

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

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 troops, then the experienced fiends to clean up the rest.

A most terrible conundrum. A siege would never work either, and those walls... they'd lose too many to scale them.

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 wolverine 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 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 passively shook his head, causing his minor 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. 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 in a mighty 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 interior, 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.

Without warning, 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 exposed skin. 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 wineplains 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 arm.

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 straggler who had wandered in. 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 told to visit 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 collar, 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.”

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 area 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

emitted a warm aura. 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 some 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 animal, 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 looked 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 its 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 weapons. 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 aren't 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 let out as it sliced through the air could burst eardrums. A strike that had it hit, would've taken Loric's head clean off.

Everything was a blur, but still so clear. Like a skilled chessmaster, the human 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 one with the sword. 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 one oddity left, another 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, the testes enduring a similar effect. A clear fluid similar to pre-cum oozing from his tip, a pulse of his cock forcing it out to mark the snow, and with just 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.

He wanted the seed of a direwolf shot into him from its 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, the balls there looking as large as shriveling acorns. "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.

King Ranly sat at a long, well-plated tavern table. Two days had passed since Loric's departure, and the army now rested at a proper town found along the frozen river. A place that still had people struggling to survive, yet they were surviving. They allowed the army to inhabit the areas they could, and the Monarch was enjoying meat and pickle reserves. This town... he'd name a castle after it.

His eyes shifted to a movement happening near his right, his court mage Kalvan humbly in view, holding his hands together as they stared inside this insulated inn.

"I'll have you know sire that I had your men administer some more... *coaxful* concoctions to the direwolves we have over in the stable. Around... thirty minutes prior? They should be taking effect here soon."

Ranly took a swing of dry ale, the suds popping in his mouth. "Why didn't you give it to them yourself?"

Kalvan looked almost offended by such a question. "I trained the men yesterday on how to administer it. I didn't have time to do it myself, especially since the locals needed my aid."

“Well,” the ruler of the North’s voice went high, coming back down as he finished the rest of his sentence, “surely the men are competent enough to follow your orders.”

The mage scoffed. “It’s *simple, my King*. You just pour a portion of it into their water bowl. No idiot could ever screw that up, even the most moronic imbecile to ever live. Hells, if they found a way to misunderstand such basic instructions, they might be more undead than those we-”

The entrance door boomed open, swinging nearly off its hinges. The patrons hissing as the cold spiraled in to smack at the flames of the powerful fire blazing in the hearthplace. The culprit, a guardsman of Ranly’s retinue, quickly closed the erroneous action made, and all was well. Except for the exasperated look on his face, and the cubes of snow falling from his snowshoes which spread along the wooden floor.

“What is it?” the King demanded. “Are we under attack?”

The soldier saluted, being interrupted by a sneering roar of his lord, he stammered out his next words. “Something’s wrong with the female wolves sir! I think you all should take a better look.”

Kalvan and Ranly rushed forward, taking their coats with them as they threw the heavy pelts on, sliding into each sleeve as they were already out the door. It was very

possible that these direwolves could be the last of their kind after everything. There was a deep need to see their species survive.

They rushed from the inn, across the icy river, and onto the other side, the rest of the military becoming antsy at the sight of their monarch sprinting like that. Rumors were already beginning to speculate.

Eventually, after several stumbles in the hard snow, the makeshift stable entryway was in their vision. The door was cracked as if they were being expected, and within feet of entering the building, the slit was widened, all three making their way inside.

King Ranly went to the first person that looked to be in charge. "What in the Gods is going on?"

This taller man with blue eyes saluted swiftly, riding a fine line between respect to authority and decisive action. "The wolves won't stop panting sir! I've checked their bodies and it's like they're running a fever. I don't know how to explain it!"

Both mage and monarch were brought into one of the stalls, rock and wood haphazardly placed all over the floor. A brown-gray bitch laid there, whining and rolling along the floor, her teats quite small.

"We don't know what it is! Her and all the others are exactly the same." The leader in charge of the stable... his voice was cracking under the pressure, his mind filled with the idea that he possibly caused the extinction of his kingdom's animal mascot.

"That's... odd." Kalvan said, moving forward as he took off a single glove, placing his hand along the wolf's forehead. "She's on fire. One might expect her to burst into flames right in front of us." He turned his head to the headman. "Every wolf is like this?"

"No! Just the females, the ones you told us to give the stuff inside that bottle."

