

## The Final Thrust

The War in the South was inevitable. Yet, no one knew of the ramifications it could cause.

The Necromancer Council of Ulther was beaten back on every front, the leaders of the living world banding together, their resources, their soldiers, putting aside their differences in order to survive. But with every victory, came severe losses that only bolstered the Necromancers' power. What else could such villains desire? World conquest? Immortality? The divine right to rule over a people they can play with like the Gods? It was a direct offense over the spirit of freedom. Over the control of one's own body, even if that body was a dead one.

The Monarchies called up their serfs and house-trained knights. The Republics too, bringing in as many as they could through mandatory conscriptions and the promise of wiping debts away for military service. Theocratic institutions of all faiths called it the greatest of all holy wars, for the death of them all meant none could worship any Gods. And those who were merely nomadic or tribally static helped in the ways they could, materially, or through rowdy although effective soldiers.

The war was entering its fourth year. Societies had collapsed, but there was still hope. The necromancers had brought a permanent winter, and the world struggles with

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a cold more severe than even their Ice Age ancestors once dealt with. It has only been a few months, but the living struggle, and soon, the enemy will win if something is not done.

Even so, there remains a spark of hope. To continue their spell of an eternal winter, the Council of the Dead remains in a single spot, the equator of the world, and must continually maintain concentration to keep the snow and chill coming.

From the North, the Winter King approaches with his army, his coat made of the warmest materials any human has ever known. King Ranly the Brave marches hundreds of miles on a one-way trip, the supplies he brought along pragmatic for his army, and his people will starve because of it. For those who survive, he can only hope they appreciate the sacrifices made.

Before the snow was too bad, carrier eagles from allied leaders brought to him information regarding the Necromancer's stronghold, the place of power for their spell and the undead that wander the lands. Ranly was a strategist, possibly one of his more impressive strong suits. However, even he was stumped upon seeing the defenses. A horde of reanimated corpses, and magic being used to make former soldiers, ones with combat experience, into undead cohorts capable of fighting just as they were alive. Send the chaff to tire the regular trips, then the experienced fiends to clean up the rest. A most terrible conundrum.

But King Ranly saw something none of the others had, and with the snow too harsh for carrier eagles, it would be his exodus to the south with his attack plans as the world's last great plan.

Atrocities were committed in the journey. Peasants were relieved of supplies as dictated by commanding quartermasters of the Northmen. They did it out of necessity, or at least, that's what they told themselves.

Before they started their trek, the snow was light. Now, with their destination a mere hundred miles away, the carts and supply trains struggled to even find the roads, making their own as ice formed on the snow. Fires were near constant, and the mood was somehow still high thanks to the overabundance of alcohol and mood-altering plants that had been harvested and dried before this winter arrived.

The King waits with eager breaths in his coach. Brown, long hair, a thick beard of the same color. Every man was banned from shaving or cutting his hair unless in dire circumstances. It kept in the heat. A crooked nose, a strong jaw, his regal cape off to his left, holding the seat that should've been for his wife. He gave a prayer that she was still safe in their castle. Even now, he imagined a warm fire in the cobblestone hearth, their house banner above it, a purple base with a white wolf in the center.

A man in the opposite corner seat from him being the only one allowed to be inside. The Court Alchemist, Kalvan, whose magics and potions have been invaluable in keeping the elements at bay. Kalvan had demonstrated his loyalty several times over the course of both men's lives. Their childhoods brought them together, their vocations broke them apart, but in a sense of irony, it brought them back together.

The mage looked to the King, his mismatched eyes of blue and gray staring deep into the monarch's soul. "We're getting close, my lord." His voice simply melted away Ranly's worries. "The snow, it's getting-"

"Worse. I know." The King spoke with the tenets of a bear. When his voice was heard, all silenced themselves not only from his authority, but just how much the cadence overwhelmed all words.

A thick hand pulled the drapes aside, showing men on horses and direwolves, the guard of the King, those most trusted to protect him. Not like he'd need any help, assassins were gone, and a stray undead was no match for his skill. But the mounts the riders rode on, they distracted him, drawing his eyes back to Kalvan. "I miss Valerye."

"Ah yes. It is unfortunate that age took her before she could give one last great fight. I could see it now, her wolvern fangs around a necromancer's throat."

The King sneered. "She was a good girl. She fought in many battles. A direwolf and their rider are not to be trifled with. Valerye deserved peace after the unwavering loyalty she gave me, and the Kingdom." He examined his hands, picking at his fingers with chewed on nails. "I never thought I could think of an animal so highly."

Kalvan made a noise, something between a grunt and a laugh as he readjusted himself in his seat. "We've bred them for loyalty sire, they love food, they love companionship, and the females – they're faithful to the calvary and their... 'husbands.'"

A knuckle was forcibly popped, nearly breaking the finger. "Almost unnaturally so. The pups only need basic amounts of training, and they're practically as good as their parents. Speaking of breeding, how goes it with Valerye's replacement?"

The mage shook his head, causing his disappointment to spread around the inside of the coach. "It's going okay. I've been trying to use what spare resources we have to make something that could help them, er, *get into the mood?* I administered a few drops last night at their pens, and, well..."

"That's why the howling was so intense last night," the King said with hearty laughter. "I suppose we'll just have to wait and see what happens in a few months. It'll feel weird going into battle as a foot soldier."

There was a curious look on Kalvan's face, his lips twisting. "I'm sure someone else could let you borrow their direwolf? I understand a horse might not be your style."

"Please. You were born and raised in the same lands as I, and I do not remember cultivating a tradition of tearing a wolf from their rider. They *are* loyal, but not to everyone."

