

Friend, Lover, Father, Hero

By Blue Jay

A stranger finds his place in a new home, but can a chance at true love help him escape the horrors of his past?

Well, this has certainly taken its sweet time, hasn't it? Of course, it didn't help that I was holding down the fort alone for a week, meaning little time to devote to making sure this story was shaping up. On that note, this tale has taken a very different turn than what I had originally envisioned: like *Cujo*, I was going to have a very dark ending with only the faintest glimmer of light for the cast.

In the course of actually writing, though, things changed, and I decided to have a less depressing ending for our protagonists. I'm fine with sad endings (and sad stories in general), but I'd much rather have an ending where the mains can live with themselves than wish they were dead. Wouldn't you?

A lot of this I got as an idea from Josh Reynolds's *Master of Death* (Warhammer), mixed with how I admire my own dad a lot, and his military service came to mind. The result is a mixture of uplifting and depressing, but hopefully it instills a sense of satisfaction, that a good story was read.

The voices of the dead woke him.

Slowly his eyes opened, and just as slowly the blurriness cleared away, granting him a perfect view of the dark ceiling he faced. Turning his head, he found the rest of the room equally dark. Good; there was nothing bright about death.

His limbs felt heavy when he moved them as he rolled off the bed, but were in fact much lighter than last he remembered: before he'd passed into oblivion, he had weighed a ton, all the exhaustion and near-starvation, running so long and hard with nothing to grant him serious rest and relief. It was a wonder he had made it as far as he had before falling into death's arms.

Feet touched the floor, and he found that they were bare upon the aged wood. Looking at himself, he saw that he was completely nude, but then again, he'd seen plenty of artwork depicting bare-bodied persons in the afterlife, so his exposure was nothing surprising. He pushed the thought aside and stood, steadying himself and making for the door. He could hear muffled voices beyond the closed portal, but they weren't loud enough to make out until he opened it.

Do all the dead find themselves in a house like this when the Underworld receives them? he wondered. Well, it wasn't as though such a thing hadn't been reckoned before; plenty of stories and artwork had

propagated the notion of the deceased having spiritual necropolises, reenacting the lives they'd left behind when they perished. Was that his punishment? To relive (he almost laughed at the word) what he'd gone through before, or some variation thereof?

But this isn't my home, as an adult or a pup, he thought. Just what was going on? This was not the Ghost King's dark palace, that much was certain: it was too "poor and of the common rabble" to be part of a spectral overlord's residence. So if not there, then where? More and more he was convinced that he was cursed to repeat a mockery of a life in the mortal realm.

That came as no real shock: the Mortuary Cult always maintained that death was a kind of life itself, a mirror's reflection, sometimes dark and sometimes light.

As he moved down the hallway, closer to the low voices, a sudden weakness came over him. He doubled over, catching himself with his left hand to the same knee, but his right hand slid over its respective joint, and he had to stop himself from falling onto the floor by bending his arm at the elbow.

Panting, he shifted his arm to get a look at his right hand and see if there was something wrong, but saw that his limb ended at the wrist; the hand itself was gone.

Making an irritated sound in his throat, he chalked another one up to the Mortuary Cult as he recalled that he'd severed the appendage when alive. It was disappointing that he would have to go eternity without a hand, but that was his own fault, wasn't it? Scarring the body in turn scarred the soul, the Cult taught, and he'd done that very thing, so it was time to pay for it.

Scowling, he forced himself back into a standing position. He was feeling better than he had before dying, but the weight of his sins was clearly dragging him into lethargy. *I don't have time for this*, he thought, pushing aside that he now had an eternity to suffer despair for his crimes.

Slogging down the hallway, he approached a bend, soft lighting betraying the presence of the house's residents ahead. He made little noise as he approached, his soft footsteps masked by the discussion held by what sounded like two females.

Ahead, seated at a table lit by a set of candles in a badly-tarnished candelabrum, two females were conversing. One of them had her back to him, and while the other was facing him, she could not see him just yet. Moving closer, still a little enshrouded in the dimness of the hallway, he listened for a moment, unable to help himself.

"—Don't know what Sal is going to do," the cervine with her back turned was saying. "When I gave him the dagger, he looked at it closely but didn't understand the writing carved into the blade or the symbol on the pommel. When he took the jewelry to Elder Domenico, neither of them could identify the style." She shook her head, sighing. "Both of them looked a little disturbed about him, but they wouldn't tell me anything."

Idly, he reached up and touched his right ear with his left hand, feeling the holes where the small rings had once dangled.

The zebra in the other chair held up a calming hand. “That doesn’t mean he’s a stranger, Gio. You know that there are wandering merchants, and some of them do come up with their own designs. This fellow could have easily purchased some, and a weapon to protect himself from bandits.”

