

Think Not of the Enemy

Spit blood from your mouth as you recover from the blow to your face; three opponents pace cautiously, taking careful steps to avoid your warding swings. Keep an eye on them circling, waiting to strike. Don't let the murmurs of the crowd distract you, the thousands gathered at the arena to watch. Take a deep breath, you've got all the time in the world.

One rushes up, hoping to catch you from behind again. Pivot on your right leg and bring your sword onto his thigh, causing him to crash to the ground. Kick his blade away as another challenger takes a swing. Catch it on your shield and push off through your shoulder, sending him off balance. Breathe, stay focused. Turn on this new opponent, relentlessly bash him with the dull weapon—legs, chest, head—until he falls. The crowd rallies, scattered cheers swelling to a wave of support.

Hear the armored-footfalls of the final rival, roll away instinctively, dropping your shield in the maneuver. Catch yourself on one knee and see the blade coming down toward you, deflect it with a wild swing. This one is smaller than the others, lithe, a woman. She holds her sword in two hands, every movement calculated, measured. You both pause, breathing heavy and labored; lock eyes with her, see the anticipation glean in her gaze. The audience falls quiet, expectant.

Step to gain a better position, but she counters with her own deft footwork. Breathe. She watches you hungrily, tracking every movement. The crowd's energy is restive, they hold their breath as one—who will claim victory this day?

Take a step forward; she does the same. Both charge, twin battle cries calling out to one another. The storm of excitement breaks throughout the masses as your blades lock mid-swing.

Duel with an incredible prowess—a dance of steel—as you both block, parry, sidestep, dodge. Her technique is excellent. Wait. See an opening—grab her wrist as she swings and pin

her sword. In the minute interval, before you claim victory, her eyes soften—gone is the intensity of battle. See in her eyes the spark of humanity: a soul wrapped in the terror of knowing this may be the end.

Smash your helm into hers, watch as she crumples and collapses.

The clamor from the stands is resounding.

The other warriors stagger up and offer you their respect, well-fought.

She still hasn't stirred. Is she breathing? Oh god. *What have you done?*

Panic rises in your chest.

Stoop down to see if she's all right, but the uproar overpowers everything.

What have you done?

Frantic now, pull the helmet from her head; eyes are still closed. Scream for a medic, but a strong hand pulls you to your feet. Lord Trachis, Supreme Commander, holds your hand in triumph: "My people! I present to you, our champion!" The audience applauds, but you have other concerns. Wrest free from Trachis's grip, say Trachis, she needs help. She—

Look down and see her being moved onto a stretcher. A pair of medics attend her and before you can make sure she'll recover, Trachis commands: "Sir Samuel—kneel."

Glance at the unconscious woman as she is taken away, conflicted...but obey the order. Place your left knee into the sand. Bow your head.

Lord Trachis continues: "Citizens! My brothers and sisters! It has been twenty years of violence, twenty years of war with the Lycan King and his wolves." Shouts of hatred rain down from the crowd, no family untouched by the war's toll. "These creatures have threatened our very way of life; they have menaced the freedoms and liberties that we hold so inviolable. Our

temples; our schools; our homes; our families—*none* are safe from the enemy!” Feel the outrage stir inside, building in strength.

“You have trusted in me to lead you, to protect you from the danger all around us.”

Trachis’s voice is full of fervor, but sorrow colors his tone: “Forgive me, my people, for I have failed with too many.” He lowers his head in solemnity and then rallies with renewed strength: “But we stand on the eve of victory. We have found the lair of the Lycan King and tonight, I and our new champion—” he gestures to you, “shall infiltrate the enemy lines to end this war once and for all!”

Hear the thunderous ovation of the crowd.

Trachis holds his hands up to quiet the throngs and announces: “And now, Sir Samuel, there is but one trial left.” Trachis looks over to a side gate and gives a nod to a guard there.

