The King’s Man

 A child rode to war, and an army followed. Sitting atop a black and white destrier, the petulant ruler marched gleefully toward the battlefield. His entourage—sycophants and bodyguards—formed a protective diamond to shield him from harm or negative thought. His porcelain skin blushed from the cold at his cheeks and nose, giving him the appearance of a painted doll. The sword dangling from his horse was more than half his size. It was a picture, to be sure. For Sir Alder Loddan, riding at the right hand of the King, it was a recipe for disaster. He knew that he was riding to death. He’d known the whole time.

 To their rear came the ranks of Mercani soldiers. They wore meager tunics and leathers. Only every fifth man wore mail, and it was rusted and battle-scarred. These were the expendables, the peasants. They carried spears made entirely of wood, or crudely fashioned pitchforks and scythes. Their ill-covered feet plunged into the frigid snow and rose to reveal blackened toes.

 Next were the short-swordsmen. These were soldiers, dressed in the leather and irons of the King’s Army, the sigil of House Loddan—a golden pillar amidst ruins—painted on their chest-pieces. The Captains wore yellow capes and plumes on their helmets. Though just as cold, they were better at hiding discomfort.

 Then came the archers, the pikemen, the chariots, and the cavalry. The Army marched in a line of castes, from poorest to the nobles. Alder imaged he could see the whips in the hands of the cavalry commanders. Each man’s worth trumped the combined wealth of the ranks ahead. And all paled compared to the child seated atop the warhorse Domina.

 “Are you worried, Sir Alder?”

 The knight jerked at the sudden noise. Lydia, his aged mount, barely stirred. She was used to his fidgeting, after so many campaigns around the kingdom. Alder smiled at the Lord of Shields bitterly. The rat-faced noble had no business in war. His purse bought him a seat at the King’s table, and it had only grown since the crown changed heads.

 “This cold is an ill omen. We are far north for this time of year.”

 Lord Inchin’s sunken eyes traced over Alder’s scarred face. “You hold too much with the old ways. The gods are with us, not the Northmen. This winter will not keep us from our conquest.” He leered at his King. “As you predicted, my Lord.”

 The King did not reply. He was bundled deep inside the royal robes. They had been made for the previous regent, an older and much fatter man.

 Alder held his tongue and turned to the horizon. The gray skies merged with the snow perfectly. It was impossible to see where one ended and the other began. To the rear, the last few skeletal trees bid the Army off with gentle waves of their branches. Ahead, for miles around, they were exposed.

 They marched in silence for an hour, too cold to speak. Alder tucked his hands under his armpits for warmth, but found none waiting. His fingers poked at the puffy scar tissue under his right arm. If he closed his eyes, he could relive the injury. A lesson learned from his youth, and almost at a terminal cost. *Shield first, then the strike. Otherwise you get hurt for no reason.*

 His eyes popped open. Traveling over open snow had one advantage: sound carried far. He’d heard it, unmistakable.

 “Sire,” Alder spoke, sending a plume of steam billowing around his face. “They know. We are spotted.”

 The Lord of Shields scoffed. “Nonsense. The Northmen weather the season in their huts. They won’t see us coming until it is too late.”

 The Knight squirmed on his saddle. He’d fought in these planes before. He’d fought the Northmen, earned his life with each battle. He’d recognize the sound of a sword slipping a scabbard anywhere. Up ahead, the hills rose sharply on either side. They knew about this pass. It forced the Army into a cluster, marching shoulder-to-shoulder for almost a mile. He’d warned the King then, in the safety of the War Room.

 Alder urged Lydia forward and leapt out ahead of the King. He stopped short, forcing the protective diamond to halt. The old rich men complained loudly, ignorant of their surroundings.

 “My Lord, the Northmen are known to set ambushes. They are waiting for us now, just beyond the rise. I promise you, the Army will die if we march forward.”

 Crisp, articulate voices threw curses and slights toward the aged guard. Lord Inchin laughed. “This is all fantasy. Our scouts have reported no movement from the barbarians. The seers have foretold no omens. This is the rambling of a madman. I fear that age has withered your courage, dear knight. Perhaps you would feel more comfort riding with the trains?”

