

## Chapter 10 -- A Long Dead Warrior

### Val

The sky was brightening again by the time I made my way up the mountain towards the Killiara, what was left of the fires that had ravaged the valley slowly dying in the snow. The town had been devastated, and would need to be rebuilt, but I had hopes that the land would recover quickly. The only concern now for the survivors would be making it through the winter, but enough houses had survived, enough food had been saved that they would make it.

There were only half as many mouths to feed now anyway.

I clenched my fists, bringing out a piece of cloth that I had torn from the chest of one of the soldiers, an symbol that they had all been wearing. A gear, layered with seven gears inside it, and seven inside each of those, and so on, the symbol of the man that they had called Kyrie Krona.

The Machine King.

I'd had to torture six men to find the raiders' leader, and he had not given up the information easily, but like all men who relished positions of violent power, he had eventually broken.

And now there were no men left in the valley.

Edda and Rowan had done well, reminding me that the blood of their father coursed in their veins. They were cut up and bruised, covered in blood and hair matted, just like me. But wounds would close and blood would wash out, and come tomorrow it would be like nothing had ever happened.

I laughed.

No, of course it wouldn't be.

Edda picked up Evan's scent not long after we crested the ridge and lead us down into the Killiara and out into the forest, where we found the townspeople shivering next to a small fire, hidden behind a hilltop and huddled together to stay warm. Altogether maybe 40 people, all under Evan's leadership, with the young man standing at attention even with eyes heavy with exhaustion.

I sent Edda to appear in front of him first, accompanied by Rowan. I didn't want to startle the strung out townspeople. I stayed hidden in the woods just beyond the firelight as Evan dropped to a knee, letting Edda nuzzle up against him, ignoring the blood that rubbed off on his shirt as he buried his face in the wolfhound's fur. It wasn't long after that before he found me, and his eyes went wide.

"Sir!" he said, running up to me, stopping a few feet away as I put up a hand.

"Build the fire up, send the men to collect wood, and get everyone warm. There's no danger anymore," I said.

"Is that true?" he asked.

"There are no more men in the valley," I said. "I'm sure. Warm up your people, I'm going to search for any others who got lost."

He looked at me for a moment, but didn't protest.

"Yes sir," he said, and then began to call out to the people.

Edda and Rowan returned to my side as the few men began to spring to action, and as the wolfhounds and I walked into the woods to find the other survivors I could see the fire already starting to grow. Evan really was becoming a fine young man, I thought. I hadn't lied, Aurie.

I tracked two small families in the woods beyond the mountain, finding the pregnant girl and her two small siblings cold but alive, and scaring the piss out of a young couple who'd heard nothing about the fight, having left just before the attack. I nearly had to knock the young man out when he ran off into the woods, leaving his lover behind and disappearing as soon as he saw me, which led to quite the fight when I dragged him back and tossed him at the feet of his beloved, now flanked by a disapproving Edda. The two young ones fought the entire way back to the campfire but they would survive, and so too would the small family.

With the lightening of the sky came a small touch of hope in my chest, as the two sets of stragglers ran to see their neighbors and families in tearful reunions, the sun rising on a new day for them. I stayed away, though, returning to the woods to sweep for any survivors that I might have missed, any soldiers that had escaped. I was out of place among the frightened families whom I hoped would never need to see blood again.

But as the day went on, and the people of the valley began to yearn for home against the cold, I returned to lead Evan and his people out of the valley and up the ridge again, stopping at the top to look down at what had been.

The valley was scarred now, but it would heal. These people, they would heal. It would not be easy, but time would pass, and they would rebuild. I had seen it when I had returned to the north after the war, watching cities that had been levelled already building back, the survivors banding together and constructing their world anew. There were tears, and there would be mourning for fallen families, but these people would grow again.

Humans were nothing if not resilient.

When the last of them had crested the ridge, the weakest ones carried by their family members or Norah, I leapt up and sat upon the rock, looking down at the valley. I had let Evan come and go without any comment as he tended to his family and their neighbors. He'd given me a backwards glance as he did, as if expecting something more, but I gave him no heed. It would just make what I had to do harder on him.

When I was sure that the last of them were gone, I made the walk down the trail through the forest to my home. Or what remained of it. They had torched the place, or at least done their damndest to, leaving a burnt out shell of what I had worked for nearly 7 years to build. The barn had been burned down and the cellar had been torched, although in a strange turn of events the fire had gone out and saved about half of the meat, which I would give to the people of the town. My porch was gone, and so too was the living room, the collapsed stonework of the chimney the only thing left that was recognizable. The bedroom had gone much the same way save some of the drawers, which had nearly melted and left me with barely a single pair of clothes to take through the next few days. Some of the metalwork of the kitchen had survived, but it was all half melted and bent to shit, and even my shed out back had been torched, melting nearly everything of any use.

Well, not everything. There was one thing that had survived the fire, because there had been no way for them to burn it and no reason to take it -- an old stone sledgehammer, sitting in the ashes of the house.