Kalvan cleared his throat. "I did not mean to cause offense. I just believe our chances are greatest when each member of the forces are at their highest readiness. That includes you, My King. I could brew a concoction that might allow a temporary severance? So that you may ride into battle for possibly, the last time?"

The Royalman was more insulted than he let on, but he always appreciated advice. "I'll be okay. Don't worry-"

Both men held their armrests tight, the carriage coming to a sudden stop. Balling his hand into a fist, King Ranly rapt against the wood above his head. "What is the meaning of this? We still have daylight left before camp."

The door to the Monarch's right opened, without his permission. It was not the face of an enemy, but a cold-stained face of a foot soldier. Such royal protocols had been abandoned out here, discipline sidelined for the simple fact that death for them all would be the fate of the world if they did not fight. But that didn't mean they had to enjoy it. "Milord, the... uh, the road is out."

"A bane to you and whatever remains of your family." Kalvan spoke first. "Every bloody road is out!"

"Calm yourself." The King's word did much. He turned to the soldier. "Explain it better this time. Take a moment if we are not set upon by undead."

The trespasser took in a deep breath, letting a whiff of steam come into the carriage, along with the stench of unwashed teeth. The cold was being let in, and the warmth sticks made by Kalvan were losing their efficiency by the second. "General

Carlisle is trying his best to read the maps. There's... a huge layer of snow and ice that breaks the levelness. We're going to have to take a detour."

A headache came to the King's head, his chest hurting and anxiety took control for a brief second. "We were already late getting out of home. I don't know if the men can take any more abuse from marching into the night again and again."

"And we're running low on the stimulants. Soon enough we're going to have men not very inebriated realizing they've eaten only bread for the last month. If they don't see the meaning in their life, they'll think the same for the rest of us."

The court alchemist's warnings were both annoying, yet effective. Ranly stared at him, holding his pause as he brought himself from the carriage and onto the heavy snow. The flakes from the sky were already battering his eyelashes. Could... eyeballs... freeze in this weather?

"See what I mean ser?" The soldier yelled through the wind. "We need to go forward, and we... we can't!"

It made more sense now. There was a giant snowbank in front of them, one that could be climbed over, in fact the King was taller than the bank, but it went on for miles, and the carts could not all be lifted up and on top of it. There was a bend that allowed



them to keep going in the general direction, but, it'd be an accursed detour, one that might end up losing them the whole war.

A giant man with furs under and over his intimidating metal armors approached, getting stuck in the snow with each step. There was no way to mistake this person for anyone other than General Carlisle himself. White hair, and pearl skin, he looked like a man fighting for his life on his deathbed. Eyes wide and active, unnervingly so, but a darkened veneer was across his face. "My King!" he shouted loudly and proudly, "The road's fucked!"

*Very astute of you,* the King thought. Suddenly, he discerned that the alchemist was now behind him.

The Commander tried to unscroll the hard-clenched papers in his hand, the wind eager to stop such notions, almost like the breeze itself had a master controlling it. "Godsdamned! To put it short, we'll need to follow the bend. We're stuck right on a river crossing, so, I say we just follow the river. The meetup point is the capital of King Valos, and this river should take us right there."

"And how much time will we lose?" The King's words were firm. The kind of tone where any answer gets you hung.

But Carlisle was the only man here with the gall to respond with the truth. "One week."

Both of the King's hands came to rest at the top of his head. They'd miss the battle by two days. "Is... isn't it possible they'd wait for us?"

A palm touched his shoulder, Kalvan's words in his ear. "My lord, they made it clear what the plan would be. They'll make the attack with, or without you. We... not even they know the extent of the enemy forces. It could be very well possible that our army's strength wouldn't matter."

"It's not our strength!" Ranly was starting to break. "It's this!" He grasped a cylindrical case that was an accessory for his necklace. With a pull, the necklace popped as the strings drooped down, the container held firmly within his palm. "The battle plans. The knowledge they need to know. I brought the army for protection, not to fight. Without carrier eagles, we had to come here ourselves, and if they go on with whatever plan they have, well, we won't win."

The General gave his usual backtalk. "How are you so certain they haven't discovered this hidden secret?"

King Ranly placed balled up fists on his hips. "Because I believe I'm the last one alive who knows that secret. The castle the necromancers are in was owned by the Calipa family. My uncle, may he rest wherever he be, was drunk, like he usually was, and visiting the family for political reasons. He placed his hand on the wrong wall, and it swallowed him up. There's a backdoor into the castle. I think it sobered him up. He traveled up the passage, and discovered its entrance outside the walls. He told me where that place is. We don't need men riding direwolves, tactics, or even basic strategy." The King took a might inhale, the puffs coming from his nose like he were a snow dragon. "All we need is twenty good men and maybe a hell of a lot more to go through that tunnel, and slay the necromancers from within. We'll never have to fight any army at all."

"Why didn't you mention this before NOW?!" It was the first time Carlisle had ever raised his voice in such a manner. Dismissal from his post would be appropriate, but doing anything like that would lead to open revolt.

And, it was an appropriate demand. "Because, I always had this around my throat. I'm always with the army, and if I were to die, you or Kalvan would discover the plan, and the map that I have stored in here. Yet, had I told everyone at the beginning, when I was not sure our city was safe to discuss such matters, then what do you think would've happened if the wrong person heard the right information, and this ended up in the hands of the necromancers?"

The General and Court Mage both sighed, one with annoyance, the other with relief.

“We’d never have this chance to begin with.”

“It... it doesn’t matter.” Carlisle’s voice broke, his already tempered nerves blowing out.

“We... we don’t even have an eagle to carry your message.”

Everyone heard Kalvan clear his throat. “A moment, if I may?” All turned to him, waiting to hear something to answer their prayers. “Sire, I remember you asking me to... prepare potions for you and other individuals of...” he turned to the simple foot soldier who was still there, still listening, “of a certain status, in case the cold became too much.”