“But what about the *engraving*?” Gio pressed. “Elder Domenico couldn’t identify it, and he’s been to every town and city in the region as Ambassador Most Honorable. Explain *that*, Lucia.”

Clearly exasperated, the zebra replied, “Again, that doesn’t mean it’s a real language. Haven’t you been cub-sitting yet? Little ones can come up with make-believe languages, especially if their imaginative enough. I’ve seen it a few times.”

Gio shook her head. “Not like this, you haven’t. The writing, the symbols, the heavy clothing—he’s from far away, I’m telling you!”

“Keep your voice down!” hissed the striped female. “He was half-dead when you found him, wasn’t he? Leave him to rest so that he has a proper appetite in the morning—”

“And that’s another thing!” the other interrupted. “His teeth are sharp, or did you forget? There aren’t any sharp-toothed people anywhere around here, nowhere on the plains. Only some wild animals have teeth like that.”

Lucia rolled her eyes. “Giovanna, I swear that you—”

She broke off and started, a sharp gasp of surprise heard as her eyes swelled, looking past her friend: she’d spotted him. The cervine whirled about and pressed herself against the table upon also viewing him there in the shadows, and for a long moment, only their frightened breathing could be heard.

Snorting softly, he stepped into the room, clearly a simple kitchen, and with no concern for his lack of attire.

“You can destroy the earrings,” he told them. “And the dagger as well; I don’t need them anymore.” He shrugged. “Might as well burn the clothes while you’re at it, since the weather here is a bit warmer than I’m used to.”

Blinking, they quickly exchanged glances before Lucia spoke up.

“Friend, you should be sleeping. At least sit down and rest yourself. With how long you must have been wandering, you shouldn’t be getting up right away.”

Recover his strength, then? Despite how sure he’d been moments ago, it looked as though he might not have perished in his flight.

Looking at her, he noticed finally that her hair was navy and not black, flowing down to her upper back. She wore a light house robe, its soft teal color complementing her appearance.

His eyes shifted to the other female. She was a little smaller in height and frame, but no less attractive. Her face was a pattern of black and white, dark around the eyes and a thick strip up the nose and

forehead, but otherwise white, and her ears were tipped darkly. Long, smooth antlers protruded from her skull, gracefully curving back, and she had black hair that flared at the ends. She was an Oryx, and she managed to weakly greet him.

“Er, yes,” Lucia spoke up. “Hello indeed. My name is Lucia, and this is my close friend, Giovanna. What is your name? Do you remember?”

He gave another snort. “What good will it do me to tell you? A name only has meaning when other people know it.”

They both blinked, exchanging confused and worried looks before the zebra stepped around to the end of the table and pulled out the chair. “In no pleasant mood you may be,” she said with an air of profound patience, “but you need rest and food, and if you won’t get some sleep in a proper bed, at least sit down before your legs give out and you bang your head on the floor.”

He was still for a moment, weighing his choices, before mentally shrugging and taking the seat. It wasn’t as though he had much else to do, and he’d nearly collapsed just minutes ago. Besides, he was alive and with a second chance, and he’d been cruel enough before that a little appreciation could balance things for him. His mind flashed back to the war, and he told himself he needed to adopt some new manners and leave the old him behind.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice low, and it was a small miracle that either of them heard the words.

“You’re quite welcome,” Lucia said. Once both females were also seated, she asked, “But what is your name? Gio here found no identification on you when she found you blacked out in the woods, and her cousin Salvatore also found nothing. Who are you?”

He hesitated. If they had no idea who he was, then telling them his name would cause no harm, but by that same token, his name would have little meaning beyond something to call him by. “My name is Wilhelm,” he said.

“Only Wilhelm?” Giovanna asked.

He shook his head. “I have no more family, so my surname is meaningless. I’m only Wilhelm now.”

Sighing, the equine nodded. “All right, Wilhelm it is. Where do you come from? Your hometown, I mean. Judging by your heavy wear, I was thinking you were a sea-faring male.”

Another shake of the head. “I’ve never been to the sea. I don’t even know what it looks like.”

Gio gasped. “You’ve never seen the ocean? But how? Wouldn’t you want to see something as beautiful as that every day?”

“Shush!” Lucia said.

He cast his eyes down, and it was a moment before he responded. “I’ve seen many things, and while a good deal of them were grand, not a one of them was ‘beautiful.’ I’ve spent my entire life in the dead

forests, black marshes, and sand-stricken badlands. Not once have I seen a body of water bigger than a pond.”

Gio’s eyes shifted into a sympathetic expression. “I’m sorry. When you’re feeling more yourself, we can take a trip there, and it’ll raise your spirits—”

Both of them jerked back, shocked, when he suddenly laughed mirthlessly, leaning against the table’s edge for support. “Raise my spirits? *Raise my spirits?* You must be mad as a sunbaked vagabond to think I want that horror back.”