"What did it say on the bottle?" A rise was starting in the robed human's voice. "What... did... it... say?"

"Uh, well, you said it was a potion of heat?"

"But WHAT did it SAY?! By the Gods man, **WHATDIDITSAY?!**"

"Well sir, we couldn't find a potion of heat, so we... used the next best thing? Heat and warmth are the same thing right?"

The alchemist froze with tension, his mouth opening a few inches. "Oh no."

"*Oh no?*" the King barked out. "What do you mean *oh no?*"

"You. Out. Now." Kalvan told the other man. In an instant, Ranly and his advisor were alone, the door to the stall closed as the higher-ranked soldier left. There were still gaps in the walls, so the two kept their voices low.

"What is going on?"

"There's a terrible misfortune I've just learned of, one you are about to learn too."

Ranly cut his palm through the air. "Are the dogs going to be okay?"

"Of course." It was a breath of fresh air as Kalvan regained composure. "They were each supposed to get a small amount of the original potion. All we need to help the females is to get them outside to ride out the higher temperature."

"Then... *what* is the problem?"

The mage bit his lip. "The night before, when we drank a lot, I made sure to get the volunteer's warmth potion ready. I don't know how it happened. I must've... grabbed the wrong one? Or maybe I... maybe I left the estrus elixir out?"

"Wait," Ranly was catching on, "you... you can't mean it." He pinched the bridge of his nose with two thick fingers. "Loric drank the wrong potion?!"

"Yes."

"What was *in* the potion?"

"Can't say," Kalvan said, pulling his collar, "mage secrets."

"I'm the King. It's an order. You *must* tell me."

The potion maker sneered at him. "King of what?! Nothing is alive out here."

Now was the wrong time to antagonize the crowned man. He inhaled, preparing his words. "I am the King in the North, and the north is snowy, desolate. Oh, well, would you look at that... I must be the King of the World then. Tell me. I won't ask again Kalvan."

The other man relented. "Several aphrodisiacs, a multitude of sensitivity herbs, fountain waters from magical basins discovered in *Parvenu*, that new continent across the sea? It'd been imported before the necromancers invaded."

“What... else? You’re not telling me everything.”

Kalvan put his hands up. “Of course, of course. Magnesium, red bee honey, mercury, and direwolf semen.”

“My gods... you had our volunteer drink their godsforsaken seed!?” The King was truly baffled, a moment that rivaled any other time of stupidity encountered in his entire life. “How in the world did you even get such a thing from the males!?”

The alchemist’s face flushed with a rose color. “I used a telekinesis spell, an ethereal hand to... help guide them into... inseminating a vial.”

It was becoming apparent just how dire the situation had become, and that’s when it hit him, Ranly speaking in horror. “Oh no.”

“Yep.”

“You told the guards here to only administer a small portion.”

“...yep.”

"How much did you tell Loric to drink? For the... warming potion he was supposed to have?"

Kalvan was silent.

"Kalvan! No! You... you told him to... drink the whole thing?"

"Yep."

The King took several steps from wall to wall, pacing back and forth as he tried to think of what to say next. "What's going to happen? He... he's not going to get warm! He's... it's been two days. He's already dead."

"Sire? If I may? We were never going to make it to the capital on time."

"What's our best case scenario?" Ranly didn't want to give up, even if it meant conjuring in his mind a good ending to this tale. "What can we hope for? And what of Loric's fate?"

Kalvan gave a cough, and then spoke. "Somehow, Thayne understands where to go with that case of yours, and King Valos understands why a dog is barking at him. Loric... he's most likely gone. Hopefully he was given nothing more but a bad stomach ache.."

“And the worst case?”

“That they’re both gone, and it’s over. Even if we ran through the night, we’d be slain through a mixture of overexhaustion and the undead we’d leave to chase our tails.” He placed a hand on the King’s shoulder, his old friend seemingly in despair. “If anything, sire... I think Loric will help Thayne however he can, and that it’ll be enough to win this war.”

Ranly sighed, the crown on his head too heavy. “Wherever Loric is, I hope he can find peace.”

—

The squire was screaming out, rutting his diminishing crotch against the direwolf’s eager lips, squealing away in feminine moans as he was using the ears of the canine for support. The tree behind him was both scratching his back and keeping him still as the slobbery beast feasted on his groin like a royal banquet.