With a whistle, Carlisle shooed away the messenger. Now the only ones listening were the trio.

“Potions of Warmth. For a good week, it’ll be like you emanate a fire from your chest. You could even keep others around you warm if you did not consider your personal space a necessity in these trying times. They are... rather expensive to make, I could only make a couple, four or five.”

“And what are you suggesting?” Ranly ordered.

“We take a volunteer, give them a direwolf for protection and to ride.” The alchemist could already see his King’s disapproval. “Tradition be damned! If we all die then who will celebrate such customs? And the damned dogs will be loyal if their master instructs them to be ridden by someone new.”

General Carlisle put up a hand. “I’m needed here more than out there, and I’m probably not going to do much fighting on him. My wolf can do that task. Thayne. He’s the strongest, the most agile, and the most loyal dog in this whole army.”

“The largest too.” The King remarked.

“I feed him well! And... I paid good money for the breeding.”

“Yes, yes.” Kalvan shushed them both. “Before you boys begin talking about the quality of your direwolves, we have but one last matter to discuss!”

King Ranly took a single step forward. “Which is?”

“Who is going to be our volunteer?”

—

A young man with faint blond hair was cleaning his master's sword. Applying oils and water from melted snow on a rag to remove the guts and viscera staining the weapon from their last battle with the undead. His hands were fair and unsullied, gentle and kind. He smiled even while the sight was ghastly, and the temperature outside his insulated tent was getting worse everyday. Several warmth sticks were dried while many more were placed all over the place, giving the atmosphere similar feelings to being in a wooden room with a weak fire during a harsh snowstorm.

His red leather jerkin had furs and wool all along the sleeves, making him look larger than normal, his trousers of similar materials. Belts were all over him, from tools to other accessories. A shortsword in its sheath, and brown boots with woolen socks. The young man's face was surprisingly little in beardage, and his hair short. It was just a problem he ignored. The white scarf around his neck helped whenever he was outside.

Suddenly, the tent's flap opened behind him. There was a moment of haste as the scarf was brought to his cheeks, the cold winds outside quickly biting his hands. He made a gasp, almost wanting to yell at the careless figure, before he realized it was his lord.

“Loric?” the taller man asked. “The king - what are you doing in here?”

Loric bowed at Lord Couter, as a squire should in the presence of nobility. “I was just... cleaning your sword my lord.”

Both individuals were from the Summerlands, their homes conquered early in the war. Their deathly slog to the safety of the Northern King, Ranly, put them in his debt. To know that they were closer to home than ever before, yet have it be so unrecognizable. The winelands barren, the lake oceans dried, an air that could kill.

Never did either imagine they would yearn for the memories of the North. Loric did not start his squiring career until after becoming a refugee, as there were better candidates at the time. However, he had lived the longest out of any of them, and so even though he was seen as ineffective, there was still mutual respect between him, and his lord.

“You never really can take the squire part out can you?”

“Sorry sir.” His voice was meek yet mellow, never a hint of disdain even towards his worst enemies. “I haven’t had much to do other than help pitch the camps. And it’s not like we were using these supplies. I... I made sure not to use the good water.”

Couter placed a hand on his underling's shoulder, fiery yet friendly eyes staring at him. "You've been good to me and my house. When we win, and settle all this, I'll make sure you get well-rewarded."

If Loric were to be completely honest, it was this or a terrible demise. Servicing out his labor for free, giving them the titles and chivalry they wanted, it got him work, fed, and shelter. It was possibly the only reason he was alive. Demonstrating humility and courteousness. At first, he had to swallow his pride, but now? It was his pride.

"Thank you sir. We just have to make it first."

Lord Couter was a minor noble, but from a strong house. He did not have muscle nor fat, but his tall height made him look like a reaper surveying a room of prey, which was not helped by the constant dark circles under his eyes, even before the winter disaster. But the squire knew his lord well at this point, he wouldn't even butcher a chicken if it meant he could be saved from starvation.

The hand was removed, and Lord Couter took a step back. "I can assume you wonder why we stopped earlier than normal today?"

Loric placed his hands together, a small smile coming and going as he gave a quick bow of his head. "I, uh, well yes. I cherish it though. My feet are *still* so sore."



His master made an affirmative grunt. "Same as mine. We stopped because of the King," he hesitated, that title had always been used in the context of his former liege, "King Ranly. He's going to make an announcement, and we're to meet outside within a few minutes. The snow and winds are light tonight. It shouldn't be too bad, but wear all you have. We shan't be out there for very long."

"You never said... why."

A sigh flew from Couter's lips. "There's been a problem. They're looking for someone to fix it. I don't know much more than that. Those near the front of the caravan know more."

Both men shuddered in their own way as a cacophony of trumpets weaved through the outside breeze rustling against their tent.

"Time to go, get your stuff on and meet me outside."

Loric watched his lord and all of the mink fur coats he wore drag along the floor, the flap open, and closed once again. The squire wasted little time, throwing on his nearby coats, feeling like an overfed hound as he waddled outside, gloves now on his hands.

The sky was a dark blue, just a few tints of life left in the heavens. The sun's orange hue still unseen in the months since the start of this calamity. But, there was a calmness to it all. In Loric's mind, the winter season just arrived early. Nothing good would come about from surrendering to the ideals that the end of the world was upon you.

The entire army was here as King Ranly stood atop of a makeshift stage made for one, him. People exited their tents, their sleeping bags, devices that were configured to fit their whole body like the igloos of the rough boreals. Sometimes two men would try to fit into one, just to conserve their body heat, and... not to be alone.

