too long and with work as stressful as it had become he needed all the distraction he could manage.

He kept a hand on the cool leather of his sword hilt, meandering deeper into the compound, past smaller out buildings. Peeking in their windows he quickly assessed whether it would be worth it to go in and chance the roof squashing him. Most were either mostly empty or had nothing in them he would value enough to risk it. Dark husks, empty as the shed exoskeleton of a spider.

There was not a single sign of anything humanoid having come through this area in who knew how long. From how undisturbed the plant life was it appeared there had been little in the way of any life passing through.

That, Zanarin decided, was a good sign.

This sort of place could have attracted bandits and for all that he was skilled he was not immune to a trap or ambush. One shadowshifter against many was not a fair fight, no matter his skill or talents. He would rather not contest with anyone if he could help it.

His boots made a soft clack on the cobblestone, then the stair leading up to the massive door of the main building. These doors were in much the same condition as the main gate and fallen leaves hissed across the entryway, disappearing into dark halls beyond. Zanarin pushed through the doorway, craning back his head to look at the high ceiling above.

Vaulted and massive, the architecture within was severe but with an eerie fae elegance. Support beams were riddled with ornate carvings, windows were massive with colored glass and metal patterns of briars that even in the dim light and dust seemed to glow. Moldering tapestries and carpeting covered parts of the walls and floors and at one point he came upon the wreckage of furniture as he strolled through, some almost appearing to have been smashed to bits against the stone walls.

Dust and withered leaves swirled across the floor in his passing, his footsteps echoing back at him. Another stairwell, massive and forked somewhat like the head of a bull lay before him, dappled light from holes in the roofing far, far above bleached parts of the old wood and stone steps. Arches beneath each fork led to what appeared to be other large chambers; likely a dining hall or perhaps even a throne room.

Zanarin whistled.

Above the wind hissed through holes in the roofing, a crisp breeze beginning to stir into something more worrisome.

"Hm... well this is shelter." Zanarin mused, brow furrowed. He wandered aimlessly, taking in trinkets left behind, decaying paintings and the state of what had once been a majestic keep. The wind howled suddenly and the ceiling creaked ominously.

"And it sounds like more than fog is moving in."

It couldn't hurt to stay the night here.

First of all he would need to find a fire place and in a keep like this he had to imagine they were plentiful. With the last dregs of daylight to spare Zanarin dug deeper into the downstairs, slipping into a massive dining hall with a long table and high chandelier that had managed to stand up to the test of time. A beautiful ornate affair, its once shiny bronze surface long since aged and dulled and its sconces dull with dust.

Zanarin kept out from under it and against the wall.

There was a grandiose fire pit on one wall, big enough a man could walk in and not have to bend. Too big for what Zanarin wanted but a possibility. Above it hung a large painting, worn and hard to make out from wear and tear. He could vaguely see a figure, ghostly through aged varnish. Likely the lord of the keep if he were to chance a guess.

There was a name imprinted into the ornate bronze frame:

Roslin Embyr.

A fancy name for a fancy lord of a fancy keep.

What features he could make out were vague; dark short curled hair, a somber face. It was too much like trying to look at a reflection in a fogged mirror and he gave up trying to puzzle it out. Turning from the painting he walked deeper in, peeked his head into what had once been the kitchen; rusting pots still hanging, dusty porcelain still sitting in the cupboards. There was even a pot in the hearth as if it were still hosting a stew for that evening's dinner, charred and crumbling wood beneath it. Whatever had happened here they had not brought anything with them if they left nor had anyone pillaged the place.

It was as if everyone had just disappeared into thin air.

Wrinkling his nose Zanarin left the silent kitchen and lonely dining hall behind and roved back out and across to the other archway, peering into a dark room.

A library. Musty and full of the scent of aging parchment and leather. He ducked his head out and sneezed. Perhaps best not to go in there for now. Maybe later, after he left the door open for a time and let it all air out. The last thing he needed was to be coughing up dust all night. Only way to go now was up.

He abandoned the library and attempted the stairs, glad to find that they held up to his weight with minimal creaking. Nothing shifted or stirred in a manner that would have alarmed him and as he wandered upward he listened to the wind puffing against the sides and roof of the keep. An eerie noise, that. It set the roof to creaking and Zanarin kept half an eye on the ceiling once he made it to the second story hall.

The floors here were relatively stable, old stonework standing up to damage from water and wind. Parts of the roofing were gone and he could tell that when it rained the stair likely turned into a tiny waterfall. There were a handful of rooms off shooting from the hall, as well as what looked to be storage closets. Most of the doors were still intact and closed.