While the cervine gaped at him, her older friend appeared angry. “Now really,” she growled, “we’re just trying to help you! Gio meant a pleasant sight would make you feel better, it wasn’t some insult, or are your people so backwards that you must take it that way?”

Wilhelm stopped laughing and looked at the infuriated zebra. Calming down, he ran his hand over his face, sighing heavily. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that. It’s just...where I’m from, that phrase has a much different meaning. Nobody, and I mean *nobody*, uses it pleasantly.”

“But where are you from?” Gio pressed. “The place you described sounds awful, and I don’t know if anybody here has been to those lands or any like them.”

The runaway frowned, turning the matter over in his mind. Eventually he confessed, “Far away. No place you want to go.” Especially if the war was still going on, which it likely was, given its participants. He looked again to his stump, dark and heavy feelings welling up within him. He’d only gotten rid of it as a last resort, relying upon it for much of his desperate flight, but possessing it for too long put him at risk for being tracked, and so he’d removed it and burned the wound shut.

Catching him looking at his injury, Lucia asked, “What caused that? Were you attacked by bandits?”

“No,” he said softly. “I did this to myself.”

His eyes grew blurry and he tried to shake it away only for it to grow stronger. Leaning heavily against the table, almost yearning for it to be his next bed, Wilhelm felt sleep calling him back to its arms. He was not yet ready to do so and fought back, staying awake just enough to hear Giovanna ask him what species he was.

“Caracal,” was his drowsy reply before oblivion reclaimed him.

Over the next several weeks, Wilhelm regained enough of his stamina that he was able to move about the property casually. He was *allowed* to go anywhere on the farm that he pleased, so long as he did not enter Giovanna’s bedroom. The feline almost laughed at how the other Oryx, the tall and leanly-muscled Salvatore, imposed these restrictions upon him, clearly not trusting a stranger even if he’d been found near death and with a serious physical injury.

Giovanna... For all the thought he gave her, which was very little indeed, she seemed to obsess over him. Each and every day she would try to get answers from him: what his old family was like; what other creatures from his land were like; what he did for a living; what kind of food he liked to eat; and a thousand other pestering bits of nonsense that the runaway quietly abided. Most of the time only silence met her inquiries, and at other times half-answers that were so vague and cryptic that he might as well have only given more silence to her.

“Have you given any more thought to visiting the sea?” she liked to ask him at dinner, right after they were both seated. “I’m sure we could get someone in town to watch the farm while we visited.”

Wilhelm would only shake his head. “I’d rather drown myself in it than admire it,” he said, as morose and bitter as he was when he’d first awoken in her home. He kept telling himself to do better, to at least pretend at gratitude, but he found it more and more difficult as the days drew on.

The food didn’t help. It tasted good, great even, but as quickly as the flavor came it went, his dismal demeanor dulling the meals, making him long for spit-roasted meats. Of course, when he thought of those meals, he thought also of his old life, and all the things he’d done, and his appetite would shrink; as a result, he had some trouble getting his weight to a safe level.

Lucia had worked what wonders she could, but in addition to Wilhelm’s reluctance to improve in attitude, her mate was always brokering new deals, gaining new clients for his tax assistance business. The caracal disdained money, having never had need for it: nobody in the North did, currency having little use when weighed against real power, such as soldiers and magic. Resulting from a flow of good fortune, the equines bid farewell and moved, their new abode three days’ journey east. Giovanna was quite sad to see them go, Lucia being her best friend since adolescence. Wilhelm wasn’t upset at the loss, but he found that he regretted the zebra’s leaving, though he was unable to understand why.

As the days stretched on, Wilhelm found it increasingly difficult to resist the urge to do something. The weight of his past was not easily thrown off, but he’d never been one to be idle when there was work needing accomplished. The lack of a second hand was a marked hindrance, but he insisted upon getting his body in motion and his mind to thinking beyond the past, and so he started to (awkwardly) help the cervine.

Initially Gio was resistant to his need for action, telling him that shoveling and hoeing were quite difficult to do with only one hand. When that argument fell on deaf ears, she resolved to make things less awkward for him. After some effort, a bracer was crafted of sturdy leather, preventing the farming tools from bruising his stump as he levied them. With the both of them unsure of how to carve an adequate false hand and sufficient locking system for the bracer to hold it with, they resigned themselves to a basic leather sheet.

When she offered to put some designs on it, the caracal had recoiled, insisting upon not using “those cursed markings” whatsoever. The Oryx had been baffled by his refusal, she’d was so sure that he

wouldn't mind some linked rings or something simple, perhaps a family crest, but his vehement declination meant the only thing she could do was withdraw the offer.