Thayne’s growls were as if he had gotten hold of a squirrel, barking whines with grovels and squeaks, the fluids in his mouth adding vigor to his flashing, wild senses. Loric, who was still under the effects of his reactive boosts, was still watching in near

slow motion. His abilities would've saved his crotch from all of the sudgy froth that the direwolf oozed. If only the heat of a bitch wasn't coursing through his body. For now the enhancements worked against him, his two-inch cock both hilted and decreasing, narrowing itself to a nearly spent pencil as a crevice opened, splitting between the ballsack, moving upwards with every lick of the animal's tongue.

All the strands of hair on the human's skin could be sensed, every bud on Thayne's tongue grinding against each, microscopic cell of reactivity that made up the flesh of his penis, a flesh that was sprawling out along with the testicles to create a new kind of genitalia. One puffy and slick, pulsing juices out like the slimy entrance to a cavern, each lick tasted by the canine telling him that he was a good boy, and to keep going further and further.

Loric threw off his upper clothing, his necklace staying on simply from how tight he had made it while on the journey. Pants still around his ankles, his feet were experiencing rapidly discomforting levels of claustrophobia, the free, breathable space between his foot and the shoe getting smaller and smaller.

He couldn't stop his uvula from twitching in the noise of an alleycat. It was as if a woman was thumbing his tip again and again, the oversensitive area that one could lose an erection from if not played with care by a monstrous tongue, yet what was hard and perceived to be upright was now the entire sexual organ. Loric felt *something* was erect,

not realizing it to be his inflating, yet still dwindling clitoris. The bead had about as much response to stimuli in such a small capacity as the entirety of his former manhood. A manhood larger than the average kind.

Soon, that feeling of extreme tenderness, one that would ruin a hard cock, something you'd have to fight through or force whatever was causing such delicate motions away from you, turned to obscene pleasure. The direwolf's tongue was going all around, up and down, flicking, hitting that nub again and again. Pink on pink, the pearl getting redder and redder both from irritation, the severe levels of estrogen, and the estrus cycle pumping within them.

The slit the balls were deformed and made from at first adopted a more human like visage, but like bread in an oven the labia coalesced and puffed. No longer did a vertical line denote the entrance to her vagina, but a bloated spade that was constantly showering itself in sweet, slickly sap, clear and moist. The more aroused Loric was, the larger the spade bulged and grew, spacing itself out to allow in a sword-like cock, with two bulbous orbs as the hilt. A knotted penis that many female direwolves would come to enjoy *and have*.

On the man's bare chest, six flushed points were appearing underneath his enlarging breasts, the things slightly sagging around the size of ripe limes. Loric moaned as with every thrust with the wolf's tongue, the higher the human went, which

gave his breasts a great big shake. Those points eventually developed into additional nipples, with the lowest set near her crotch. Each one swelled, creating two vertical rows of four breasts, all of them femininely wired.

Like explosions from grenades, many nerves were erupting, the man roaring the same way the woman he bedded last night did. "Keep going! Don't stop! *Don't* stop Thayne!" There was nothing left to thrust, the gyrations stopped as the direwolf applied force, letting himself deeper inside Loric's cunt as her convolutions made his work harder. While the situation was obvious to many, the canine was still operating through instinctual behaviors, his brain trying its hardest to work the way it could.

A direwolf, when prompted for sex by a female in heat, would be given pheromones that told him to stimulate her pussy. Another leak would be made when the bitch was ready, which would tell him to clamor up, mount, and fuck until insemination. Yet, Loric's body, while changing, wasn't giving Thayne the clear to ride his new slut. Every lap, every sniff, each one told him not to stop, to keep licking, lick, and lick, and lick, to pleasure the girl until her essence told him her body was ready.

And ready it was. The squire's penis and testicles were shriveled, nearly completely, but still hanging on like unwanted accessories. A small hole was filling where the bead was now, but that didn't stop one last hurrah from coming. The literal last of male cum in Loric's balls shooting out into the direwolf's maw, white sperm

barely holding a sticky and globby consistency flying as the clit finally took its proper spot, spasming its last. Thousands of nerve endings interacting with the human's male brain, destroying all semblance of reality.

Undead from miles away could hear the man's shrieks and squeals, Loric saying the name of the direwolf again and again like an impassioned lover finally meeting her secret admirer after years of teasing. His vision ceased and was replaced with blurry, burning images as if he was dying and viewing his last memories. But these were not memories of his past, but what his mind fed of the future. A female direwolf laid on her side, feeding pups. Repeated sex again and again, hearing a mixture of Thayne's pants and the masculine, powerful grunts of this manifested beast in her seizure of an orgasm. Areas of his brain were literally fizzling out from the overloaded, godlike satisfactions, which was fortunate that chunks of the pink matter were being molded, overlapping like an omelette as a direwolf's brain did not need so many complicated functions.