He adjusted his pack and began to peek into rooms.

Most he found were in disarray and damaged, often from windows broken out and elements getting in or the ceiling collapsing, so much debris folded inward like cards.

Then he came to one with a most ornate door; much like the gate there was a motif of birds, plantlife and bones carved into it but unlike the gate it still looked almost untouched. A beautifully crafted door that to his eye, looked almost like new. He pushed on the honey colored door till it swung inward and stepped into what could only have been a study.

The interior had survived better than anywhere else in the keep. The carpet in faded blues and golds was not moldering away yet, nor did any of the furniture look like it had been left to rot. Dust covered everything in a fine sheen but otherwise he was surprised to find it so intact.

A nice sized fireplace of natural rock complete with a hearth of rough hewn stone across the way and above it there was the skull of a massive ram, netted black leather hanging below and above it like a curtain, bits of bone and glass beads woven into the mass. He had never seen something that size before, but it looked like a ram, or sort of given the teeth were a touch off, but the horns were wickedly curved and appeared like those he oft saw on flocks back home. Such a strange thing; a ritual piece of some kind?

"Damn..." he hummed, investigating the state of the fireplace and checking the flume.

"It will most definitely do."

It was a simple task to dust out the room, tunic pulled up over his nose, quiet cursing falling from his lips. Once he wasn't sneezing with every breath he deemed it good enough. It was just one night, all he needed was the bare essentials for a restful sleep out of the cold and wet.

Casting a look about he came to realize there were many strange things in the room; stones and twisted pieces of wood, a few books in languages he did not recognize, bones and skulls of many kinds. He left those be.

It did not take him long to find enough wood and tinder to start a proper fire and by the time he had the wind was truly howling and the whipping winds brought with them the thud of falling rain.

"Stroke of luck." He thought aloud, head tipped back to look at the darkened sky through a hole in the roof. Zanarin hurried back to the study, slipping in with his armful and set to getting the fire started.

Time slipped between his fingers between striking the fire and readying his bedding for the night. Dinner was from a small magicked thermos, simple rabbit and vegetable soup he had made the morning before and kept hot till now. He sipped it in the warm light of the fire and listened to the thundering of rain on the roof, drops tinkling against the windows. Zanarin thumbed the pocket shrine that hung from his belt, silently saying his thanks to Life and Death for this shelter and warm meal. His night would have been an uneasy one if he had not happened upon these ruins.

Cast orange by the firelight, the skull drew his eye once more and he stood to examine it closer, the heat from the hearth a pleasant sensation on his thighs. There were what looked like runes carved into the bone between empty sockets. Strange markings that made no sense to him but drew his interest.

A finger traced them, following their form and he wondered what their meaning could possibly be?

Pain shot up his digit and Zanarin pulled back with a hiss.

Blood beaded at the tip, a dribble of it smeared across the runes. He frowned and sucked upon his finger, muffled a curse that was bubbling up from his chest.

Bone splinter he figured. Shouldn't have handled it without his gloves. He should not touch anything without gloves on, given the state of the place. Stupid slip up. Zanarin scowled to himself and shook his hand, the pain from the cut worrying at him like a sliver til his natural healing sealed the wound and his finger was whole once more.

The room steadily darkened, what light that came through the windows grew weary and faded. Zanarin decided it was time to rest. Shedding eyepatch, tunic and coat he made himself comfortable, sword laid out against his side and shoes still on in case of an emergency. The blankets bundled around him, the fire warmed his back and he grinned to himself.

Very lucky...

With the wind and rain to lull him to sleep Zanarin dozed off.

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Inky blackness, flickering light like a candle shaded by thin cloth. There was a face, unconventional but handsome in a way, framed by short, wavy brown hair, intense pale eyes rimmed dark, as if the delicate skin was bruised. His body was obscured in dark flowing clothes that billowed about him like foam on water.

"I'm so cold."

His voice was thick, aching.

"So cold, so alone."

Those pale eyes were pleading. They called to something in Zanarin, a strange yearning deep in his gut. In this dream place he took a tentative step forward and held out a hand in welcome. The figure reached out; hand darkened and clawed, fingers unnaturally long. They grasped desperately towards him.

"I need you!" He howled.

They clasped about his neck, drew him in as the figure twisted, grew strange and inhuman.

Bore down upon him with hunger and a great weight that he could not push off. Engulfed him like a dark wave, till nothing was left but inky dark.

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Zanarin awoke with a start, mind foggy, and sprawled among a tangle of blankets.