Sighing, she kept a watchful eye on Wilhelm as he picked tomatoes in the garden. After a minute, she turned away to get ready for lunch, missing her cousin as he came out from behind a tree and quietly approached the caracal.

As the male cervine approached, Wilhelm continued working, and did not respond to the herbivore's presence until he was almost upon him.

"I could sense you back there," he said without turning. "Perhaps *you've* never felt another's eyes crawling over you watchfully, but *I* have."

"You've been here for almost three months now," Salvatore said, ignoring the cat's comment. "You have kept your nose clean and respected my rules. You haven't wandered like a vagabond about town, or said cruel things to anyone. As terse as you were, you afforded Elder Domenico the respect he deserves."

Wilhelm, growing more than a little annoyed, cut to the chase. "Is there a reason you're interrupting me?"

Frowning, Salvatore said, "While you've kept yourself out of trouble, I still find it hard to trust you very much. You insist on helping, but you refuse to wield a second hand to replace the one you lost. You won't talk about your family, but I've caught you staring at some of them in town, and I can tell when you can't stop thinking about your left-behind loved ones. I don't know fully who you were or where you have been, but I do know that you make me very, very nervous." Though the cat could not see it, the larger male took a firm stance, crossing his arms. "I will grant that you are a peaceable enough person now, but I would ask that you not change from that."

The veiled threat was so painfully obvious that Wilhelm wanted to slap the other. His face contorting into a scowl, the stranger rose and turned, locking his gaze to the Oryx's.

"Let me make myself perfectly clear, Salvatore," Wilhelm said, his voice low and brooking no argument from the other male. "I do not like your 'rules' in the least; they're a vainglorious attempt at lording over one of your many betters. I have absolutely zero interest in the privacy of your cousin. I am not some street scum who goes around menacing the citizenry. And—" He paused and jabbed a finger at the cervine. "—I do not at all appreciate your attempts to decipher my feelings regarding the lives of others.

"You don't trust or like me? I could not care less. You know nothing whatsoever about me. I don't feel comfortable around people, even if I envy them. You don't want to know why I stare at those who have what I do not, because the weight of such a burden would crush you in an instant. You live in a happy, ignorant corner of the world that hasn't known a single day of hardship ever, and you can't even be grateful for that." It hardly seemed possible, but the feline's visage became even more serious. "The gall you possess in telling me what to do is unbelievable, and for your sake, you had better get rid of it,

before I become tired of you completely and leave you to your imaginary kingdom, where you push around Giovanna like a damn slave.”

A gasp snapped both of them out of the tunnel vision their heated exchange created. Giovanna stood a dozen yards away, a shocked expression on her face. In her hands she carried a wooden cup and pitcher, a small towel on her arm, and Wilhelm realized she’d been coming to offer him some refreshment when she’d heard his retort to Salvatore. Flushing, he opened his mouth to explain, but she tossed down the items and stormed back towards her small house.

Mood darkening, Wilhelm turned again to the other male, who himself looked very offended. Salvatore stepped forward, a stride that saw his hoof nearly step onto the cat’s toes, and took a fistful of the outsider’s shirt.

“Now look what you’ve done!” hissed the Oryx. “All that she’s done for you and you brush her off like she’s—!”

He broke off, staring in growing stupor at Wilhelm.

Within the caracal, something awakened, something he’d spent months burying only for the witless flat-tooth to rouse. His hand clamped onto Salvatore’s wrist, squeezing hard enough to make the other cry out and open his fist. Not letting go, Wilhelm glared daggers at the cervine.

“*Go away,*” he said, his voice low and strained and very deadly-sounding.

Salvatore’s eyes widened, his voice unable to muster itself against Wilhelm’s fury. In the cat’s eyes, he thought he saw dark flames. Wrenching himself free, he took off at a full run, moving as if a pack of starving beasts was snapping at his heels.

Wilhelm paid him no heed and picked up the pitcher, cup, and towel, bringing them into the house. Gio wasn’t in the kitchen, and he reluctantly went to her room. As uncomfortable as he felt invading her personal space, he knew he had to.

The female’s door was open, not even partway shut, and he found her on the bed, huddled with her knees brought up, looking like she wanted to cry.

“Gio? May I come in?”

She gave a small sound, and knowing it would be worse if he walked away, he entered and took a seat next to her on the mattress.

“I don’t know what I must have sounded like to you out there just now,” he said, not looking at her, feeling ashamed. “I don’t have a perfect explanation, it’s just that—”

“Am I burdensome to you?” she cut in, weakly. “I know you and Salvatore have never gotten along well, and I know you’re hurt inside and that you find me annoying, but am I a burden to you? I ask you so

many questions, because there's so much about the world I wish to learn, and you're the only person I can think to ask who is not Elder Domenico, but are my questions just making you hate me?"