The guard knocks a mailed fist on the closed entrance. After a few moments, the gate opens and a pair of soldiers wheel a massive crate into the center of the arena. Hear loud struggling from within. Behind them, a squire walks towards Lord Trachis with a blade—your blade. Trachis unsheathes the sword, examines its sharpness, and then offers it to you. The soldiers open the cage and drag a writhing creature from its depths, fighting to keep in under control. They manage to secure it and back away.

Lord Trachis says for all to hear: “Samuel, the final task of your training: prove you are ready to kill our enemy.”

Gaze upon a muzzled and trapped wolf—feel no pity. Though young, the Lycan King and his kin deserve only contempt. They are your enemy, monsters born of wrath and darkness. Take the sword from Trachis eagerly, the fire still raging inside. How pathetically the wolf fights

against its restraints. Its life is an offense to all human life, but an affront to you, especially, who has lost so much in this war. Raise the sword up—

Wait. Look into the wolf's eyes; threatening black pupils in a sea of coursing amber, the hatred and fury of the wild. Observe a calmness, for but a moment—see something you were not expecting. The hatred gives way to... that same *spark* as the woman. But the essence of this soul is not fear, it is grief.

Reel from the discovery.

The wolf's eyes probe: "Is war the only way?" The sincerity is unnerving and catches you off guard. The eyes of the wolf are not pleading; they are pained, forlorn as they whisper a doubt you've long held back: "Isn't there more for us, brother?"

Adjust your grip on the sword. Try to shake off the hesitation, these are *monsters*. Think of father. Think of Henry. The thousands who have fallen in this war. Feel their presence with you now, how their memory should cry out for vengeance and blood.

Look into its eyes and coerce that ire to build again. Realize the pup does not grieve only for its end, but also for you. *It pities you.*

Swing. The eyes are silenced.

Breathe slowly, try to steady your racing heart. Lord Trachis places a hand on your shoulder, a congratulation of your commitment. In an undertone, he assures: "It is our charge to protect the land and its people. Unless we destroy these enemies, our country shall never know freedom. We must never hesitate to do our duty."

Nod in understanding. Your face betrays you.

Trachis scrutinizes: "Speak your mind, what bothers you?"

Wrestle with that doubt, a naïve remnant of your youth. Remember your training, that they are animals deserving of death. The Lycan King and the wolves—they hate you, your people, your way of life. There is no room for reluctance when your people are at stake.

Say the pup... it's eyes. They seemed to speak.

“Oh? And tell me, soldier, what did the beast say? What lies did it whisper?”

Stifle the uncertainty. Lie. Say it begged for mercy.

Trachis's stare pierces your deception. “Come with me,” he orders.

Follow Trachis away from the arena. Pass through the paved courtyards of the training grounds, where hundreds of youths are being taught in the ways of war. Some work with sword and shield while drill masters scream commands from the sidelines. Others have just begun training in their armor and they are slow and awkward still. Male and female, rich and poor, all strive to be ready for the day of reckoning. One young boy catches your eye, the color of his hair the same as Mary's. He carries a bow, though his quiver barely dangles above the ground on the back of one so young. Watch as he pulls an arrow from the quiver, fumbling with the drawstring. Imagine Mary doing the same—fighting for her life—as the wolves close in. *They* would not hesitate to strike; *they* don't have these doubts.

Wait, yes they do. The young wolf's eyes: that familiar, almost human fear, the sorrow, the pity.

Hear a cough and return to reality. Find yourself atop the east wall; from the battlements, you can see miles of the city's beauty: tall, proud buildings that speak of progress. Warm lights flicker in some of the homes as the sun sets on another day. Lord Trachis turns you away from the city and points to the memorial beyond the fortifications. “Have you forgotten your great father and his troops, Samuel?” Trachis's challenge echoes to the graves below. “Those brave

men and women, who were but the first in this war to be set upon by these vicious monsters?”

Glance down to the graves—each marker a soldier who has given their life in the name of home and country. Hundreds, *thousands* of souls... reduced to so many headstones.

