

## Long Live the King

By Lily Strachan

Ares takes a deep breath, watching the snow falling lazily around him as he tries to catch his breath. The air is cold on his face, cheeks having gone numb a long time ago, but it's hardly noticeable through the adrenaline, his head spinning with it.

He takes another breath, listening to the quiet of the wilderness, only broken by gentle winds blowing through sparse branches or a distant call of a lonely crow, and he grins. There is something sick and twisted hidden beneath the curl of his lips, a manic fire flaring up behind his eyes that have long since been laced with insanity, and he laughs. He embraces the relief and excitement slowly replacing the rush from before, looking out over the long abandoned clearing, over the long deserted stone walls and wooden doors, over the ruins of a forgotten castle, a kingdom.

He has finally found it.

He pushes his hood down, easing his sight, smearing tacky blood against his cheek as he does so, a stark contrast to the pallid colour of his skin. He has his axe still in hand, hanging limp by his side with blood splattered over the blade, leaving a bright, splotchy trail in the snow as he walks down the hill, dragging it behind him.

Ares is reckless with his footing, caring not whether he stumbles through the snow; as long as he makes it to the castle, he cares for nothing else in the world. He is careless in leaving his footprints visible, a clear trail to say someone has been there, but it doesn't matter, not anymore. He had dealt with whoever else could find this, made sure he can't be followed.

The stone walls of the castle have grown dull in their age, crumbling apart over time. The wooden doors have grown full with rot, the wood delicate and splintering under too hard a touch. Ares shows no care for the fragile wood though, shoving the heavy doors open with his shoulder.

The hinges groan as the door budes open, weary after centuries of laying unused, the wood fracturing under the force and falling to the ground. Ares grunts as he shoves the door the rest of the way open, the sound echoing through the barren and cold halls, cobwebs and dust filling out each nook and cranny.

The air is damp and stale, and the halls are dark. Everything is left exactly where it was when everybody abandoned it, old and burnt torches lining the walls, curtains drawn and things abandoned along the halls. There is an old doll laying beside a window; a cart left at the end of the hall, empty wash basins with clothes still hanging out of them.

Ares slowly walks along the deserted halls, his heavy footfalls echoing off the worn stone walls, the scraping of his blade echoing just as loud. Every surface in the castle has been covered in a layer of dust, filling his lungs with every breath he takes, a harsh contrast to the cold air on the outside.

He walks leisurely throughout the halls, taking everything in; the old and tattered portraits of the kings and queens who ruled here, the half open doors leading to torn apart libraries and empty sleeping quarters.

After a while of taking everything in, taking in the history of the castle and the people who lived inside, the history of the kingdom from documents in the studies, he finally stumbles upon the throne room. The twisted smile appears again, curling across his face, bringing along the depraved insanity behind his eyes, something sick and power hungry.

The door creaks as he pushes it open, revealing a large throne that had been carved out of a dark stone, a small shaft of sunlight peeking through the lone window landing directly upon the throne. There was a royal red cushion on the seat of the chair, dusty and discoloured. On the floor just before it lay a crown; cast out of a blackened metal that had grown dull in spots over time, and the base was lined with rubies. Just as time had dulled the colour, it had worn the crown down until it was cracked and broken.

The top of the crown was lined with crosses and points, the metal intricately swirling into different designs throughout the crown. One of the crosses had been broken off at the base, leaving behind a sharp and jagged edge, and another was cracked down the middle.

Ares lets out a breath, walking slowly towards the throne, towards the crown, as he finally latches his heavy axe back onto his belt. He kneels before the crown, lifting it off the floor and turning it over in his hands, gentle with the brittle metal, staring intently at all of the little details carved into the delicate piece. He slowly gets back to his feet, and, still staring at the crown, walks up to the throne.

He finally looks up from the crown, meeting the cold and hard eyes of the last reigning king in the painting hung behind the throne, a similar emptiness colouring the dull grey eyes of the man held within his own. He turns around and lets himself fall into the old throne, taking in every detail of the room splayed before him; suits of armour lining the walls before the wooden doors, paintings of past rulers and past families, everything exactly how it was left, just like the rest of the castle.

There is a scepter leaned against the side of the throne, made of the same metal as the crown with swirling crosses and rubies embedded into it, and Ares grabs it with one hand to lay across his lap. He stares up at the banner hanging above the door, the kingdoms crest threaded into it, and he takes a deep breath, raising the crown above his head, almost as a cheers to the banner.

He places it on his head, the rubies glinting in the light, and leaned back into the throne, letting his arms rest against the stone armrests. He smirks as his eyes light with a burning sense of power.

“Long live The King.”