An orange glow illuminated the room he lay in, warm and bright from the fire and the occasional flash of what must have been lightning turned the walls bright white off and on. Quite a storm had brewed up while he had slept and the air was laced with a tang of ozone, earth and copper. He lay listening, heavy-limbed and groggy. His heart thudded hard in his breast and each breath came short and sharp.

Such a strange dream...

His good eye roved the dark room, groggily taking it in. Lightning flashed and the whole room brightened like it was full daylight. He paused, blinked. The skull above the hearth was gone.

Nowhere to be seen, not on the floor, not broken in pieces or misplaced somehow, just gone. A skull that size could not just up and walk away! Zanarin scooted up, pushed aside his blankets. He wobbled. What was with this fatigue? It was as if all of his energy had been drained from him like water from a broken pot, as if he had worked himself to the bone and was all but ready to collapse. Had he slept that poorly? He frowned and took up his sword. He listened.

Thunder, a steady pounding of heavy rain and shuddering gales of wind. The old house creaked and groaned but none of it sounded like footsteps or sneaking about.

He stood with a weary grunt and walked to the door, nudged it open with a foot and peered out into the darkness. Black halls, rain trickling down through holes in the roof. Occasional flashes of lightning revealed empty halls and no intruders.

Had he just misplaced where the skull had been in his memory? Zanarin scratched the back of his neck, frowned. He could have sworn...

He closed the door and turned back toward the fire and its warmth. He approached his tangled bedding and swept one shaky hand back through his hair. It was fine, just the storm rattling him. How silly that he should be jumpy because of a little lightning.

His feet swept out from under him and he crashed down onto his back, all the air in his chest expelled in a woosh. There was no time to react and he lay there wide eyed and wheezing on the ground, sword skittered across the floor and out of reach.

Something pulled him in closer, whispering filled the room. Strange words the likes of which he had never heard before. The hands that grasped him held him with steely strength and yanked him forward on his ass. He twisted slightly, made a feeble grab for his sword, tried to call upon his shadows, to shift, anything. He was tapped out, empty. Fatigue settled over him, his squirming turned sluggish. Zanarin huffed for breath, grabbed at the carpet to stall how quickly it forced him backward into the study.

From deep shadows that the firelight could not quite displace, something took shape; a dark twisted mass, far bigger than Zanarin and crowned by the missing skull, which it appeared to be using as a head of sorts. The sockets were dark, eyeless and yet the jaw moved as if it were a living creature and needed to draw breath to live. Its mass twisted and shivered, sheened like crow feathers dipped in blood. Dark and eerie.

Tentacles were wrapped tight about his ankles and calves and drew him in closer till the creature's massive head lay just above his belly and its tendrils had locked around his legs and over his hips.

"So waaaaarm..." it groaned, voice a rumbling purr.

This is it, he thought, frantically trying to squirm free, this is where I die. Zanarin had not put much thought into death, into the how or why he would shed his body and move onward. This was far from an ideal death; panicked, possibly violent and horrible but it would be his.

That did not stop him desperately clinging to a chance at life.

He snarled weakly, fatigue laying over his body like a wet wool blanket dampening his struggles, made them useless. More and more tentacles wrapped around him, sliding in past his clothes and popped the buttons; they were frigid against his bare skin. Oddly pliant and soft, they gripped at him as though desperate for the heat of his body and pulled aside cloth in rough yanks. The massive head of the creature loomed over him and the bone jaw opened,

tentacle-like tongues sliding across what it had bared on his torso and along his cheek. Lacking in spit or slime they trailed along his skin, tingling left in its wake. They had a soft feel to them, not unpleasant.

Zanarin cursed viciously, tried to shove that huge maw away only to have his hand captured and forced down against the floor.

"So warm... so soft..."

If the creature was speaking its mouth was not moving. Zanarin could see nothing controlling it, nothing to suggest this beast was not acting of its own accord.

"The hell...hell are you doing?!" Zanarin gasped, writhing far as the grasping tentacles would allow, their hold tight and by Death's Mercy he could not shift free! No matter how he tried to focus he could not call forth his shadows or break free. It was as if he had lost control of his body. "Off me, you lout!"

His chest lay exposed to the slip of long tendril-like tongues, thick and prehensile, eager in how they curled and caressed. Nimble tips curled around his nipples, teased them to sensitive points.

"No, need!" The creature insisted wordlessly again, its tongue curling about his neck, cupping his cheek. "Need warmth, need you!"

Its voice sounded familiar and Zanarin recalled the dream; that strange somber man, changing, warping. His heart thudded in his breast, struggling to catch his breath as they tightened about his throat.