I knelt down next to it, lifting it up and rolling the tool in my hands before standing up and walking down towards the cellar.

The tunnel was still half-filled with smoke as I returned to the cold darkness, striding towards the very back, where the thick wood of the supports ran against a solid stone wall. There had been no reason for Krona's men to come this far in, especially as they slashed and burned their way through the valley.

Krona's men.

They had been looking for survivors. Their goal had not been to kill for survival, or in war, or to defend themselves. They had been sent here for blood, to massacre the people of the valley. For what reason, I didn't know.

And I didn't care. Krona and all of his men would die.

Two days previously, when I had offered to train Evan, Aurie had called me a good man, and part of me had believed it.

But now... now I needed to be someone else.

I placed the sledgehammer gently to the wall, and then swung back with every ounce of force in my body, screaming as I did.

*WHAM!*

The stone crumbled, the heavy head of the sledgehammer crashing deep into the wall.

I roared again, swinging the heavy sledgehammer back and sending it through the wall.

*WHAM!*

*WHAM!*

*WHAM!*

The head of the hammer finally broke through into the chamber beyond, letting out a cool breeze of fresh air.

*WHAM!*

*WHAM!*

*WHAMWHAMWHAMWHAM!*

The hole began to widen.

*WHAM!*

*WHAM!*

*CRSHHHHHH!*

With a final strike I burst through the wall, which broke apart to reveal an open chamber behind the rock as I fell down under the exertion. My breath was heavy, sweat racing down my brow and dust in the air as I stood and pushed ahead. I stepped into the darkness, a torch lighting a small chamber where a steel coffin stood buried halfway into the wall.

I could hear my own heartbeat as I stepped up, dusting off the iron-bound wolf insignia.

There was an inscription on the front, written in silver lettering that twinkled in the dim light.

*I will pray to no god, for no god will answer me.*

*I will bow to no king, for no king will bring me justice.*

*I will bend to no law, for no law will deliver me from evil.*

*And I will fear no man, for no man can break my spirit.*

I opened the coffin, unlatching three locks on the side and heaving the heavy metal lid to the side, a hiss marking the rush of cold air over the years-old armaments, still like gleaming new. The twin, gauntlet-mounted blades had not dulled. The armor had not rusted. The daggers lay perfectly in their bandelier, untouched by the passage of time.

They were not like their predecessors, carved from starsteel by a long-dead craftsman and lost on the battlefield of Heaven's Gate, but they would suffice.

All men died to normal steel just the same.

I pulled out Krona's insignia again, memorizing it again as my teeth clenched so hard that they nearly cracked, and without another word I left the makeshift tomb, bringing the armor and weapons with me.

The sun was setting as I lead Norah through the burnt out strip of the village towards the road that lead to the coast. The men had come from Rene, they'd said, but that was not where I'd find Krona. None of them had even known Krona -- who he was, what he looked like, why he had done what he had done, if it was even a 'he' at all. There had been levels upon levels of intermediaries, they'd said, and hearsay and rumor and myth all surrounding the name of The Machine King, but no truth that I could nail down outside of what their orders had been -- slash and burn, leave no survivors.

They had massacred without even knowing who had ordered it, a thought which made me sick, and presented a daunting challenge. No matter. The wider the name had spread, the easier the trail would be to pick up, and there were only two men -- a king, and a god -- that had ever eluded me before.

And that was only because they had died before I could kill them myself.

I was about to mount up to leave when I heard a voice cry out.

"Sir!" Evan called. "Mr. Valentin, please wait!"

I stopped, turning to find Evan rushing out into the center of the strip calling after me. I stepped down from Norah's stirrup and turned to face him, not moving as he approached.

"Mr. Valentin!" Evan called again, and then stopped a few feet from me, breathing heavily. He looked like he still hadn't slept after all of this time, bags under his eyes and ready to collapse, but still he stood.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I'm going to the nearest town to warn them about the attacks," I lied. "The Edaran nationals need to know that these type of people are out there."

Evan was silent for a while, before hanging his head.

"I... I saw the bodies, sir," Evan said.

I was silent, and Evan spoke again.

"We had to clean them up," he said, fighting back tears. "We had to figure out how many of our people had died and... "

There were tears in his eyes as he looked up to meet me, and for a while his mouth moved but no words came out. Finally he looked away.

"You... you said that there were no more men in the valley, and... and I guess I thought that they'd left or moved on like you said they would. But instead..." he murmured.

Silence hung in the air for a moment, before I spoke again.

“Yes, I killed the men,” I said. “All of them. I didn’t let a single one escape. And now I’m going to leave, and I’m going to find the men who sent them, and I’m going to kill them too, no matter how long it takes.”

Evan nodded, but still wouldn’t speak. He was on his last legs, beaten down and dead tired and probably scared to death. I’d known men who would have broken into hysterics for much less. But he would survive.

“Be safe Evan,” I said, and turned to leave once more.