The old suspicions bubble up once more. Ask but why did the Lycan King attack? What does it want? It’s been twenty years of war and we still have no idea what they are after. If we could just find out what they want, maybe we could—

Trachis, outraged, interjects: “What? Reach a peaceful resolution? Trust monsters that have no semblance of humanity?”

Unrelenting, Lord Trachis continues, “You of all people should want revenge for how our people have suffered.” Trachis steps forward with arms crossed, scanning over you with his frigid blue eyes, like he’s trying to spot where this lack of resolve is rooted. “Maybe you don’t have what it takes to serve. Maybe you just don’t care about those who have given their lives for this country, *for you*. Like your father. Or your brother. Can you live with that *boy*?”

Freeze at the accusation. Recall the memories that haunt you: seeing father for the last time as he prepared for his expedition because not even his body was found after the ambush. Or years later, coming home just in time to see Henry riding off to face the Lycan King, determined to end this war once and for all. Lord Trachis led the search, but recovered nothing of Henry except his sword—father’s sword. Now your sword. Feel its weight at your side, heavy in more ways than one.

“This is the only way, Samuel. It’s them or us; they started this war and now we’re going to finish it. It’s our duty.”

Wallow in the guilt. Meet Lord Trachis's stare, expecting disgust. But his stalwart blue eyes, usually so demanding, reveal something worse than distaste; they are the anguished eyes of disappointment.

Trachis approaches, a mentor instructing a student. "Think not of the enemy, those beasts beyond the wall. Think of those we're fighting for." He turns you back to look once more upon the city. It's wonderful and true, made by honest hands. A shadow lingers over it, the unrest of knowing the enemy lies in wait.

"I love these people, Samuel. I want them to live without fear. I carry this weapon," he motions to his blade, "for a day when everyone will finally, truly be free. And on that day, we will all put away our swords for good, steadfast in the knowledge that we have earned this peace both for those living and for those who have come before us."

The weight of Trachis's words crashes down upon you, causing your doubts to flee, and leaving a loathsome taste. Question how you could ever let such fear cloud your judgment—this isn't about vengeance, that's where Henry went wrong. This is about the people, about carving out a world where they are free.

Kneel before Trachis, a show of homage to a man who has never wavered in his commitment to duty. Say you're sorry, that you're ready for this task.

Trachis gives a solemn nod and raises you up. "I'm proud of you Samuel. Now go home, make ready for the battle to come. Say goodbye to your family. Meet me near the north road and from there we will ride to the lair of the Lycan King and finish what was started so many years ago." Trachis offers his forearm to you—a salute of strength and brotherhood—take it and destiny in your hand.

Return to your home—a quaint place at first glance, it has none of the trappings one might expect for a family of your prestige and reputation. Simple it may be, but it's also comfortable and welcoming. It's a home for a family—or at least it was. It feels emptier every day.

Mother and Mary have not yet come back from their business around the city. Quickly, prepare for your journey: cast off the sparring armor from the arena and don the glimmering plate that has stood at your bed for years now. It fits like a second skin and after years of drilling and training, the weight is almost nothing.

Meticulously take the whetstone and bring the sword to a razor's edge. As you sharpen the blade, steel yourself for what must be done.

Hear a noise from the door and pause your preparations. Mary and Mother come in, laden with a basket of goods from the market. Mary yells as she sees you and runs to your side. She wraps you in a hug, her small, soft arms at odds with the hardened steel of your plate. "Samuel! Samuel! You look so pretty in your armor. You look like a real hero."

Smile and pick up the little girl, she squeals as you bring her up to your face. Say, that you hope you look the part; the city needs a hero right now. Kiss Mary on the cheek and she giggles.

Mother cuts in: "Mary, would you please go to your room?" Mother's tone is delicate, but uneasy. Carry Mary over to the backroom and gently put her down. Say you'll only be a minute—she looks up curiously to you and then to Mother. But she trusts you and goes inside as you shut the door behind her. Take a deep breath and turn.