 Alder heard the sound again, repeated over and over. He could see the forces of the North in his mind, their numbers hidden with blankets of white fur to mask them against the snow. The first strike would be arrows, loosed in the thousands. Then the swords and axes would fall upon the exhausted Mercani forces until the ground was but a red slurry. He saw it all. His eyes turned to the faces of the young peasants, shivering only a few hundred paces away. They were blacksmiths and farmers, hunters and trappers. Their families would starve without them. The Kingdom would die without them. Alder’s heart pounded so heard he felt it vibrate his chest plate.

 “Let us retreat to the wood line,” he implored. “Set up a defensive line and probe this passage. Give the army a chance to warm themselves and dry their feet. Please, sire. I beg of you.”

 A cacophony of voices echoed from the royal party. The Lord of Coin laughed so hard his jowls almost clapped together. The Lord of Whispers sank deeper into his black robes, avoiding further scrutiny. The Lord of Shields posted up between Alder and the King, pointing an accusing finger at the guard. Suddenly the cries stopped. A small, bejeweled hand rose from underneath wool and silk robes. All eyes fell on the boy King. He smiled wickedly.

 “It appears my Uncle has lost his stomach for war. Pity, Sir Alder. I had hoped you would be my right hand in the wars to come.”

 Alder balked. “Wars? But this campaign—”

 “Is just the beginning. Mercan is an empire on the rise, and we need resources. Wealth. Bodies for the army. Once the North falls, we will only have to guard one border, and will grow it ever outward, until the entire world bends the knee to House Loddan.”

 Alder’s chest pinched in. He winced, rubbing at his scar with frozen fingers. *The shield, then the strike.* His mouth was dry and scratchy. His wind-whipped face numb. He saw the royal map in his mind, watched the golden color sweep across the adjacent kingdoms one by one. The leather scroll floated on a river of blood. Alder’s hand went to his sword.

 Lord Inchin saw it first. He was a man of means. His flawlessly manicured fingers struggled to grip the icy handle of his blade. When he tugged, the scabbard stuck. He tried again, to no avail. His sunken eyes grew wide as saucers.

 “A soldier always oils the blade, m’lord.” Alder drew his sword in a fluid motion, spinning it over the top of his head before bringing it down with a crash. The heavy iron bit deep into Inchin’s neck, releasing a spray of hot blood that splattered the pristine snow.

 Now the rest of the King’s Guard reacted. They went for their swords and spears. Those furthest drew up crossbows. None had notched a bolt yet. Any other day, Alder would have reprimanded them for such carelessness. Today, his mind was only one the war, and how to stop it.

 The boy king watched in horror as his Lord of Shields fell to the ground, gurgling and grunting his final words to the world. Alder urged Lydia forward until he was inches from his nephew. He placed a gauntlet on the boy’s shoulder and held him tight.

 “Uncle?” This wasn’t the voice of a King. This wasn’t the commanding timber that had just demanded whole nations die for his conquest. This was a child of nineteen years, the son of a fallen brother.

 Alder felt the first bolt strike him in the shoulder. The thick iron quarrel punched through his armor and buried in his torso. Another caught him lower down, just missing the spine. On either side, guards raised their swords to strike killing blows. Alder drew back his sword.

 “You were right, Jeremiah. I have lost the stomach for war.” Alder pushed the sword through the King’s chest until his pommel stopped. Warm blood gushed over his wrist and spilled into his lap. He stared into his nephew’s eyes and whispered a final apology. Then the strikes came and felled him from his horse.

 The snow cushioned his fall and numbed his wounds. He could hear the blood soaking into the earth around him. He felt like an emptying bath. The cold came first, sapping his strength. Then a warmth that wrapped around him like a blanket. Alder could just make out the words of the Lord of War. They must retreat immediately, lest the enemy realize they are without a king. The King’s Guard gathered up the body of the Lord of Shields. They left Alder in the snow. He didn’t mind. It wasn’t unexpected.

He knew had ridden to his death. He had known the whole time.