A lithe crowd-bearer brought up his speaking horn, shouting out to the throng that amassed around their leader in a circular fashion. "Your King speaks! High King Ranly of Nortwen, Lord of the Onyx Keep, Tamer of the Snow Bear, the-

"If you waste our precious heat on saying *one more* title, I will cut out your tongue, nail it to a wall, and press my arse against it." Silence. The King now spoke. "We're not going to make it to our destination. We're going to be late. And they'll all move onto the battle without us."

Each soul in the crowd wanted to moan, to groan, to voice their well-warranted anger at the fact they were being told now that this four month endurance test, was all for nothing.

“The plan I sought to bring to them will not make it. In the end, they do not need our help, but the plans I had devised.” The King had clenched fists at his side. This all hurt to say. “However, there is one last idea my councilors and I have created. All of you, are skilled to have made it this far. We simply need a volunteer that understands they may not make it. Someone to take a direwolf, which will be given to you, across the frozen wastes of our original path to get to the capital of King Valos. You will be supplied food, and a... way to fight through the cold. A volunteer. Anyone.”

Loric was squashed between several men and women, along with Lord Couter, the cold not as bad as it could be. He breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that someone here must be willing to put up a hand. This plan would work, and they'd all be saved.

Yet, there was not a rise of even a single hand.

Ranly proceeded further, blinking as if he was surprised, but anticipated this scenario. “Whoever accepts will be given a hefty sum of gold.”

Nothing. Loric bit his lip. There had to be... many people in this mass of bodies.

"A great piece of land, your *own* title."

The squire turned his head to his left, then to his right. Not even his lord looked to volunteer. Some glances were exchanged with other nervous wrecks in the crowd. Heads of varying sizes and altitudes simultaneously wanting to go to their maker in peace while wanting to live. For them *all* to live. At least, that's how Loric felt.

"One of the grandest castles one could ever hope to possess. Endless servants at your beck and call, never having to work another day in your life. Countless women to love you, or men too!" He tried to find the women in the sea of people, hoping they had the same wants as he did. "Heaven... on this earth, for you, if you... if you take our offer. *Please.*" His voice had never sounded more desperate.

"I will!"

Every single head turned to the voice. Loric was confused, as if the voice was right next to him, under him, *above* him? No. It *was* his voice. His hand was in the air, and Lord Couter was flabbergasted. "*You... you can't!*" he whispered to his companion, "*Loric! You'll die!*"

The young man pushed through the crowd, shouting back to his master, "we'll all die if someone doesn't go. King Ranly took me in when the Necromancers conquered and razed my home," he was frightened, struggling to keep his composure and nerve as he was now speaking to every person in attendance. "I owe so much." People were now parting for him. A savior that allowed them to live, and not have to make, what was in their mind, a treacherous addition to their already difficult journey.

Then, Loric was but a few feet from the King, his guardsmen moving to intercept the squire. "And if I get these plans, the world will be safe. My debt will be repaid, and I will enjoy what comes next as your majesty has said here. Endless servants, and everything else."

"By the gods as my witness boy, I'd replace your face with the wolf on my banner if my ancestors would permit such radical rewards. Do you accept the call?"

A part of Loric wanted to turn around, and look for his Lord, to see a sign of permission to be allowed to take part in this dangerous mission. But Couter would be a blur, just like the rest of army's faces. A squire was not meant to be a servant forever, and in a way, this would be a chance at a new life for the Summerlander. He got on one knee the best he could, looking like a stuffed doll with padding all over thanks to the coats. One inhale, one exhale. "I accept."

There wasn't much fanfare, or celebration. He was quickly escorted as if a dagger would be placed into his back at any moment. For a few minutes as he was brought closer to the front, Loric felt like *he* was the King here. There were some smiles as he imagined what the response would've been had he bargained for the throne. That would've been interesting, but the volunteer was not particularly ambitious. The crown of the North was not for him, and why rule over a people that'd resent him?

Into the higher up's tented mess hall could best be described as a feast from the old days, before necromantic incursions and yearlong winters. A fat turkey that still had steam on it, goblets of wine and assorted root veg. Ranly came up to him, shaking his hand like they were lifelong friends, introducing the squire to a seat just for him. This... dinner would be as if he were having his last.

He didn't care, this would finally be some good food. As he chewed through rendered flesh and peppered carrots, he talked with courtesy towards the King and his advisors. General Carlisle was the sternest there about tradition, constantly reprimanding Loric for not using the proper titles and prefixes. No matter *how* many times Ranly told him tonight was special, and that each of them in the tent no longer had rank or status. It was a night to be remembered, to make sure that the volunteer, Loric, would be at his best the following morning.

The young man *did* rise from his sleep. A woman half-naked on his bare chest. Foggy memories clouded the actions of what happened before, but if one thing could be said – everyone had too much wine.

It was with the fifteen minute watch shifts that saved the camp each night from undead disturbances which brought them all safety. The first month was hard, but by now, Loric could dispatch a moaning straggle who had wandered in. But with the keen eyes and quick actions of the watchers, eliminating undead was as simple as hunting game.

Loric brought a hand to his head, gently pushing the groaning yet still sleeping girl off of him, leaving her on the cot as he took in the oath made the previous night. Various foods still rested in his belly, ready to digest and create energy for the long road ahead. It was a job no one else would perform. No one but him.

He was to leave early, at first light, or well, when the sky looked less dark. Opening a crack of the flap for one small moment showed him the latter was already happening, and now a searing chill slapped his nude chest. Muscle was there, but only from labor, no rigorous workout schedule.

Already having his trousers on, Loric applied his jacket, gloves, boots, white scarf, and more, leaving the mess hall tent as his teeth crunched into an oat cookie. Layers of coats all over him.