When she paused to draw a breath before continuing, his hand touched her shoulder and she stopped. Wilhelm felt somewhat wrong doing this, an intimate act that he'd deprived himself of for so long, assuming a role that was reserved only for whosoever became her closest companion and lover, but something inside of him told him that he absolutely must do so lest turmoil most foul strike the young female.

"I don't hate you, Gio," he said, finally looking at her. "You've done everything in your power to make me feel better and get me out of this horrible rut I've been in since I left my home. My old home, I mean, the one I left months ago. I've been slow to catch on to life here, because every time I try to feel alive, I think about the past and that makes me feel dead. That's what's wrong with me, Giovanna: I'm consumed by my past no matter how much you try and help me live in the present."

He stopped there and gave a gentle squeeze of her shoulder before starting to get up, but she touched his hand and he froze.

"Why are you afraid of leaving the past behind?" she asked him. "I know you don't want to forget who you are, but why don't you want to be more than that? You were in such a bad way when I found you, and you've made so much progress since then. You're still a little down in the doldrums sometimes, still depressed by whatever happened in your old life, but you don't let that stop you from having a new life. You've been helping out a lot here, and I've been getting a little extra coin from some of the vegetables you've grown, and doesn't that make you just a little proud of what you've accomplished?"

She shifted, fully taking his hand in both of hers, meeting his eyes. "Don't you care about what you have here? Maybe you didn't care about your old life, just going through with some routine or another, but you don't do that here. You insist on getting details right and doing everything yourself, without making it easy, because you're not afraid of hard work. Some of the townsfolk don't know what to make of you, but you never speak unkindly to them, and they've come to like you a little; I know the cubs would miss you if you left, they've grown a bit fond of seeing you."

Giovanna paused to suck in a breath. "Wilhelm, what *are* we to you? What am *I* to you?"

For a long minute, he did not answer. He *could not* answer. Words could barely even form in the caracal's mind, but somewhere between brain and voice box they crumbled to nothing, not even so much as a meek whisper. It took an eternity for him to force something, anything, from his throat.

"My friend," he choked, and could say no more.

Gio's face softened and her eyes grew wet until she couldn't hold the tears back any longer. Several of them streaking her cheeks, she wordlessly slid from the bed and went to her bureau, removing from the top drawer Wilhelm's dagger. When she turned to him, she asked, "What is this, Wilhelm? Please tell me."

He stared at the blade, quietly surprised she'd kept it, and then slowly shook his head, a look of shame crossing his features. "It speaks of too much wrongdoing. I won't tell you."

"I want to know!" she insisted. "Wilhelm, I don't want you to keep hiding things from me. Tell me half-truths if you must, but no lies, no deceit, nothing of the sort."

For a moment, he did not answer, and barely even did he move. Eventually he spoke again, his voice heavy as weights were set upon him by the memories of the things he'd done, forever associated with that awful blade.

"The writing means 'Death and Obedience.' I will not tell you of the runes; their meaning is too dark and violent to speak of."

Giovanna stared at him with incredulity. Slowly she put the dagger aside and returned to the bed. "Come with me."

He blinked. "What?"

She waved an arm. "Away from here! I'm not a fool, Wilhelm, I know that you were running from something horrible, and you've become better away from it. You haven't recovered yourself fully, and I think that's because you aren't far enough from your past. You need a place where you can forget the pains of yesterday, rid yourself of this darkness, and become a better person—the person you're becoming already."

He pondered over this, wanting to say yes but not sure if he should. He had run as hard as his muscles could push and as far as his eyes could spy. He'd used his survival skills, both natural and arcane, to suckle the land of sustenance, always to get one more mile, one more day of travel between him and his past. Could he really ever escape it? Looking at the Oryx and her plea to take flight and find a new path, he suddenly realized what was happening.

"You love me," he said softly.

Gio's eyes went wide. "You...you *knew*?"

"I've only just now grasped it. But it explains everything, all the looks and questions and pleadings. In spite of my doing absolutely nothing to earn your affection, you have given it." Wilhelm shook his head. "Gio, why? Why would you love a monster like me?"

She slapped him. It wasn't hard or baleful, but it was sharp and clear, and he gaped at her.

"By the spirits, Wilhelm, don't say that about yourself!" she scolded. "You are a good person! You have a good heart and you do good things! Stop telling yourself that you only do wrong, because you know that is not true!"

The caracal flinched at her words, even though he knew of the truth in them. "Gio, you don't understand. The things I've done—"

She cupped his face in her hands and he fell silent. "Are nothing compared to what you do now," she whispered. "I tell you again, you are a good soul."

Looking into her eyes was like looking into mirrors made for the specific purpose of reflecting his own soul. Wilhelm knew what she was saying, that she was utterly correct in his belief in his virtue, and yet...

