

Dark of Winter
By Christopher Percy



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Prologue: Directive

Sumner

Spider

Rebound

Deadeye

Breaking

Broken

Ablaze

Captive

Damned

Groogs

Hunted

Kamda

Dead

Rush

Jambalabans

End

Epilogue: Directive

Prologue: Directive

Vaconius watched as the victory-wheel was paraded down the battlefield. He could taste blood in his mouth, a foul iron flavour that even retching could not diminish. He used to relish such sensations, but not so today. Today the carnage had been on an unreal level. Today thousands had died.

The victory-wheel was a monster. A huge contraption of wood and nails built for ceremonial death. On each of the wheels forty spokes was tied a chieftain from the amalgamated northern force. They looked like worms, all brown and wriggling, gagged to save from screaming but muted gasps of terror still escaped some. At an unspoken point, the knights holding firebrands set alight to the wheel and pushed it over the edge of a large snowdrift. A cinder-black trail followed the rolling wheel down into oblivion. It was a clear message. Oppose King Fialsun and be turned to dust.

Three people stood close to Vaconius. They were counting the battle dead. A simple black mark on ribbed parchment constituted a life, or a death. They had stopped to watch as the victory-wheel was torched. "Went well," mused one of them.

Vaconius was a rig, a captain in the royal army and today, for reasons he could not explain, he felt sickened by the sight of bloodshed.

A widow bird settled on a heap of mashed bodies. It croaked, blinked, flapped its bald wings and turned its beak to the purple and crimson pulp that had, until recently, been living men. Vaconius put his hands to his mouth and yelled, scaring the bird off and raising the heads of the living soldiers around him. He waved his arms up and down when the bird tried to return. Pointless, he knew, and he wondered if that was how the northerners had felt facing the might and sophistication of the King's Army. Iron headed arrows against tempered steel. Futile. But it had not stopped them from trying. He half envied them, the brave northerners. They had died for a reason. Vaconius was little more than an automaton. He fought not for a belief but because he was told to. He was no better than the footpads in Vague. They killed for money too.

He was feeling uncharacteristically maudlin and was worried by it. Thinking too hard, but why now? He walked with his head bowed down, only raising it to acknowledge the soldiers that stopped sifting through the dead long enough to throw mailed fists to their chests. Then he spotted the Chancellor and his mood darkened further. The bureaucrat stood at the other end of the battlefield, the King's end. His cloak billowed out behind him like a black cloud. It framed his baldhead, made him appear puffed up, anatomically odd. It was not a flattering garment, nor did it bestow grace to his movements as he picked his way through the cloven shields and shattered heads that busied the ground. Amongst the devastation of the battlefield the Chancellor was light entertainment. Even so, Vaconius rolled his eyes at the prospect of talking to him. Duvikon was a treacherous man, so ingrained with pleasing his King that his opinions were worthless. What was spoken in confidence to Duvikon soon turned to court gossip and Vaconius did not like him.

"Vaconius," it was Duvikon. The wretched man had finally caught up. Vaconius ignored him. "Didn't you hear me?" Duvikon picked his way through the spilled entrails like a lady fighting to keep her hem clean. He expressed his disgust by screwing his nose up.

"What do you want?"

"To give you a word of advice, from one friend to another."

The Chancellor had no friends. “Don’t play games with me. You are like the snake that slithers through the court, tongue darting, eyes everywhere. Your mere presence irritates me. What do you want?”

Duvikon looked stunned; he was unaccustomed to such honest retorts. “You haven’t fought in months,” he said at last, too dull witted to riposte. Vaconius’ directness had momentarily thrown him, but the Chancellor was quick to reassert himself. “And this has not gone unnoticed. You command the men well but this may not be enough. Certain people feel that you should lead by example, as you used to when you were younger.”

“Certain people?” Vaconius questioned. “By that you mean him.”