Alchemist Kalvan awoke even earlier than him, or maybe had no sleep at all. The squire's soft face, with rather handsome features awaited the mage as he stood in the cold, already feeling the chill eat into him. This concoction he was promised was almost worth taking on this endeavor by itself. Loric imagined summer rays hitting him, by the beach once again as his village was close by.

He exhaled, and the tent's entrance opened. "Loric? What are you doing standing out here? Why didn't you just *tell* me you'd arrived?"

"I..." he gasped, "I wasn't sure..."

"You, brave Loric, possibly have more privilege than any man in this current world could have. Hells, you could stab me, kill me, and you might just be pardoned if you still did as you promised." He waved his hands, grimacing as more cold was coming in than he'd like.

Without another second wasted, Loric was in, and the heat was sealed. "I was said to meet with you, then the King near the snow bank. To meet, uh, Thayne."



“He’s a good boy! Him and Ranly’s direwolf were practically playmates. In... more ways than one. She was a fair bit older than him, and she passed. He’s good for two decades or more though. Might even outlast me.”

The smell of acrid odors assaulted Loric’s senses, dragging his focus from the current conversation. “What is *that?*” he said, pointing to a variety of instruments brewing on a nearby table. Bubbles and the sort, smoke and witchery.

“Ah, that.” Kalvan grunted. “That... is my alchemy. I wanted to brew you something that could help you fight as well just in case anything could happen. I talked to your lord last night, and you’re not the best of fighters.”

Loric shoulders briskly rose and fell. “I try my best.” It was said weakly.

“It should be done within a few more minutes. Essentially, it enhances, or perhaps in your case, *creates* an ability in martial prowess. Time might appear as if it’s slowing down, if you were to eat food, it’d taste extravagantly better. Any senses, all feelings, are felt as if thrown into a pit of laudanum. You’ll feel good, and your reflexes even better. It’ll make combat feel more alive than you’ve ever known. It lasts for a short time though.” Kalvan fiddled with a few nozzles and switches. “I’ll give you a few vials that’ll last for ten minutes each. Instead of one of the larger flasks.”

The brave soul's eyes examined the room. Foci and old tomes all over. The alchemist brought along much that was banned at the start of their journey for everyone else. It was like a traveling library of a sort, with various bottles and other kinds all around. "I see! Is there, um, you need from me?" Loric spoke cordially, looking rather innocent in his questions, his brow going up and down like a rowboat riding a river.

"Actually, if you wanted to save me some time. Could you go into my supply tent and grab your warmth potion? It should be in a big, green flask." He bit his lip. "Actually, every mix I've made so far, they'll be in that kind of flask, sadly."

"W-why is that?"

Kalvan pulled at his color, adding a crumble of brown dust to some beaker. "I normally liked keeping different brews in differently colored vessels. The glassmen are gone. You can read can't you? It should be obvious which one it'll be. Just take "

Loric didn't question anything else, taking the alchemist's word for it as he strolled back out into the surprisingly calm snow, and into the tent nearest. The scents of musk and bitter aromas choking his nose. The level of organization in this place was terrible, while everything was set into stacks, sheets of rings holding the potions in safe

positions, it was a wonder how anything could be found in here. One would have to remove tonics from the front before they could access the back.

Searching this place would take too long, and would hurt Loric's brain of how this place could easily be dismantled and set up every dawn and dusk. If the warmth potion was made recently, it'd have to be in the front. The squire's assumption proving to be correct as one of the nearest mixtures was labeled in scrawling, scratchy writing. The penmanship was obviously the hand of a mage. It read - *'potion of heat,'* and the flask did feel warm. He held the glass against his face, and already did he feel better. As if one could throw their head into flames without fear of burning.

There was no doubt this one was the correct elixir. With the pack he was given the night before, various foodstuffs and supplies available to spare, the potion went in, right on the top.

Loric intended to move back into the main shelter, but paused as he noticed Kalvan out to meet him. "I finished the cook. Put these in a safe, easy to access place, just in case you need it. If a body missing have of its skin tries to flay you, you don't want to be occupied digging through your belongings." Carefully, the vials, with a dark purple liquid inside, traveled from one set of gloves to the other, going into a satchel pocket on Loric's outside coat layer.

"I think that's it then?" the young man asked.

"Did you get the right one?" The question was honest, without sarcasm. Kalvan wanted this plan to succeed as much as anyone else.

The squire raised an eyebrow. "I *can* read sir. I think I'd know what a warmth potion looks like compared to some of the poisons and other affects you have in there. Let's get this over with."

And so, the two souls walked along the stopped train of carts and other wheeled wooden vehicles. The King and General were waiting for them, and there was no more time to waste.

The weather had been calm, but still cold. It wasn't that long of a walk, and Loric swallowed nervously as he could see the giant beast he'd be riding in the distance. He kept his head down, trying not to stare at it. He didn't know a thing about direwolves, they were more of a northern conception. Why northmen couldn't just keep around normal guard dogs was a question he always asked himself. But before he knew it, he was next to them all, including the panting pooch. Or... less of a dog, very much a wolf.

"Young Loric," King Ranly said, putting his head on the squire's head, ruffling the blond hair there, "this is Thayne. The General's direwolf."

Thayne's pink tongue was out, longer than one of Loric's fingers. He couldn't tell where the midnight black fur started and the muscle ended, the beast at height level while on all fours, and quite wide, larger too. On two legs, it'd tower over him. He theorized it'd be hard to travel on the direwolf had it been *smaller* than him. His four paws were way bigger than any human hand. The tail could be a coat on its own, wagging softly as a new person approached. At least it was friendly, those gray eyes staring, intentful, waiting for the volunteer to make the wrong move, and punish him if he intended to hurt anyone here. But... if Loric was as much of a good boy as the wolf himself, then no issues would be had. The wolf, simply by staring, had both locked him into both anxiety and a feeling of welcomeness.