No, he told himself, no more running.

Feeling all the hidden tension, all the fear and desperation and urge to survive, all of it melting away, Wilhelm leaned into her arms.

Their lips met.

Hours later, as Giovanna slept peacefully, he lay awake in her bed, staring at the ceiling. His thoughts drifted to various points of his life, to the past and present, always with the wonder of what the future held.

His time with the Oryx meant a lot to him now, more than he had ever thought it would, but he could already tell it was over. The comfort he could feel budding within his breast was not misinterpreted: he knew he returned her feelings.

Yet the problem of his past remained. He could not still the urge to return to his land, and try to gain some measure of peace, both with himself and with his people.

Looking again to Gio, he let out a gentle sigh and slid from the sheets, heading to her small writing desk.

It was well into the night when he had started textually confessing his sins, and it was hours later that he stopped. Papers whole and torn littered the floor, a few of them crushed into balls, the writing sometimes crossed out. Wilhelm kept writing even when he felt sleep calling him, determined to tell her the truth.

Eventually he finished. Slowly he worked his wrist, massaging it; he had never in his life written so much, especially not all at once. Wilhelm arranged the papers in order, leaving them in the middle of the desktop, and replaced the quill and ink. He ignored the discarded failings below and went to the closet, selecting a pair of coats. In this region, it only became cool even in the dead of winter, only enough to warrant moderate clothing, so he would need to combine the articles into layers for greater effect.

He hesitated to take his dagger back, but then decided against it; he would take a few coins to procure one from a highway vendor during his trek. A small number of other things he gathered together.

Once he was satisfied that everything he needed was upon his person, either wearing it or ready to extract it from his traveling sack, he gave Gio a gentle kiss upon her brow and left, vanishing into the pre-dawn darkness.

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" Elder Domenico called.

He was a late riser, and would only get up before ten if there was an especially good reason. When the pounding and shouting for him had roused him from his slumber, the aged hog had immediately looked to his clock, seeing it wasn't even nine. Much grumbling followed as he dragged himself out of bed and pulled on his robe, shuffling towards the door.

"Sweet mercy!" he complained as he wrenched the portal open. "What could possess you to wake a poor old beast at such an unkindly hour?"

His demeanor quickly sobered when he saw it was Giovanna, her eyes wide and desperate, breathless and clutching a set of paper in her hand. From her state of dress, it looked as though she had sped through the town in her house robes in a race to see him.

"Child? What's wrong?"

"Elder..." she croaked, all but staggering into his home; he barely got a chair behind her before she collapsed. "Wilhelm, he's gone..."

Domenico frowned. "Gone? Gone where?"

She tried to respond, but no words came, and she held up the papers for him to read. Brow furrowing, he did so, sitting on the stool in the corner. "Gio, get yourself something to drink, you're exhausted."

The Oryx didn't seem to hear him, and so he turned his attention fully to the papers.

Dear Gio,

By the time you read this, I will be far enough away and deep enough in the wild that chasing me will be a fool's errand. I therefore ask you to not do that, because I do not want you to become involved in what I must now do.

You have asked me many questions about my past, and I have always been profoundly reluctant to say anything of it. I told your cousin, when you saw us arguing this last time, that the burden of knowledge regarding me would be too much for him to bear, but I find that I cannot keep this from you anymore. I will tell you a bit about my history, and that of my people, but I cannot tell you everything: there is not so much time and you would be too horrified to read it all.

To begin with, yes, I come from what you call the Northern Wastes. Beyond the Silver Mountains (which we call the Black Edge Mountains), very far north will you find us. In comparison to you, we are as different as night and day: you are herbivorous, while we are carnivorous; you elect your officials, while we have a ruling class. Most telling of all, though, is how the deceased are treated between our cultures: yours are often laid in the earth and sometimes burnt and scattered upon the winds, but my people do not believe in that.

You see, Gio, magic is real. For centuries now my people have harnessed it, many of them, sometimes entire families, learning a few tricks to either survive in the wild as scouts or rangers or some such, but more often to manipulate things so that there is extra help around the house or to bolster the army or seek ancient counsel with wise rules of the ages.

There is no easy way to say this: we do not bury our dead, we raise them. In my land, there is not a single grave. Bodies are only interred long enough to preserve them for a necromancer to call upon the World Unseen and rouse them from death. As such, the bulk of our military is undead. There are benefits to this, as grotesque as this may seem: they require no food or sleep; they feel no pain or fear; and they are in plentiful number.

I was born in a small house at the edge of a dark and twisted forest. My father was not present for my birth, having agreed to help reinforce the barricade at the nearby valley against further assault by the neighboring province. Because of this, my grandfather delivered me, but do not think he was at the end of his years when I started mine: he had passed on several months earlier, and my mother's cousin, who had learned a few words of power, raised him and bound him to our home that he may keep my mother and me safe while my father was away.