“Him!” Duvikon sounded stupefied, but the reaction was mock and really he was angry. “Such familiarity demonstrates the contempt the ordinary man has for our great and glorious King.”

Spoken from the heart. Even low-bellies like Duvikon could speak the truth, sometimes.

“What do you want, Duvikon?” Vaconius’ irritation peaked at the lame defence of the King. “Your very presence offends me.”

The Chancellor leaned conspiratorially close, “Today has brought us another victory and we would celebrate but for your jaded approach. Your attitude is like a cancer spreading through the ranks. The men are getting lazy and attitudes are changing. I have been watching you, these past few months. You are not the man you used to be.”

“Attitudes are changing because the men are getting tired of fighting.”

“I’ll pretend that I never heard that. If the King is looking for reasons to punish you he has a wealth of them already. Don’t add to them.”

“Anything else?”

Duvikon huffed indignantly. “Just remember that Chancellor Duvikon was there for you. That he tried to give you advice. I am also here to summon you. The King wishes to see you.”

Having always felt affection for his King, Vaconius experienced anger now. Things were changing. For the better? No, things never changed for the better.

Weavers had finished making the royal tent. They were fat men, particular to the King’s Army, all arse and naked, with tall heads that ended in points. Each was capable of creating a shelter in minutes. How they did it was a mystery. They spun something from somewhere.

Vaconius brushed aside the silky flap of the tent entrance and walked in. A sickly smell rose from an incense burner, its scent competing with the stench of carnage outside.

Sat in the middle of a ring of tall candles was King Fialsun; so fat and old he struggled to lift his head in recognition of his rig. There were other figures standing in the gloom just outside the ring of candlelight. Occasionally they moved or coughed or left the tent on some errand to return later. Vaconius could see their silhouettes. He supposed that he must have been one too, a shadow that is.

The King addressed his subjects. “Time passes slowly. Just like everything else here, it gets frozen in place. I hate it. I will be returning to Vague in two days’ time. First to appoint satraps for my new province. Let them argue amongst themselves over what precious little commodities this land has to offer. I need to instigate the keep building programme too. Bastions have to be paid for to garrison

the law. I want rig Haerk to organise victual parties. We'll have to raid the villages as we find them. Take what we want. We could use their men too; help with the building programme. If they don't come freely then clap them in iron. Kill a few to send out a message."

Fialsun sat wearing his parade armour. It was fashioned from gold with baroque borders of twisting platinum. A helmet, beautifully crafted from ivory, was barely discernible nestled beneath one of his fat arms. The armour was exquisite to behold and it sparkled playfully in the guttering candlelight. It was typical of Fialsun: pretty but impractical. None but Vaconius had noticed the wire wrapped around the breastplate. The King had been secured to the chair to save from falling and hurting himself. He was so fat he could not even sit unaided.

There was one other stood within the circle of golden light, just to the side of the improvised throne. Vaconius did not recognise him though he had the same sharp, cruel features as the King. "Well," said Fialsun finally turning to face Vaconius and the rig was startled at the sudden interest. "Forty-thousand northerners lay dead and I now own this freezing piece of shit." He was in a black mood. He was always in a black mood. Perhaps a spark of humanity deep within the King was just as abhorred at the massacre as Vaconius was. Perhaps.

It had been all too easy crushing the proletarian forces of the north. They had been ill trained, ill equipped and unfocused. Nothing more than a maniacal rabble which had fought with desperation. Had fought poorly. It had been a slaughter, and it sat uncomfortably with Vaconius, a soldier of honour. The strategic implications for holding land so far north were infinitesimal when compared to the demography. It was an inhospitable country filled with snow and wind and surprise chasms. Peopled by quarrelsome, territorially hungry tribes and a sea that was frozen solid throughout most of the year. The invasion had been driven more from whim than some grand economic scheme. It had been an amusement for the King, a distraction. Where was the honour in that?

Rig Vaconius bowed before his King. His thoughts were his own.

"You're missing something, Vaconius."