Loric said the first thing on his mind. "His coat is pretty fresh."

"I groom him daily." The mighty General exclaimed. "He'll be glad for the exercise he's about to get. I told him to trust you, to treat you right. Thayne will give you no harm unless you have a reason to harm him. Trust his nose more than yours, and his eyes. When he knows something is up, he'll growl before you even realize it. And if you think his decision is more right than yours in those pivotal moments, go with your gut, and follow his lead."

“He... he, you told him all of this?” Kalvan said, surprised, as if wondering if the toy automatons that children often played with could be delivered orders in a similar fashion.

“A lifebond between direwolf and rider leads to relationships one might consider unnatural. When he barks, I know what he wants, and when I tell him what to do, more often than not, he does it.” Carlisle spoke with one hundred percent certainty. “Go on, pet him. Create that link. He won’t bite.”

Even with the reassurance, the squire hesitated, bringing a hand closer and closer to the black forehead of the direwolf, the eyes trained on the palm until it reached the fur bristles, soft, trimmed nails covered by layers of leather scratching into the strands, which made the canine pant with a joyful vigor. Plus, he was quite warm.

“Hmph.” The General snorted out. “I think he likes you.”

Thayne’s triangular ears dimmed, going down as he was scratched. *He really is just a larger dog. A hound trained to be cordial in the house*, Loric thought. A few other accessories donned the beast. A large saddle, a few bags here and there, almost like he was a pack animal as well. A strong wolf like him could handle it surely.

“Is there anything else I should know? Like, should I drink the full potion?”

“Yes!” the Mage blurted out. “Drink the whole thing. It should last for a week. It’ll maximize your chances since it should take you roughly a week to get there.”

Loric nodded, but then noticed Ranly approach closer, until their chests were almost touching. The taller King looking at his smaller subject. “You ride him well, and he’ll take care of you.”

“I know. I’ll try, no, I *will* trust him. I mean, I’ll have no one else other than him and I out there. Is that it?”

“One last thing.” Taking the necklace off from around his neck, he laid the loop over Loric’s, tucking the cylindrical case below, touching the squire’s skin. “Guard this with your life. If all else fails, and you perish, but Thayne lives, give it to him, and try your best to convince him of where to go. Even a dog showing up to King Valos’s doorstep with these plans means our world is saved.”

The new direwolf rider gave one single bob of his head, proud, and confident. It was one of the first times in his life he could ever be so sure of himself. “I understand.”

With that, he used the foot step of the saddle to bring himself up. Loric had ridden horses in his Summerlands home but the slight grizzled groan of Thayne

spooked him, only to realize it was almost something like an affirmation, like the wolf himself was ready. Maybe there was something magical about these creatures.

“Ride, Loric.” Said the King. “And never stop until you’ve come to your last morsel of energy, and even then, don’t stop.”

The wolf’s hind was slapped and pushed, Carlisle and Kalvan both giving out quick words of advice over each other, about warmth, and how to dispatch an undead husk with ease. But Thayne was already trudging along not exactly at full sprint, but enough to where Loric had to hold the reins to keep himself balanced. He didn’t want to drink his potion until he felt as if he really needed it, to maximize it’s week-long effect. The snow, and the cold was bearable. Plus, there was plenty of hardy food if he needed it mid-ride, enough for him and Thayne.

As the direwolf hopped over the snow bank and the open horizon was in front of them, Loric felt unstoppable. Never more had he felt like a knight, nor such a grand man. Like a winged valkyrie charging forward with a lance towards an evil of darkness, it would be his name in the history books. Loric the Great, the man who saved the world.

Which sounded *much* better than Loric the Squire.



It'd only been an hour. Nothing but white. The sound of his own breaths and the direwolf's huffs. He'd gone through two sticks of jerky, the warmth of his body dying as quickly as energy was created.

Frost was on his eyelashes, and the white scarf around his face was getting less, and less effective. He lasted roughly... three hours. One might think that the night brings harsher tidings of the season, but in reality, the morning was when it got colder. At least, most days.

With severe hesitation, he brought a gloved hand down to Thayne's black hide, pulling at the strands as he commanded his mount. "Halt. Halt!" Paws scraped the dirt, the wolf angling himself until he sat there, panting, waiting for further orders.

While the wolf dipped his head down, lapping at the snow on the ground for water, Loric reached around into the pack on his back, holding the potion tightly with both hands. Even through the gloves, it was warm. Just what he needed. The man thought about hugging it, how that might give him another few hours, but before he had realized it, his teeth were deep into the cork. Like a deranged animal, he ripped it out, spitting the peg into the snow, smelling the alluring scents. He couldn't tell if his body just naturally wanted warmth or if there was something to the potion that made him crave the contents inside. Even now, blood rushed into his phallus, no doubt trying to keep warm.

Loric didn't waste any more time. The brim was brought to his lips, and the colorless liquid poured into his mouth. Immediately his tongue was sated of its curiosity, the taste being quite potent. He coughed, yet the entire thing was to be drunk. It was syrupy, getting caught in parts of his mouth and throat with globby textures. It had salt in it, for it sure tasted of the rock, and various other things that were perplexing to his mind. A meatiness. Like, if fish had the consistency of steak. A complete paradox in his mind.

It took effort to swallow, whooping noises and more coughs being made until he finally chugged it all down like an inexperienced keg-drinker. Parts of it marked his lips and face, and he eagerly licked the rest up, various areas of his body feeling... much more warm now! Especially his chest, head, and nether region. There was a revitalization of his person, and with a nonchalant yelp, Thayne rushed them forward. In that moment, Loric never felt more intune with anything, anyone, anybody. It was like him, and the direwolf were two peas in a pod. Like they could relate on this journey, their experiences, their hardships, their lives.