No one on this very earth had ever experienced such a climax. Not even Kalvan was brave enough to try the battle enhancements in bed. And for good reason. Passing out was too common of a side effect for the dogs, just as Loric had.

When he awoke, his bare ass was against the snow, white fuzz on his growing butt keeping him warm as Thayne's tongue played with the inside of his mouth, the taste

of canine spit and the changing human's own pussy juices now filling his maw just as much as the beast's peach appendage.

Thayne backed up, sniffing at Loric's crotch before giving it a kiss and backing up even further, whining, as if he couldn't get the proper angle to thrust into a ready bitch. He'd ripped off all of his accessories. The saddle, the bridle, and the bags too, all laid along the floor as he had to deal with his feelings somehow. Tearing off the foreign extremities attached to him was how he contended with them.

Loric mumbled words, drool pooling and falling over his lower lip. Eight sagging and milk-filled breasts piling on top of each other like stacked wine kegs, each leaking as small pearl-colored fur strands were appearing all over his body. Although, there wasn't much of a *man* left.

He kicked his shoes off, the rest of the clothes as well. They were too warm, and they felt too tight. With them removed, *she* could tell why.

At the far end, there were new nails scraping the underbelly of the only male here. Giant paws larger than her own face wriggling as the toes flexed. Loric could control them, they were part of her body, they were her own feet.

Before she could do much more, Thayne pushed back deep into her mouth, choking her as she gagged several times from the wolf's tongue hitting her uvula, a paw stepping up on her crotch as the rough pads casually played with her pussy. The feelings from before were kicking in once more, and her now working womb was calling for semen to fill it.

Loric's hips locked upwards of the sensations on both of her lips, the pose she had around the tree loosened as Thayne pushed her aside, growling not at her personally, but because he was still rock-hard with an erection that wouldn't go away until that heat was satisfied.

The human's thumbs were moving down her wrist, becoming dewclaws with no dexterity. The feelings of the combat enhancements were still within her, minutes to go before they'd leave as legs and arms shifted, allowing her to walk on all fours just like Thayne could.

The last remnants of sanity within her humanity called to her to run, like a dog if it'd save her. Simply though, there would be none of that, especially when her nose became black, a short muzzle pushing forward under a coat of white fur. The completely opposite color of what she could not stop thinking of as her mate. It wasn't a male human, a female, or any other kind of person she typically enjoyed, but a giant

hound like this. Even as those vestiges hollered to run, all she did was take a few steps forward, and lock her shortening legs in place, widening her hips as the knees popped.

Loric was given one warning. A quick inhale from the direwolf before he jumped up, a crack in her back making this four-legged stance a permanent facet of her life now. A small nub forming right above her rear already wagging from how finally this nightmare of arousal could be over, but not before the best moment of her life would soon come to be.

Her ears traveled upward, becoming much like the ones on her mate's head. The knuckles of her hands snapping while they made their mark in the snow. Loric's wolf neck barreled out, her whole body conveniently multiplying in size as the thousand pound beast on her back would've broken her previous form through such an unfortunate accident.

The partial she-wolf became as still as a statue, the tip of a deeply dark red phallus testing the girth of her spade. Her eyes went upward, failing to operate normally as streaks were created in the air, like she was running at the speed of the sun's rays sprawling across a snowy mountain top. The entrance to her burrow took a broad shape, one appropriately fitting exactly the way Thayne's cock was shaped and sized, the puffy lips spewing feminine fluids to give the male the most gratifying coitus known to his simpler brain.

Loric's tongue sprawled out, teeth flinching between a clench and an open maw, whines seeping through her snout as the more her mate entered, the more pressure she could feel. A bark came, then two, then a growl. Concepts, intelligence, all known human matters were leaving her brain, no longer needed. From her urethra, more squirts shot out, pelting the side of Thayne's rod, slicking the areas it hit with more and more lube to pummel the cunt until cum breached the cervix.

Both dogs were panting, Loric's tail fully grown as there was more fur than skin. From far away, people in large coats could look over and shrug their shoulders not caring about the fact two wolves were fucking as the animals usually do. The bitch's thoughts, memories, ideas, aspirations, all of them were already gone, to be replaced by the plain instincts of what female direwolves usually care for. Breeding, eating, sleeping, the uncomplicated stuff.