"Need, mine..." the beast huffed, pawing at his hip with a long, spidery hand. "Waited so...long." Tentacles passed over his hips, inner thighs; pressed instantly along the seam of his pants as if desperate for the heat there. Zanarin rasped in confusion, hips yanked up by strong tendrils, others groping over him in greedy massaging passes, not leaving an inch undiscovered.

Arousal sparked in his belly like a rogue wildfire; unwelcome and disastrous.

The beast snarled to itself, huffing coppery scented breath into his face, a tendril playing along his parted lips as he struggled for air.

"Beautiful...warm...MINE!"

That came out in near a moan, punctuated by one of those dark tongues thrusting past his lips and down into his throat like a bastardization of a deep kiss. Zanarin could do nothing but arch and gag, followed by a ragged moan as the tendrils below ground aggressively at his sex through his trousers. He might die tonight... but it may only be a little death.

He wasn't sure if that was a good thing.

It slipped down his throat, writhing and slippery, drug across his long, flattened tongue, across his teeth and back out again in a sensual slide. Zanarin gasped and shuddered.

Air came back to him; tasting of copper, woodsmoke and ozone. He gasped in breath after shuddery breath, glassy eyed and unable to stop shaking. The insistent touches had turned to gripping, pulling at seams till fabric ripped loudly over the crackle of burning wood. Cool air passed across his loins, a shock followed by the press of warming tendrils to his inner lips. Stroking touches drew his hips up, drew soft garbled moans before he could manage to bottle them.

Purring, the dark creature hunched over him, contorting itself in a manner that suggested it might not have any real bones. It loomed above him, pulling at his ruined trousers, spreading

them so that it might explore his naked sex further. Its tendrils oozed over him, a strange sensation for while they seemed almost like jelly they were much firmer and left no residue behind. They conformed to him, massaging over soft pink lips, across the jut of his clit till his thighs trembled and his breath caught ragged in his throat.

The tip of one played along his opening, collected a drop of fluid and smeared it along his clit in teasing circles till his hips jolted up into the touch. Zanarin bit his bottom lip, agitation buzzing like bees in his blood but he was not that surprised that he was aroused. This creature was hitting on far more of his kinks than he would have liked and it appeared determined to keep him jarred and helpless.

Its purring filled his ears, tendrils slipped between the lips of his sex, grinding up and along his pearl, wicking up fluid till they shone. His hips humped at the air, trapped thighs straining, belly taut. Pleasure skittered up and down his body in sharp pops and crackles, a fluttering in his gut that wound Zanarin tighter.

Pressing the tip to his opening it began to push in.

The beast shuddered above him, snarled low in its throat. Long fingers kneaded at his sides, tentacles grasping him tight. Oddly they had warmed since coming in contact with him and now they were almost too hot. He was smothered by heat, humid and intense. The tendril pushing in was narrow at the tip; just a flutter inside with each inward push. Yet pressure steadily built, expanding within him till his walls strained and a ragged sob burst from him. That was just one. "Hush, Pet." It rumbled down at him, the tone of its deep voice low and soothing, as if it were trying to calm an agitated animal. This was not in the least soothing.

Its many tongues rolled across his chest and throat, another tendril pressing to his stretched sex. "Hush and help me feel alive again..."

Cursing under his breath Zanarin stared down between them; all those thick, slithering cocks pushed their way in, some prying his other passage open, lubing soft muscles along the way. One, two, three...! He quickly lost track of how many had been crammed in.

They wormed and flexed, pressing deep enough to tickle at his cervix with each inward thrust and all of them relentlessly ground against each other through thin walls.

He had no respite, no moment where he was not crammed full.

They moved in tandem, certain ones thrusting in, others rolling back out. Back and forth, deep as they could go each time. They worked him like a well oiled machine. Fluid coated his thighs and dripped down the curve of his buttocks, soaked into the ruins of his shredded trousers. Ecstasy seized him as all at once the tendrils curled inward, knotting almost within the core of his splayed body. He shook, warbled listlessly.

"Ah Pet..." the beast sighed, grinding in deep. "Fate has been so kind to give you to me. Such a beauty to wake me from my slumber!"

The longer the creature was within him the more eloquently it spoke, as if this closeness garnered energy and gave it back its wits. Those long tongues curled about his neck again, a purr puffed against his chest just a touch shy of scalding.

"Any other and I would have just stolen energy via their death...but you, my Pet, you are exquisite!" It punctuated its praise with another rough grind, sending Zanarin over the edge once more, a pleasure so intense his legs locked and quivered, toes curled in his boots.

He cursed and sobbed for breath, gripped the carpet with all his might.



Zanarin found it near impossible to think of anything beyond how full he was, how they twisted and writhed within and ground against his walls with perfect precision. It was maddening. His thoughts rattled and rolled, loose in his head and ungraspable.