Loric had only known this good boy for less than four hours, and the human trusted him with his life.

His body's temperature was normal, but he couldn't help that his erection had been lasting for quite awhile. Thirty solid minutes of constant blood pumping in and around his crotch, but then again, it did feel like all veins he possessed were running on overdrive. Sweat was causing his internal clothing to stick, and he noticed that he was taking in more air as usual, as if it was thinner here, or he wasn't getting enough. This potion... would it be giving him assistance in this time with its own qualities? Or was it going to make his body work even harder to keep him warm.

And... it wasn't just that. There was a smell. A deep, *strong* smell. Loric didn't know *how* it was strong as he passed by trees frozen solid, but there was something nearby that made him *want* to be by that smell even more. The longer he rode atop of Thayne, the more suspicious he became. The wolf wouldn't notice anything weird.

The squire paused, only for a second, and took down his scarf, the chill biting his beardless face but not as badly as before consuming the potion. Loric moved his nose forward, sniffing at the beast's hide as his eyes fluttered, brain sparking alight with agitated excitement. Something in him was telling the man that this place was the right place to be. The smell... was good, very good, better than good even. Musk, plain and simple, the natural aromas of a working dog and the savored tang. He'd never once been too into men, barely into women either, but something about that smell.

Loric caught himself licking his lips as his body bobbed while the direwolf galloped. He clenched his teeth, growling as a human would, Thayne's expression in the front confused, trying to ignore whatever might be happening. But the volunteer could not let it easily leave his mind. There was something here... he was being taken advantage of? No... no-no, he *deserved* a reward? Not a reward. It was on the tip of his tongue, almost quite literally so. He was being given practically a small duchy, eternal happiness for the rest of his days, but a rage in his heart that drifted to his brain and all other parts of his body, even his cock, told him that none of that mattered oddly enough.

He wanted something from Thayne, but Loric just didn't know what. And that made him more mad than anything in the world. Anxiety surrounded him. *Why?! Why* wouldn't Thayne *help* him!? He needed... SOMETHING! The squire couldn't even speak, he... he had to...

The direwolf was brought to a sparse cover of petrified foliage. No plants or bushes, but trees and their branches, with pines and ferns. Loric stepped off, needing to breathe, finding it difficult to contain his emotions as he threw himself from his mount, strutting around the cold thicket as he looked to the wolf. "*Why? Why?!*" He was asking himself the same question. *Why* this sudden obsession? A Summerlander wasn't supposed to care about a northern animal. What exactly *did* Loric want?

Thayne found it difficult to understand past all the confusion, merely tilting his head with a curious whine.

Yet, before the squire could say anything more, the wolf growled, directly at him. Loric froze, and not because of the winds. His eyes went wide as he thought the snarls were meant for him, a sudden force pushing his body to submission by becoming stiff as the trees around them. But... he broke from that intense glare as snow crunched behind him.

Loric's head whipped around, seeing in the distance, not more than a hundred feet away, the figures of two shambling corpses. Ones with armor, still holding their weapon. A halberd, and a mighty longsword.

Their eyes noticed him, something still animate behind them compared to the typical chaff that he'd already dispatched of before in the past. Typically, they moved slowly, yet with these soldierly types, once alerted, they intelligently assess the situation. If their deaths are assured, they leave and report, most of the time coming back with more in number, their formations as deadly as they were alive.

And if they could win? They'd charge, just like now.

“Fuck!” Loric screamed, the abnormal feelings of his body being dulled as adrenaline kicked into gear. Just like he trained, his sword was already out, its pitiful length damning to his advantage, but it was still sharp. Severing the limbs, *that’s* how you did it. Cut the arms, the legs, and you can worry about the head. Luckily for him, the weapon was quite sharp.

He almost thought he could take them both. No doubt these men were stronger fighters when they were alive, and most likely still in their prime now. But those growls from the wolf got worse. Even with their numbers, Loric was worried, but as he glanced over his shoulder, he could see two more coming from behind. Almost like... this was planned?

The wolf had taken his position, analyzing his enemies to figure out the best way to approach. Loric had fuck all for such battle sense, but he wasn’t idiotic enough to forget he had a way of balancing this battle to be in *his* favor. Even if he could ride off into the sunless horizon, it’s possible that these undead could report what they’ve seen. That was a chance the squire... the warrior couldn’t take.

Coolly, Loric took out one of the purple vials, popping the cap off with his thumb as he drank it in one gulp, right then and there. Tastes of tarty lavender and briggensap, a sour herb, marked his mouth. The effects were... immediate.

Time went slower, he could hear himself breathing, the winds, the cold, nothing else mattered. Loric's muscles felt ten times stronger, but they were not in actuality. Holding his sword in both hands, he prepared himself, for his foes were coming into reach.

The halberd came first, two steps to the left, and the pointed tip went past him. His body detected that Thayne was charging and leaping at the enemies behind Loric, and so there was no need to worry. A swing was made, the shaft of the halberd going downwards, the sharp axehead edge digging into the snow.

Leading from that attack, the man wacked at the arm of the undead, slicing it completely off as it now struggled to hold its weapon with just one limb. But Loric couldn't finish it off, ducking and weaving as his second enemy made its attack, the high-pitched noise it made as it sliced through the air could burst eardrums. A strike that had it hit, would've taken his head clean off.

Everything was a blur, but still so clear. Like a skilled chessmaster, Loric noticed the weak spot to press his advance towards, the tip of his blade sinking into the armpit of the undead swordsman, angling the blade as it crunched into the tendon, breaking the arm. It was rendered useless, but that didn't stop a brutish blow to the man's chest, the fist of the husk hitting him as the pain did not hurt. It was simply a way of letting him know he'd be struck.