The former squire's tits dangled, full of milk, the added weight on her back causing them to leak droplets of dairy onto the ground. She actually felt bad, knowing that her future pups wouldn't be getting what she was wasting, but the poor girl was new to all of this, even as her literal psyche shifted. Her breasts would make up the difference later, after all, the tits would be drained time and time again.

Thayne's back had been arched for a whole minute now, thrusting his cock wherever he wanted as long as there was pleasure and the delectable sounds of slimy plaps being made, his fuzzy balls swinging in the air as they surged with vigor, knowing that they'd be used soon.

The battle concoction Loric drank *still* hadn't left her body, causing her snarls to be extremely potent, for even with the diminished capacities of her new role, the pleasure was immaculate, and another orgasm was already rising, her first *true* female climax.

She yelped, feeling powerful jaws bite into the scruff of her neck, fur hiding all skin as Thayne's piercings rapidly intensified, both wolves growling at different tempos and tones as whatever was left of the human was completely gone. It was not only washed away through new canine behaviors, but having gone literally insane from the hyper-energized nerves her body possessed, becoming near feral as her heat exploded in intensity. The same thoughts slamming her mind of 'BREED, BREED, BREED' again and again, curving all perceptions into the same barking noise repeatedly and without pause, one she made out from her muzzle like the bitch she was.

Finally, Thayne howled and Loric joined him, a deluge of direwolf semen flowing from his cock in near-constant sprays as if he were marking his territory. And in a way he was. The she-wolf, her transformation finished, her brain coated in liquid pleasure,

found her orgasm as well. A torrent of doggy girl juice flushing all over Thayne's penis, the knot slamming inside of his mate's pussy as she gave a quick yip. Her neck craned low to the ground, eyes halfway closed as the warmest part of her body cooled. Like the winds of winter blowing out a fireplace, her alpha's seed put out her heat, at least partially so. Pregnancy was not always assured, and so repeated fuckings would be in both of their futures.

The male wolf hopped down, turning his body around as they both stood there, watching each other's backs. Loric used her eyes to scan the horizon, waiting for her mate's knot to deflate and allow them to run. For all of the changes that occurred, her body now recognizable to a brain fit for the form, the necklace was still around her neck. The string at its limits, but still holding strong.

The two communicated in ways unknown to humanity. Little barks, yaps, and curious whines exchanged back and forth, until finally, with a loud burst, the knot came out. Along with it, a mixture of fluids pelting the ground, leaving both of their scents to fester in the snow.

All could be seen as lost. The former human Loric without the mental acumen to understand anything from a monarch to why humans stood on two legs compared to a wolf's four, but with the transformation, one aspect was granted that she did not possess before. An unwavering loyalty for her mate, and her master. She had bonded

with that of King Ranly, the person who promised her so much. The human words translated in her brain. "Find King Valos."

Thayne understood it as well, and the two were off, running into the wilderness together. They hunted spare game where they could, feasting on raw flesh to keep going. Never once had Loric remembered her heart going as hard with repeated exertion, the two animals barely getting any sleep or rest, their paws aching. Loric's head understood that this was a matter of life or death, even if she didn't really know why.

They made it with a whole day to spare. Finding a city of towers near the night's start with dimly lit yellow windows, each spire larger than the last. The direwolves huffed, approaching the city guard hidden behind their walls as both dogs whined at the door, trying their best to seem as submissive and friendly as possible until a man inspected them from behind the safety of a portcullis, and a warm torch in his hand. It was a wonder they were seen to begin with. But the man only did because Loric's white fur did not match the black background of the horizon.

Being let inside, they licked at the man's gloved hands, trying their best to replicate alley dogs wanting food, mostly because they were also terribly hungry, but to placate the guard into feeling safe around them. He petted the white one, her ears flicking as she swooned in his hand, making Thayne slightly jealous as he used his

muzzle to push her aside, getting scratches of his own. Eventually, the guard felt the accessory around her neck, and with it, the container with the plan's to end the war.

The guard brought more, and soon a whole detachment was escorting the northern wolf-dogs to the keep, their tails wagging as they felt like pampered pooches. The fact that direwolves were not native to these lands was more than enough evidence that King Ranly was sending a message.