Mother stands tall and unbowed, her arms crossed stubbornly. Her hair has gone grey at the roots, but it is her eyes that reveal her age—the green eyes that speak of loss and of the

implacable pain born from that loss. She obstructs the path to the table where your sword rests. Approach and ask her to please move aside.

“I won’t let you do this Samuel. I won’t let you make the same mistake as your brother.”

Say it’s not the same. Say that Henry was too caught up in vengeance, that this time, your motives are pure—you’re fighting for freedom and justice. Is there anything more worthy?

Mother’s eyes soften and you recognize the same pity the wolf showed in the arena. “But why does it have to be you, my son? I know you have spent these years training, fighting, to be ready... Haven’t you ever wondered if there was more for you?”

Mother’s echo of the pup’s thoughts stings your conviction. Don’t give in to the apprehension; remember what Trachis said.

Slam your fist onto the table. Say that if we will not fight, we will never be free. Point to Mary’s closed door; say she deserves to live in a world without fear.

“But what do you deserve?” Mother moves to you and places both hands upon your face as she whispers: “You speak of freedom for others and what about for yourself? You bear this duty like a burden, but have you ever asked why it was yours to bear? You want people to truly know freedom? Show them what it means to be afraid, but to refuse to let that fear rule you.”

Tears fall now from her eyes and an aching reaches your heart. “Bloodshed can’t bring your father or Henry or any of the others back Samuel, nothing can. Life can hold more for you, for all of us, if we just have the courage to live.”

Feel the desperate vicissitudes. On the one hand, a thunderous shout culminating from years of training, the daily reminder that you should always strive to do your duty and nothing less. And on the other hand, Mother’s whisper, like a still small voice that resonates with

veracity, but you've always tried to drown out. Lock eyes with Mother. Wrestle with the impossible choice.

Spy Mary's small face peering up to you from the cracked bedroom door. Her soft green eyes are like Mother's but without the suffering. In Mary, you see an innocence and that gives you hope—hope for a world where her and the little ones like her might never know the heaviness of the sword or the fear of battle. What's more, they won't feel as if they must lay down their lives for others; they'll be free to live for themselves.

It's too late for you, you've carried the burden so long, you've become one with it. She has not yet felt the heaviness of duty. Accept that you would do anything to keep her from it. And if you can end this war...maybe she'll never have to.

Kiss Mother on the forehead and release a sigh. Pull yourself from her grasp. Say you have to do this, that you will not let anyone else carry this for you. Say you're sorry. Go to the table and pick up your sword. Mother doesn't stop you; she knows your path is set.

Mary rushes from her room to wrap you in another hug, though sorrow has replaced her excitement: "Don't go, Samuel. Please don't go, I want you to stay."

Pick up the sweet girl once more. Say it'll be all right, that you promise to come back soon. Kiss her and give her back to Mother. Turn to the door and go forth into the night.

Do not look back.

Meet Lord Trachis and the horses on the north road with your visor down, afraid to let him see the struggle in your eyes. "Are you ready, Samuel?" he asks. Nod in silent affirmation, don't let your pain show through your voice. "Good. It'll all be over soon." Mount up next to Trachis and ride hard into the night.

Ride on the road for a few hours, following Trachis as he navigates in the night. Suddenly, Trachis brings his horse to a halt and motions with a closed fist to be silent. He dismounts and secures the horse to a nearby tree, do the same with yours. Look at Trachis arrayed in his raven-black armor, embodying the visage of living darkness; watch the darkness pull a sword from its sheath and behold—this angel of death.

Trachis ducks behind a nearby tree and points deeper into the wood: after a few moments of scanning, see a pair of wolves sniffing the air, searching for an unknown scent. Trachis points to you and motions to go around the patrol—creep from tree to tree, trying to stay upwind of the monsters' detection. After reaching a flanking position, just a few yards behind the wolves, Trachis snaps a twig, drawing their attention to himself. At the same moment, break cover and charge at the wolf on the left, stabbing into its side before it can turn to face you. Hear its miserable yelp as the steel pierces deep and deadly. Watch as it falls and lies still on the forest floor.