“Mr. Valentin!” he cried, collapsing to his knees and reaching out. I stopped.

“Please! Please don’t leave us!” he said. “I don’t know if we can do this on our own...

Everyone... everyone is gone and I just... I just... I want Papa and... and Aurie and...”

He began to break down, and when he next looked up at me I saw that the spirit was fading from his eyes. The same spirit that had made him stand up when he was terrified, had kept him alive and awake for almost two days straight, and that he would need to face the trials that were to come.

It was true that facing death could force a young man to grow in an instant, but everyone had a breaking point.

I took a few steps toward him and dropped down to one knee, pulling the boy into a hug, the first time I’d done so. I could feel him trying to hold back his tears, but at a whispered word he finally let them go, crying deeply into my shoulder and going limp as I gently patted his back.

“It’s okay,” I said. “It’s okay.”

But when Edda’s ears perked up and she signaled to me that people were coming, I murmured to Evan to pull himself together and slowly stood, bringing him up with me and then finally holding him at arm’s length until he had the strength to face me on his own power. There were other people coming now, descending from the valley.

As one, then two, then more of the others filed into the town square, I looked Evan in the eye and spoke quietly.

“It’ll be a long time before you can cry again,” I said.

“Sir?” he asked.

“Behind you... these people,” I said. “Right now they need someone to guide them, someone to step up and lead them, to tell them that everything will be okay, and the only person who can do that is you. But it will be a long time before you can cry again.”

“Sir, I don’t think that-” he started.

“When I first met you, you were afraid,” I said. “And even though you were afraid, you stood tall. You steadied your quaking boots, and you did what you believed was right. You protected your family, you stood strong for your mother and your sister when your father died, and you will do the same for your people. But you cannot let the weight of them break you, or they will fall into despair and lose hope.”

“Sir, I can’t... you can’t... please don’t leave!” he started.

“No,” I said. “This village, these people, they’re not my burden to bear, they’re yours. I can do nothing to help, nothing except tell you that I see strength in your heart, the strength to do what you have to.”

Evan was silent, but even as his shoulders trembled, the fading light in his eyes slowly steadied. He looked at me for a few moments, as if the look itself would change my mind, before eventually he shied away, looking at the ground.

"I'm scared," he said. "I... I don't even know where to start."

"Survive the winter," I said. "There's enough food for most of you in my cellar and across town, but you'll need to keep everyone warm and prepare to survive again in the spring. Rebuild the farms, prepare the hunters again. Start there, and the rest will come in time."

Evan nodded slowly.

"I wish I had more time to train you," I said. "But you will learn in time. Remember those few things I taught you, refine them and practice, and you should make a fine hunter someday."

Evan nodded again. He looked as if he wanted to say something else, but instead shook his head and took a set of deep breaths. Counts of four, just like I'd taught him. I waited for him to speak.

"I'll do it sir," he said, taking a moment to look up into the sky before returning his gaze to me.

"I'll lead them... I'll protect them. I promise... I promise I won't let you down!"

He would have said the same words to his father before he died.

"I believe in you Evan," I said. "Be strong."

"I will, sir," Evan said with newfound strength.

With a nod, I turned back to Norah, setting to mount up, when Evan called out again.

"My father... before he died he would tell me the story of a hero, a man who saved our country when the whole world wanted it gone," he said. "He said that after the war the hero had disappeared... but that if we ever needed it, he'd come back. Is that..."

He paused, unable to finish.

I said nothing.

After a few seconds, Evan nodded, head hung in thought. I flinched, hoping that he wouldn't break into tears in front of the people who relied on him, but eventually the waves of emotion passed, and when he finally raised his head again his fists were clenched and there was a fire in his eyes. With a deep breath, he put his hand over his chest in salute.

"Kill them all, Iron Wolf," he said, through gritted teeth.

I mounted up on Norah and spun her around to face Evan and the village. It seemed that all of the survivors had arrived, watching and waiting, eyes on Evan and me.

I looked to them, and then back to him, before raising the same salute to Evan.

"I will," I said, loud enough that only he could hear me, and then without another word I kicked Norah again and set off down the wooded path into the night, flanked by Edda and Rowan. I did not look back, but if I did I knew that Evan would have been standing tall, unwavering as he watched me disappear.

In our world, everybody wants someone to make them feel safe, someone to hold them when they cry and tell them that everything, somehow and some way, will be alright. They turn to their mothers, their fathers, their aunts and uncles, their grandparents, their siblings, their priests, even to their town sheriffs, their guild leaders, their commanders, their kings, their heroes, their gods.

Or even to a young boy, just barely a man.

But not everyone has that right.

Not everyone has that privilege.

As I rode off into the woods, I spoke the lines inscribed on the open coffin of the Iron Wolf of Edara.

*I will pray to no god, for no god will answer me.*

*I will bow to no king, for no king will bring me justice.*

*I will bend to no law, for no law will deliver me from evil.*

*And I will fear no man, for no man can break my spirit.*