The Cordial Monarch, with the banner of a blue crescent moon on a white background, soon received the parchment inside the case. His stringy mustache curled a few inches as he twitched his face, reading the notes and maps again and again. He looked to his messenger who had brought the dogs and the necklace, and spoke seven words that the direwolves did not understand. "Stall the assault. We wait for Ranly."

But they did not care to understand them. For they had done their duty. Loyal dogs from the beginning of their lives, to the end.

—

Lorica panted as she rested by the fireplace, her aching body stretching out as her black paw pads scraped along the carpet. Above the flames, a purple banner with a

white wolf rested in the center, designed after Lorica herself. She let out a yawn, and was rewarded with a large hand patting her fuzzy white head.

"You okay girl?" said King Ranly, making sure to dig his nails deep into her fur coat, receiving licks on his fingers from her as he did so.

Whenever he spoke, it was gibberish to her animal mind. But it comforted her nonetheless, especially as she laid there, getting suckled on from around six little pups with differing white and black colorations. She had birthed them recently, when the sun finally revealed itself through the clouds, and the necromancer threat was ended once more.

Being a mount was new for Lorica, the King choosing her personally as his steed considering the dots were connected between Kalvan and his majesty and the bond had been made. It was an interesting and unexpected effect, the knowledge of its existence would be destroyed by order of the Monarch, who felt sorry for Loric, and never wanted such another man to go through a similar experience. Many records were destroyed, people gone from history. The squire was one of them, as if he never existed at all.

Yet, even under order from the King, this was where the alchemist betrayed him, for the recipe exists, in some decrepit library, waiting to be found once again. If

someone went through a related situation, hopefully they would not be transformed from a malicious motive.

While Lorica could not get to own the property and assets she was promised, she still did get to live in a fancy castle with several servants always at her beck and call, or her bark and call.

Thayne was right behind her, licking her ears and snout to make sure it wasn't too sore. Her first time giving birth, she had never felt more proud in her existence. Everyone from foreign rulers to the lowest lepers owed their lives to Lorica and Thayne, the direwolves getting so much praise whenever they were recognized.

And even still, giving birth, in Lorica's eyes, was the best accomplishment she'd ever done.

There were others too. Such as beating a local record for a race on a trail. King Ranly atop her, directing her reins as she ran between the trees. Lorica was a good mount, but with the world rebuilding itself, it was more than likely that she would not serve as a war mount for those tired of such conflicts. Yet, there were bandits, and her master often did enjoy disposing personally of such ruffians.

That would be her life. Lorica and Thayne, and all their children to remain. A bronze statue was created of their liking, the male slightly larger, and positioned over his mate in a protective stance while the necklace drooped down from her, showing exactly what had saved the world.

This monument was built in the plaza of Ranly's capital, the cobblestone roads walked by many as they paid their respects to truehearted hounds that saved the day, that saved them all, and the planet too.

Many suns and moons would rise and fall. Ranly too, Kalvan, Carlisle, Couter, even the dogs too, and their descendants. The cobblestone roads would be repaved many times, but the statue still stood. As the buildings went into disrepair, they were renovated with new architectural styles, ones popular at the time as even those rose and fell. Nothing was permanent, except for the statue.

The city's streets were laden with brick, the houses too as smokestacks billowed smog into the air, industry revolutionizing their earth with new commercializations, thoughts, concepts, political ideologies. The Kingdom fell, but a Republic continued in its stead, and the statue was still there.

Streetlights were set up, with large metallic carts that used four black rubber wheels and mechanized engines to honk and drive from place to place. The fashions of

what the citizens wore became radical and progressive compared to more traditional attire. When the government did something the citizenry did not like, the central square that was based around Lorica and Thayne became a symbol of hope for the protesters.

Then, the modern day. High in the clouds, skyscrapers threatened heaven's domain. Flying, metal birds traversed individuals from population center, to population center. It was a hot summer, and a foreign-looking woman with a rectangular mirror was tapping a button, recording herself in a snapshot as she smiled in front of the memorial. Even in her lands, these animals meant something.

These direwolves meant something for *all*. As rockets took the planet's population to new horizons, new worlds to be settled, they would not be forgotten. And as a mega-city covered the planet, their statue would even now stand.

For what does a dog want in return for being loyal? Food? Shelter? No. They want love, and for Lorica and her mate, they found nothing but the warmth and devotion of a world they had saved. For the warmth the dogs received could not match the warmth they returned to all of humanity.