Quickly, turn to face the second wolf who greets you with an angry snarl, stooped down, and ready to pounce. Suddenly, instead of charging, the wolf raises its head to the night sky. Realization comes upon you as it moves to sound the alarm—as it begins its haunting signal, Trachis sprints from his position and swings powerfully at the exposed neck of the wolf, staining its white chest and with crimson.

Both of you wait for a moment, straining to hear the telltale barks and howls of reinforcements coming. The night is still as you both let out a sigh of relief.

Trachis leads deeper into the forest and eventually the soft dirt of the wood gives way to rocky gravel and you find yourself entering a small ravine. Feel the grit of the sand under your armored boots, anxiously look about at every kicked rock and creaking stone, feel your heart

announce your movements with each echoing beat. Finally, find yourself at the mouth of a large cave, see the faint glow of moonlight shining into its depths. Silently look up to Trachis as he whispers that this is it. Nod in affirmation and draw your sword.

One. Two. Three. Take a deep breath.

In a rush, enter the cave. It's a massive open chamber, vaulted ceilings that rise ten and even twenty feet tall in some places, with sharp stalactites that hang like fangs. It's dark and has a musty wet smell of mold. It's difficult to see anything but the immense void of the darkness.

There's a moment of bated breath as you and Trachis scan the cave—where is it?

Then the void begins to *move*, begins to rise. Open your mouth in horror at the mass of black fur and muscle, a mountain of midnight. Its claws and teeth like daggers, its eyes full of wrath. And like a man, it stands on two legs and gives a roar that shakes the cave.

“Stand firm Samuel!” Trachis commands as he moves to one side of the hulking creature, trying to flank it. Pull yourself out of your shock and move to the other side. A deadly duel commences, a delicate back-and-forth as the two parties test one another. You and Trachis are a whirlwind of arms, blending offense and defense, probing the Lycan King and his movements with your blades. But every time it seems you're gaining the advantage, the Lycan King unleashes a fresh series of attacks and the ground is lost.

The foul creature looks on with caution, tracing every move with a shocking level of cunning. Though it may be savage, it is far from simple. Look into its eyes and see a similar spark as the wolf pup, but this creature's emotions are uncomplicated. Deep within its foul eyes is an unadorned contempt.

Try as you might, you and Trachis are unable to pierce the keen defenses of the Lycan king. Strangely, the beast does not press its advantage, but seems to be waiting, baiting you to

keep pressing the attack. Trachis begins to pant from the effort and you likewise feel the weariness in your arms.

In desperation, Trachis moves forward to engage, but is caught on the shield with a ferocious swipe of the deadly claws, shattering it with one blow. Rush the creature with your shield and slam into its side. Stagger back, feel like you've rammed a granite pillar. Ask are you all right to Trachis, looking back to see him cast off his splintered shield.

"Look out!" Trachis cries. Feel dazed as a claw knocks into your helm and sends your temple ringing. Blindly roll away, losing your sword in the moment. Let instinct take over as you desperately try to keep from the beast's menacing maw. Struggle to catch your breath, your head pounds from the blow. Pull the helmet off and see the monstrous form standing over you, look deep into its dangerous jaws. Its eyes pass over your face and you see a glimmer of recognition which gives it pause.

Trachis places himself between you and the Lycan King and the rancor returns to the lupine eyes. As Trachis attempts to fend off the monster, search for your sword—there it is! Injured and dazed, crawl towards it. Grab it and stumble upright, turn to watch the duel between the man and the devil.