When I was born, Mother told me that my eyes shone in the dark, the faintest glow. To my people, that is a sign of magical capacity, and when I was ten, after waiting patiently, I was allowed to enroll in the Mortuary Cult. Every province has a chapter, to teach everyone that death is a natural part of the world and that, contrary to fearing it, we should rather seek to understand and even embrace it. That it not to say we crave death, Gio, that could not be farther from the truth, but think instead that we simply do not mind it quite so badly.

My studies progressed, and after a few years I was strong enough to raise nearly a dozen undead on my own. I was not the best student in the chapter, but one of the local lords saw fit to offer me patronage if I agreed to serve as an officer in his border guard. I vowed I would serve him, and upon graduating from the chapter at 17, I entered the service of Lord Drang.

By our standards, it was a fairly uneventful time, those next ten years, but to you it would have been tumultuous. My parents both died, my father of a bad heart and my mother killed by a wild beast. The border guards have a difficult time, because they have a two-fold duty: watch for enemy undead and also fierce wildlife, and if they do not patrol often in certain areas then that wildlife grows bolder and attacks villages.

Reluctantly I raised my father and bound my mother's spirit to her favorite necklace, taking it as my own. Her remains were too broken to raise, so I donated them to a surgeon, with instructions to use what he could; nothing goes to waste in that land, and I know that my mother is still out there somewhere, crawling around at the behest of another. Perhaps I should have kept them, but at the time I had her spirit to accompany me and that was enough then.

There were battles sometimes, rival lords sending waves of undead and their own servile necromancers to oust each other as they vied for power. Such attempts at creating a territorial monopoly had been

going on for decades again by the time I was born, so this was nothing to me or my peers or elders. I fended off the attacks and led a few myself, rising through the ranks until I was a respected officer of the province, both admired and feared. By this time, my magic had grown strong enough that I could raise over a hundred undead of mixed types, though if I focused on only the more dangerous breeds I could raise fewer albeit more potent kinds.

Shortly after I turned 29, things began to change, and not for the better. Alliances were made by rivaling lords and in response alliances were made by mine. Forces were joined until over five thousand of us had banded together, raising a grisly army of nearly a quarter of a million. We marched here and there, destroying roads and dockyards, making travel for an army (undead or otherwise) a hard task.

One of the enemy's defensive positions was a small town, only a few hundred persons there, and it was here that my life turned, setting me on the road to meeting you.

We wiped them out easily enough, adding their armaments to our own, replacing our losses with their bodies. I was in charge of the battalion that held the town, and inquired to Lord Drang as to what I should do next: if I marched south, I could possibly overtake a supply route, but if I marched west a strong defensive position (a fort, specifically) could be overrun and used as a bolstering point to keep ourselves from being beaten back should our fortunes turn.

His answer came in the form of a particularly dangerous undead, which ordered me to burn the town utterly and move on. When I asked for clarification as to whether that meant rendering homeless the townsfolk, the answer was the same: destroy everything. I realized then that my orders meant death for those who did not deserve it.

I was at a loss as to what I should do. If I defied my orders, it was worse than death, but if I carried them out...

I can barely remember accepting my orders and executing them, rounding everyone up, crowding them into as few buildings as possible before setting everything ablaze. My undead made sure none escaped the blaze, and I could only stand there and watch as my integrity was destroyed, made all the worse by the fact that I was the one who had done it.

The war dragged on, and though I did my duty, it was with a darkened conscience. I know that your people would call me a monster for dabbling in "dark arts" alone, heedless of how accepted and even praised it is in my culture, but something that is beyond question is the butchery I committed that day.

I turned 31 a few months before I found the will to reclaim myself, however fractionally. I had a legion at my command, my powers having grown even further and now with a magical rune burned into my hand. I had channeled into it the death energies of enemy necromancers I defeated, adding their strength to my own, though a side effect from this act is that the rune makes one traceable through certain scrying methods.

I led my legion and subordinate necromancers to a deserted town, and when we camped for the night, I secretly sent out riders to alert the nearby enemy to our position. I grabbed what I could carry and fled,

lest I risk my own death. For weeks I made my way south, certain that if I could brave the mountains, then I would be able to find respite. I foraged as best I could, using my powers to sustain me by draining the life from trees and other plants, even the water itself, when I ran out of food. Doing so can keep one alive for a while, but it is a half-hearted replacement to actual nourishment.

Eventually I made it through the mountains, my desperate need to survive driving me onward. I never saw any other person, not of my kind nor yours, during my flight. Sometimes I thought I heard voices, but I would tell myself I was going mad from lack of interaction with other living beings. Fearful of being followed, I made the decision to remove my hand, and the physical pain was nothing compared to the spiritual agony. It felt as though my very soul was being rent apart, though it gradually returned to normal as the pain from the extra spiritual energies I'd disconnected from my soul vanished, my natural balance returning.