Loric repositioned himself, noticing already that both of his enemies were having severe drawbacks to their weapon choices. Their undead strength would help them, but the techniques, the maneuvers, they were really actions you'd want to perform with two working arms.

Thayne's roars were in the background, which was good, it meant he was still alive.

The one with the halberd tried another assault, making Loric slant his shortsword downwards, pushing with power to side the weapon to the side along with the rotting fiend who growled with the trouble he had in controlling it. This allowed the warrior to take his blade, and quite literally, *swing* faster than the other one. As it brought its longer edge behind its back and brought it down, Loric swiped, cutting the arm in one motion, the inertia sending both the arm and the sword deeper into the thicket.

Without a weapon, the demonic entity tried to emulate its stupider cousins, using chipped, uneven teeth to bite into the human's flesh. It soon found its mouth full of coat, Loric bringing his arm around to catch its teeth on his sleeve, guiding the thing like rabid dog that just wouldn't let go until he swiveled its body in a half-circle, the chest burst forth a halberd spike that was a few inches from the volunteer's own. *Exactly as planned,*



Loric thought in his mind, the drug altering his senses making him feel like the smartest and most arrogant man in the room. And the outdoors was a very large room indeed.

With the spine destroyed, the one biting him let go, and Loric allowed its head to be released from the rest of its body, the thing flying off into a nearby branch. Not allowing any mistakes to be made, he swiftly moved forward while the corpse struggled to remove the halberd from its re-dead ally. Its last, enchanted thoughts being of how important it was to pull out its weapon, suffering the final end as the husk joined its friend in being headless.

Black blood steamed from Loric's sword, the effects of his combat enhancements still alive as he recalled how long they'd last. Ten minutes the wizard had said, and yet, barely one had passed. The grip on his weapon was ever tight as he realized that his steed was still in danger, twisting his body to notice a rather interesting sight.

On the floor, one undead's skull had collapsed from the jaw strength of the direwolf, the other *currently* enduring a similar fate as it laid on the floor, trying its hardest to punch the beast to death by applying an unfelt force of slams into its side.

Fire ignited in Loric's eyes as he screamed like a banshee, holding the last corpse alive by its throat, sending the blade deep into its forehead as it was held between the direwolf's jaws.

Removing the sword, it was finally over. Loric... he'd never felt so protective of something before. Even if his own mother was at stake, he never thought he could ever move that quickly, become so enraged to that point. He felt so alive.

And so hard. The man dropped his sword as a liquid trickled out from his cock. "What the f-fuck?" he said out loud, the words from his lips warbling in his overtuned state. "Am I pissing myself?!"

The flow wasn't acrid or the color of urine, but it did come out similarly as such. Loric's erect penis did lose some of its hardness, but as oddity left, this one soon came to reveal itself. The man felt so hot... too hot. *Too hot!*

He felt like he was burning, and so with the sensation of superhuman strength, he began to take off his bag, his coats, his gloves, allowing the winds that could kill a person without protection to rush up and grind against him. A high-pitch gasp came from his mouth as his skin felt so sensitive. But the cold... it helped. It helped so much.

Without all those layers obscuring his vision, he could finally see why he was creating such large stains on his crotch, shoving his trousers down to expose his bare crotch to the world. Thayne was already well interested in the situation, leaving the bodies behind as he approached.

Loric backed up until he hit a tree, the odd pleasures that would normally be numb to his senses spiking a level of pleasure he had never experienced. His cock had shrunk, it was too obvious to ignore. A clear fluid similar to pre-cum oozing from his tip, a pulse of his cock forcing it out to mark the snow, and just with no room left to hold... there was no better term. It *streamed* from him, as if he were using the bathroom.

But he had no control! He couldn't stop! All he could do was moan, feel the cold against him, feel **EVERYTHING** against him. All senses were in his mind. His nose could smell scents better than a dog could, every cell in his body was telling him to near insanity levels of times about updates on his current condition. Every nerve, was that much more sensitive, especially that which felt pleasure.

Yes. It was pleasurable to leak like this, to release, to let it all out. Loric was losing his footing by the tree, hesitating as that masculine musk from Thayne's body wafted into his nostrils, watching as the direwolf slowly, steadily, took his steps closer.

“Give... give,” Loric slapped himself. He wanted it. He wanted what the wolf had! He *needed it!*

Thayne’s black nose sniffed at the clear marks on the ground, his own senses starting to pick up something rather *persuasive* to his being. He tilted his head in complete skepticism. This colorless juice, according to his nose, was absolutely no different than the droplets a female direwolf frees from her body when *enticing* a male to mate her. With several small puddles around her body, the splatter soaking into her trousers, whoever this female was, she was *desperate* for pups.

So, why would he not give her what she wanted? A red cock popped out from between his legs, a scent that was immediate to Loric’s nose as his eyes became large like two moons. His body wanted it, and it wanted it so badly that it tricked his own mind into believing it was more desirable than gold, property, and every kind of woman imaginable.

The seed of a direwolf shot right into him from a thrusting canine cock. The very next moment, a gooey rope flew from his still shrinking cock, nailing Thayne’s muzzle, the white contrasting with the black fur. A single tongue lick cleaned it, and heightened his own arousal. Loric’s trousers and underdrawers fell all the way down until they rested on his boots.

Hot, wolver steam hit his reddening genitals. "F-fuck!" Loric shouted. The pleasure a hundred times better, or in this case, worse from the battle augmentations.

The human screamed, the loudest scream he'd ever emitted in his entire life as the direwolf's tongue met with his crotch, his heart nearly about to burst from his chest. He stared straight forward, not wanting to look down.

Not... wanting to enjoy this exhilarating feeling any further. *Fuck* indeed.

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