Trachis is a great warrior, but age has weakened him. Watch as he bravely attempts to hold his ground, his defense is untenable against such reckless hate. Trachis's feet are unsteady, he's slowing down. With a frenzied swipe, the creature disarms the venerable warrior, then picks him up in its clawed hands, and slams him into the stone wall, once, twice, a third time. Trachis eyes are barely open as the Lycan King snarls and goes for his throat.

Cry out no! Ignore the pain, ignore the danger, storm forward with blade in hand.

Feel your sword sink into the beast's side with a sickening, wet *slck*. Listen to the monster, this curse upon the land let out—not a roar or a scream—but a whimper. And then a sigh. Push the blade further. Curse the beast back to hell. Watch the monster release Trachis from its clutches and watch them both crash to the stone floor in a clatter.

Dash to your mentor. Kneel at his side and try to rouse him. Say Trachis, Trachis, wake up. We've done it, the war is finished. Feel the tears, of their own accord, stream down your face. Say it's over. Shake him, panic filling your heart. Plead with his unmoving body, don't you see? It's what you've always wanted, Lord Trachis. You. Me. Our families. The people. We're finally free. We can finally put away our swords.

Scream the words again when he still doesn't stir.

Stand up and shout at the monstrosity, why did you ever come to this land? We gave you no reason for violence! My father and brother and Trachis and so many others—what had they done to you and yours? Why did we deserve this?

Blink once. Twice. At the third time, realize the Lycan King's body has changed. Where there once was a monster is now a young, poorly kept man whose ragged black hair is the same shade as the creature's fur. Notice the thick iron chain that is locked around his—no, *its*—ankle, restraining it within the cavern, limiting its movement. See your sword in its side and know that this was certainly the creature.

Let time come to a standstill as you recognize beneath the motley beard and matted hair the face of Henry.

No.

Henry is dead.

Trachis saw him fall those ten years ago, slain in his confrontation of the Lycan King. You wield his sword, the sword he received from your father. The father who was the first to fall against the Lycan King...

Come back to yourself at the shock of a shield slamming into the side of your head. Hear the clink of metal locking into place. See around your ankle a new chain, this one likewise anchored to the stone. Look behind you to see Trachis scurry away, out of reach. Say Trachis you're alive? And Henry? What-what is-happening?...

Watch Trachis's face go from strained to malevolent as he sees your confusion. "I knew you were weak," he gasps, "but I never thought you were stupid too, boy." Trachis's blue eyes have lost their calm, the coldness now colored with cruelty.

Place your hand against your chest as your heart suddenly screams with excruciating agony. Feel the blood boil under your skin, feel the hot acid pump through your body, pain so present you can taste it like fire and bile.

Through blurred vision, see Lord Trachis nurse his left side, but he savors: "Nothing unites a people like war; nothing else makes them so eager to submit, to line up and follow orders. They need a strong commander to lead them; *they crave the order.*"

Feel yourself begin to change, your frame growing unnaturally large, your armor falling off and scattering from the sudden expansion of your body. Hands becoming brutal claws; face and neck elongating, forcefully contorting, more canine-like; dark fur sprouting all over your body. All of it agony.

"And as long as there are enemies at the gates there will never be a shortage of heroes who are willing to sacrifice themselves for *freedom*," he mocks. Trachis walks over to Henry's still form, unceremoniously rips the blade from the body, and slings it across his back. "Your

Mother will be heartbroken to hear how I could not save you. How you fought bravely, but we could not defeat the Lycan King..." He pauses at the entrance in a moment of feigned mourning. Then the façade gives way to a chilling grin: "I'm sure Mary will be inspired to hear how you fought so valiantly. And don't worry; you'll get to see her again...in a few years."

Roar with a voice that is not yours, a primal cry of defiance and suffering. Curse Trachis as he stumbles from the cave and into the moonlight and pull uselessly against the chain that binds you.

Weep bitter tears from eyes that are now wolf-like and amber, a raging torrent of wild anger. But there, amidst the untamed fury, hear that young wolf's plea echo softly in your soul: *isn't there more for us, brother?*