I kept going, telling myself I had to make it farther, that maybe they had sensed my severing and were on my heels; after all, my people never forget an offense, no matter how slight. My strength failed me and I passed out, lying there for you to discover me in the middle of nowhere.

That is my tale, Gio, and I can only imagine how you must now think of me. I do not know what to say to you in apology for what I've done, and I wish we had had more time together, but fate is a cruel thing.

Again, do not pursue me. Where I must go, what I must do, it is all thanks to you, Gio. I would have withered away in my own misery and shame had I met someone less interested in me and my wellbeing, but your relentless and sympathetic nature have given me the strength to do the right thing.

I am going back, Gio. I made the trip before, and I can make it again. I know the war cannot be over with, and my powers are markedly diminished (though by no means am I weak), but I fully intend to make Drang answer for the crimes he has committed.

Life is for living, Gio, you taught me that, and I can never fully repay you.

I love you,

Wilhelm Ruttmeyer

PS—destroy the dagger.

Domenico stared in disbelief at the letter, his eyes lifting to the cervine. "I...I never would have imagined," he managed to say. "An army of corpses, led by dark magicians, and he intends to fight against them to atone for his sins..."

Gio wiped away fresh tears, choking out a question. "Isn't there anything we can do? Don't we have any soldiers of our own to send him?"

The hog shook his head. "No, nothing. City guards and local militia are all our people have, you know that. And even if we had more, what he describes is great violence between the dead and the living, something far beyond what we are used to. Our soldiers would flee in terror from his before the first

clashing of swords.” He sighed. “Forgive me, child, but it looks as though we must concede to his wishes and let him go.”

Her body aching, her mind reeling, Giovanna could only cry again.

The months passed. Gio lived alone, aside from Salvatore steadily checking in with her. He was less stern, sometimes skittish, as if he expected Wilhelm to leap from the shadows and assail him, but he was otherwise himself.

Lucia visited a few times, when she had the money for it, and the time allowed for travel. She was shocked and horrified to learn the truth of the stranger she’d met those months ago, but Gio persuaded her to keep it quiet and gradually agreed that, as horrible as he had once been, Wilhelm had made a phenomenal recovery and that he was a far better person for it.

Similarly, Elder Domenico said nothing of the truth.

When in town, sometimes the cubs would ask Gio what happened to her strange friend with the flat face, and she would shrug and say he needed to see his home again, and that it was so far away that it would be a long time before he returned. The cubs were saddened by this news, but in the fashion of childhood, they began pretending to be Wilhelm. It caused no small amount of amusement to the residents.

As the time passed, Gio grew ill. She would wake up feeling not very much herself, and the youths who volunteered to help around the farm in Wilhelm’s stead were forced to work longer, harder, and more diligently, as she was not there to supervise. For a little while, the Oryx thought perhaps she had caught a summer ailment, but when it persisted, she went to the local physicians and explained her illness to them.

“What are experiencing isn’t a cold or fever,” she was told. “You’re expecting.”

“Expecting what?” Gio asked, confused. “What does that mean?”

“My dear,” came the patient explanation, “you are with calf.”

Naturally shocked, the cervine wracked herself for an answer. There was only one: Wilhelm.

Beside herself, she tried to find the best course of action. A part of her wanted to leave and find him, tell him what she was going through and demand his help in raising their child; another part told her that was foolish, that he was gone and she needed to be strong in his absence.

Overcome with worry, she went to Elder Domenico, asking for his aid. The old hog gave her advice, offering that where her partner had gone was no safe place, and going there either with a child inside of her or with a child holding her hand, it was reckless to the point of condemnation for her to go after

Wilhelm. He insisted she stay in the area and cherish the life given to her, that she had a mother's responsibilities to assume now.

Reluctantly Gio accepted. She did not want to let her lover go, but in the face of childbirth, she had little choice. Having her lover's dagger melted down and discarded made his absence a little easier, as if she was somehow helping him combat his demons.

As her belly grew steadily, she took good care of herself, always safe and keeping healthy. This did not go only for her body, but also for her spirit: though she missed Wilhelm dearly, she had decided to raise their calf with only selected knowledge of the caracal's existence. She would say that he was a quiet and determined male, willing to work hard using both mind and body, that he was a devoted friend and compassionate partner, and that he had to return to the place of his birth to right many wrongs.

Giovanna knew that their child would be upset that his or her father was not around, but she was adamant in making sure to raise her calf knowing that Wilhelm be remembered fondly, with their calf admiring him as the family hero.

Journeying alone to face such danger, all in the name of doing the right thing, what else could he be?

The End