

## 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 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?"