Upward he was lifted by his hips, till their loins were flush and the beast could leisurely pump in and out, cocks curling together, twitching in the clench of his achy sex. Climax came again and again now, cascading over him in electric pulses.

"Oh Death!!!" He howled.

His god could not help him here.

Massive hands grasped his hips and kept them up, allowed him to dangle in the cage of its hands and tentacles like a rag doll. It crushed into him, filling him to the very brim, till he was sure he might just split from the sheer intensity of the inward push. A final pulse, a snarling cry from his captor and instantly seed flooded him, gushing out past the tangle of tentacles and onto the carpet below.

He twitched and trembled, eyes wide and mouth agape. Every inch of his body tingled, sex throbbing and convulsing through aftershocks that milked the many lengths relentlessly. His fingers flexed and clenched, hands shaking so hard he would have dropped anything put in them.

The beast sighed, tongues lolling and the long body hunched close over his was now so warm Zanarin could barely stand the heat against his flushed skin. Tentacles and fingers both traced his sides, massaged his hips till the trembles had eased some and his muscles unlocked. Its withdrawal was slow, tentacle by tentacle till Zanarin was empty and trapped seed oozed out in lewd globs and strings.

The beast took in its work with a rumbling chuckle and an aura of intense smugness. It sat back on its haunches with hands folded before it. It must have been pleased with the sight of its conquest. A hand slid along his thigh, traced the outer lips of his sex. Two fingers curled in, catching up some of its leavings and pulled them back out with agonizing leisure to slide them across Zanarin's lower stomach in dark swirls.

Writing. It was writing something.

Zanarin panted, brow furrowed in confusion.

"Worry not, Pet." The beast said.

There came a sizzle and the markings burned into his skin, down into his womb. What seed had not seeped out drew back in, sucked up until his belly bulged some; taut and achy. Zanarin shook, clenched his teeth. The burn and pressure soon faded into pleasant tingles and then eased away completely as if it had never been. His belly flattened once more.

The beast purred and pulled his hips closer.

"I will not trap you here... but you will come when I call, my beauty." It breathed, stroked his cheek with a hand that could easily crush his skull. "You will come and replenish me."

It leaned down and drew its tongues across his cheek and lips in a semblance of a kiss. Zanarin had no energy to disagree, murmuring incoherently in return.

Exhaustion seeped into his very core, limbs heavy as bags of sand, unable to keep his head up. The creature positioned him on the floor by the fire and lay along his side, hands and tendrils curled around him like a child unwilling to let go of a beloved doll. Zanarin couldn't keep his eyes

open; lashes flickered, spots of light, darkness, the sensation of roving limbs touching him all over.

He woke to silence.

The fire lay dead, smoldering embers that barely held a hint of warmth and blankets lay tangled about him. He sat up, peered down at himself and found his clothing unmarred. Not a single seam was popped, not a single stain.

A dream...?

He looked about the room wide eyed. Everything was lightly glowing in the gray dawn that peeked through high windows. Nothing knocked over, nothing out of place. His sword lay by his side.

Zanarin frowned and glanced at the hearth. No ram skull but there looked to have never been one there, just an old shield with what looked to be a motif of a ram and briars. It was finely coated with dust.

"... what a dream..." He murmured and scrubbed at his face with a hand.

For all that it was a dream he was raw and tender, his sex swollen still as if he had been teased and tormented the whole night. Perhaps he had, at least in his dreams and Zanarin rubbed his thighs restlessly together. That had been a particularly wild wet dream if that was what it had been. It must be; there was nothing to suggest what he had experienced the night before had been anything but overly realistic dreams; no scent, no markings. Zanarin checked himself over, scoured the room.

Nothing.

Frowning at the floor he decided it best to gather his things and head out. Lingered here left an uneasy ache in the pit of his stomach. He had never left a place with such haste as he would leave this old keep. Once everything had been packed he had all but run down the stairs and out into the overcast morning. The world was cast in pewter and off whites and the air hung heavy with the perfume of rain and loam. He trotted down the trail for a space before the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. He cast a glance over his shoulder.

For a moment he thought he saw something in the doorway; tall, dark.

He froze and stared, heart hammering so fast it might as well have bounced off his ribs and right out his throat. Something there? No it couldn't be... He blinked and it was gone.

Zanarin grit his teeth and shook his head.

No time for lingering over spooks and tricks of the eye. No time to ponder if dreams truly were dreams and not memory. He slipped past the broken gate and into the woods once more, leaving the rotten place to its decay.

Zanarin did not glance back again.