He could not think what. "My lord?"

"Your spark, your bite. You're the finest of all the rigs in my army. The men love you; adore you. But you held back today. Many have commented upon your lack of," he thought for a moment, finally settling on the word, "commitment."

Vaconius was worried. His thoughts had not been his own and had been betrayed by his lack of aggression during the fight. What else did they know of his deepest, darkest secrets? The thoughts he had late at night when cruel men slept and honest ones wrestled with their conscience.

"I relish disappointment on your face, my proud captain, my rig. You're a dangerous man and dangerous men should be kept occupied, lest their active minds and busy hands find mischief elsewhere." Fialsun leaned back and he whistled as he breathed. His nose glowed red. Not even the King was immune from the weather. Just knowing that was some comfort to the bitter Vaconius. After all, it was fitting that he should suffer just as his subjects did. The cold was relentless.

"I would find no mischief. My mind and hands belong to my King," he replied diplomatically. Fialsun's grasp of ethics was held in check by delicate threads of reasoning and it was easy for one of those threads to snap at any time. The King was mad and that made him unpredictable. Many people had died for minor infractions. A word spoken at the wrong time or a misinterpreted action could end bloodily and those close to Fialsun soon learned to live with fear and paranoia.

Time passed as Vaconius' response was mulled over.

"Are you ill?" suddenly from the King.

Vaconius shook his head, saying, "No, my lord."

"Then perhaps we ought to test your dedication."

Vaconius shuddered. What cruel scheme had the old fool devised? He did not have to wait long to find out.

Fialsun beckoned him nearer with a curling finger and said, "The unification of the northern tribes ensured that we killed all the barbaric chieftains, bar one. He lives in a village called Sumner. A place so remote that its neighbours forgot to invite it to the fracas."

"Sumner. I have heard of Sumner," said Vaconius. Sumner was as far north as any man could go before hitting the sea. It was a village lost in a world of cold and pain and suffering. Its people were odd, mutated by generations of isolation and inbreeding. The warriors of Sumner were infamously feral, with one more so than any other. "Threecuts," he said breathlessly, "Threecuts guards that village."

"Yes. Prove your dedication to your King. I want you to kill Threecuts," said the King, visibly animated with the prospect of violence. "Along with every other man, woman and child in that village. Slaughter the cattle and raze their huts to the ground. I don't want their fealty. I want their blood. My sister's son, Ramperan, will go with you," eyes lifted in the direction of the man stood next to the King. "He has some military experience and has expressed a desire to learn from you."

Vaconius nodded curtly in recognition of the honour. Inside he was cursing. If the rumours were to be believed, Ramperan was just as mad as his uncle.

"I want you to kill Threecuts, Ramperan knows this. He will not take the kill from you."

Again, another nod from Vaconius, followed by, "He must be old now," meaning Threecuts. "I thought him a legend. He is a monster, an eater of the living."

"No, no legend. Tales of him may be inflated, who knows? All those that have fought him have died. He is an enigma, as mysterious as the village he protects." Fialsun moved a little as he spoke and the dark wood chair he sat in creaked. The fat fingers of his right hand shook visibly with the cold. The candlelight flickered and a strengthening wind beat upon the sides of the tent so that it sounded as if the war drums were starting again.

The tent flap moved and Chancellor Duvikon entered quietly. He was hard to detect in the lambent light, like a spirit or a shadow. But he was all mischief.

"Have you told him of our plans my liege?" he said, bowing long and deep.

"I have. He knows all he needs to." Turning stiltedly to Vaconius now, "You know your King's mind. Leave me now. Go, bring me the head of Threecuts. Wipe out Sumner, their existence mocks me."

Duvikon was quick to follow Vaconius out. "We have to test your loyalty," he spluttered nervously. "Some dogs get lazy with age, others rebellious. I hope you don't object to the reference."

"Not at all," said Vaconius. "It's just what I expect from a snake."



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