

01 – Kieran

“Hero of the Realm”. He had finally done it. A smile of pride slid across his face. He had come a long way.

It had all started on the day his mother had told him about the past of their people. How they had once been great warriors – the strongest of all – ere the traitor Belial offered ancient magic to the Dracoids and poisoned their minds. She had told him how his ancestors had fought and died and how they had finally lost most of the strength that ran through their blood. How most of them had cast off their ancestral powers and turned to become farmers and traders.

There were only few of their strong kind left, Kieran had known, even at the age of eight. Some of them had turned from the great world and now lived in isolation as “the savages”. And only few were now left to honour their old traditions.

Hulines like his father.

Kieran had always admired his father. He was his idol, his image of a perfect Huline. Strong and inflexible as rock, but mild and kind as a ray of pure sunlight. A warrior of the Crown, a loyal servant to King Richard.

Young Kieran would often stand in front of the fireplace, staring in silence at the dented shield above. His father had died in battle for his king. He had died as an honourable man, a great image of the Hulines of old in all their glory and splendour.

He wanted so much to be like his father had been.

At the tender age of nine, Kieran had joined the Iron Ring. Training and fights used to form his days and often had his mother had to cut the edges off his enthusiasm, so he would pay attention to all his other studies, too. His whole mind had focused on becoming a great warrior and often had he heard his mother wonder if he’d ever focus on anything else again.

It was true he had neither been the strongest nor the smartest, but agility and adaptability had always helped him out. Respect and a higher rank in the Iron Ring had soon given rise to his pride.

He had fought many battles side by side with King Richard, his brother Eric and the Generals of the White Army, but his battle against Scotia had outdone them all. He had been the one slaying her. He had been the one saving King Richard. He had been the one saving the kingdom. How much more honour could one gain in a lifetime? And he had gotten it in less than the quarter of a century.

And yet, there was one task left to be done.

Clearing his mind of all distractions, Kieran focused his sharp eyes and ears on Tohan and Paulson again, who were explaining their latest strategies to the rest of the council of officers.

The Dark Army was not yet beaten. Rumour said that Scotia’s son inherited her forbidden magic and surely her Orcs wanted to revenge her. They were still swarming all over Gladstone, raiding and plundering even worse than before. They had to be annihilated. Each and every one of them.

They had spent weeks on the battle field now, but the numbers of the Orcs could not be diminished that easily. It was time to admit that they needed a better strategy. Which meant in particular that it was time for him to admit that it’d better be Tohan’s turn to lead their army. He and Eric were the great men of strategy.

The briefing was brief indeed and the soldiers left the tent as quickly as possible. Finally, it was only him and Tohan left. Frowning, Kieran got up from the chair he was sitting in. “It’s a wonderful plan, Tohan. Believe me, it truly is. But yet my feeling tells me that something is wrong about it.”

“I see what you mean.” The tall warrior with the kind eyes, as some called him, smiled shortly. “I feel it, too, my son. I have seen decades in war against the Orcs. Their ways are tricky and they are always ready for surprises. I base my strategies on experience and knowledge, but none of these will get me far against those beasts.” Swift as a shadow, he put out the candles and took one of the swords from the chest to his right, weighing it in his hand carefully. “Yes, this will do. Don’t worry, though, Kieran. Eric’s army is only a day’s march from here. If we shall fall, the Orcs will peril by his sword ere the sun rises over the keep.”

He was almost out of the tent again, when the feline voice reached his ear. “What about your sword, Tohan?”

Kieran let his right paw trace the runes in the blade. “Are you not afraid to leave it behind?”

Deep, dark laughter rippled from Tohan’s throat. “My dear Kieran! Don’t you see it with your own eyes? It’s broken. It has to be re-forged before anyone can wield it. Besides, it’s not a simple sword that leads a man to victory. It’s his strength. And skill.” He turned to leave, but stopped once again. Smiling sadly, he looked at the Huline for a last time. “And if I fall, the next hero of Gladstone shall wield it and no harm shall be done to him as long as he carries it.”

A short smile flashed across Kieran’s face as he followed Tohan out of the tent. If old Tohan already was that optimistic – then why did he even worry? Bracing himself for battle, Kieran stepped onto what would soon be a battle field, not knowing that it would be his last great deed.

The soil was deep red by the time they had slain all the orcs. Frowning upon the great loss their own army had suffered, Eric the White rode through the battle field, searching for the two faces they all hoped to recognise among the living.

He found them surrounded by Orc carcasses and not nearly as alive as he had wished them to be. Quickly, Eric jumped off his horse and searched for their pulses.

For Tohan, the Brave, all hope was lost. Closing his eyes in deep respect and sorrow, Eric bent down to kiss his forehead, murmuring a prayer in silence.

Next to Tohan, Kieran lay. Badly wounded and fading, yet still alive. Sighing, Eric removed the heaviest parts of armour from the Huline’s body.

A beautiful, yet strong light engulfed him. He was dead and this was the paradise of his forefathers. He was sure. Attempting to smile, he pried his eyes open.

“Kieran?” The soft voice sounded familiar to him. Female. Young. Yet full of strength and wisdom. “Kieran, wake up, please! Rise from the shadow.” His vision still wavering, the young hero turned to look at the woman that heavenly voice came from. Golden hair fell down her shoulders in little waves and her blue eyes themselves seemed to smile at him. “Lady Dawn?”

“Yes, Kieran, I am here. We thought we had lost you to the shadows.” She grabbed for the bowl of water on the shelf next to him and gazed back at the door as if she was most impatiently waiting for something. He was back in Gladstone, Kieran noticed now, but the walls he had grown so fond of now seemed cold and dead to him. The bright light he had seen had become a withering candle and the wind that gently passed through the window smelled not of blossoms, but of doom to him. “I called for Finch Boris and brother Josiah.” Dawn continued. “They will be here soon, with medicines to ease your pain and treat your wounds.”

“I am beyond treatment.” Kieran whispered and caught a moment of sheer panic and bitter pain in her eyes as she looked upon him again.

“Your face assures me of what I feel, my lady.” His already soft voice had become faint, while he struggled to ignore the pain in his body. “I am broken, Lady Dawn, and there is

nothing any of us... could do about it. Yet if I am to die..." Blood came up his throat, causing him to cough badly. "If I am to die... I would prefer... to die with a sword... in my hands."

For a moment, Dawn wanted to argue, but she knew it was useless. He had less than little time now and there were no hasty footsteps echoing through the hall. Fighting back a tear, she handed him his broken sword.

His claws ran over the short blade of blue steel for a last time. His sword. The symbol of his achievements, his life. Smiling a last time, Kieran drew the sword to his chest and closed his eyes. "For glory and... honour. For... Gladstone."

Dawn waited another moment and, now, soft footsteps could be heard in the distance. Shaking her head, she set the bowl of water aside and blew out the candle. What good was strength and skill if you had no luck, no fortune at all? It wasn't incompetence that had brought him to his knees. It had been bad luck.

Kieran, Slayer of Scotia and Hero of the Realm, had fallen.

