

## Don't Let the Dream Die Here - by Ward E.

**We lost 17 men on that last expedition. 17 fuckin' men. That had families. That had fuckin' wives and children. 17 men that aren't comin' home to their fuckin' kids. And for what? And for what? For some fuckin' fitter, fatter bullshit? In the sand pits.**

The rain hammered down against the tin roof of the bunker, turning the air inside damp and suffocating. A bitter storm, one of the few that had swept through in months, bringing with it the acrid taste of radiation that burned on the tongue. Jerrick Sloane stood, drenched despite the meager shelter, his soaked coat clinging to his broad frame as water dripped from his matted hair. He slammed his fist on the table, the sound drowned out by the relentless downpour outside.

Across from him sat Alistair Cray, dry as a bone in his long black coat. His pale, reptilian eyes watched Sloane with an unreadable expression, fingers steepled in front of him, calm amidst the fury. The lantern between them flickered, casting jagged shadows on the rough concrete walls.

"They died for nothing, Cray," Sloane growled, his voice hoarse, filled with bitterness. "Seventeen good men, torn apart by the storm, poisoned by the fuckin' radiation. And for what? For a fuckin' rumor about a plant. A plant! We've been sending people to their deaths, chasin' after this goddamn herb for months now. And all we've found is sand, bones, and more fuckin' bodies."

Cray shifted slightly, his cold gaze never leaving Sloane. "The *herb*, Commander, is not a rumor. It exists. The old texts say it grows deep in the sand pits, only after the rains come. And this," he gestured to the deluge outside, "is one of the rare storms that might bring it to the surface. You know what's at stake here. The baron's blindness—"

"—is his problem, not ours," Sloane cut in, his voice rising over the rain's din. "Seventeen men aren't comin' back, and for what? For the chance that maybe, just maybe, we stumble across some magical plant that's supposed to fix him? Do you hear how fuckin' insane that sounds?"

Cray leaned forward, his voice soft but deadly. "Watch your tone, Sloane. You forget your place. The baron's affliction is more than just *his* problem. Without him, without his rule, you think this world will be any less bleak? You think the other barons won't descend like vultures to tear what's left apart? If we can cure him—if we can restore his sight—we preserve the order. We preserve what little stability remains."

Sloane stared, unblinking, the rainwater running down his face, mingling with sweat. He was shaking now, whether from the cold or the rage, it wasn't clear. "Order? Stability? Don't give me

that bullshit, Cray. You know as well as I do that he's blind in more ways than one. This isn't about keeping the peace. This is about power. His power. His control. And now you want to throw more lives into the pit just to save his eyes?"

Cray's smirk was barely visible in the dim light. "You're right. This is about power. Power to see. Power to rule. And yes, power to control. You of all people should understand that, Jerrik. Power is all that matters here. Without it, you're nothing more than a dead man walking."

Sloane slammed both hands on the table, the wood creaking under the pressure. "The only thing I understand is that these men—these *people*—had families, lives. You want me to march more of them into the fuckin' sand pits, to chase after a plant we've never seen? After the storm took half my squad? There are no more miracles out there, Cray. Just death."

Cray's voice remained steady, a serpent's hiss. "Then maybe you should remind yourself of the alternative. The baron grows impatient. His sight is failing, his health with it. When he goes blind, and his enemies smell weakness, they'll tear him down. And when they do, you, Commander, will be right in the crosshairs. If you want to keep breathing, you'll find that herb. Seventeen men? Seventeen isn't even a footnote compared to what's coming if we fail."

The rain outside turned to a roar, battering the bunker with renewed ferocity. For a moment, the two men just stared at each other, the sound of water dripping from Sloane's coat into the muddy floor mixing with the storm.

Sloane finally straightened, his fists unclenching. He looked at Cray, eyes burning with the anger that had no outlet, no target. "We go out again, we're all dead. You know that, right? Even if we find this goddamn herb, we won't make it back. The storm'll bury us."

Cray stood slowly, smoothing his coat, his face a mask of indifference. "Then perhaps you should start praying for a miracle, Commander. Because the baron doesn't have the patience to wait much longer. You have your orders. Don't make me repeat them."

Without another word, Cray turned and walked out into the rain, his silhouette disappearing into the downpour, leaving Sloane standing alone in the flickering lantern light. The storm raged on, cold and merciless, and all Sloane could think about was how many more would have to die for the baron's failing eyes.

Sloane barely registered the rain hitting his face as he stormed out of the bunker, his fury fueling each step. The argument with Cray played on a loop in his mind, the sound of the enforcer's smug tone gnawing at him. The downpour was thick and bitter, tainted with radiation, but it was a welcome relief from the heat that had plagued them for weeks. For just a second, Sloane allowed himself to breathe, to feel the cold soak into his bones.

But that second was all it took.

The first scream tore through the night—a sharp, blood-curdling wail that cut through the sound of the storm like a knife. Sloane spun on his heel, eyes wide, scanning the darkness beyond the dim lights of the camp. Then the second scream followed, and the third. His stomach dropped.

### **Lizard Drinkers.**

The bastards were immune to the radiation, thrived in the nightfall rain like it was their birthright. Their bodies had twisted, evolved to handle the worst of this new world. The moment the storm hit, Sloane knew they would come, but not like this. Not so fast. Not so many. His pulse quickened as more screams echoed from the bunkers behind him—his men, his brothers-in-arms, being torn apart by the scaled predators that lurked just beyond the campfires.

“Sloane!” a voice shouted, cutting through the rain. One of his lieutenants, face pale, came stumbling toward him, soaked and wide-eyed. “We’re being overrun! They’re everywhere—there must be hundreds of them!”

“Get the men! Now!” Sloane barked, shaking off his shock as the soldier looked at him with wide, terrified eyes. “Anyone who’s left, we’re moving out!”

The lieutenant hesitated, but only for a moment. The weight of Sloane's command snapped him into action, and he sprinted toward the chaos. Sloane turned back to the bunker, rain pouring down his face as he cursed the gods, cursed Cray, cursed the fucking herb that had led them all to this nightmare. The rain fell harder now, a bitter torrent that stung his eyes and soaked him through.

Another scream rang out, louder this time—Cray. Sloane could picture it now, Cray's smug face torn to ribbons by the Lizard Drinkers, his body being pulled apart by claws and teeth. A part of Sloane wanted to laugh, wanted to feel satisfaction at the thought of Cray's arrogant sneer finally wiped away. But there was no time for that. The enemy wasn't just Cray—it was the hundredfold monsters now descending on them like predators hunting in the dark.

The Lizard Drinkers moved like shadows, their rusted rifles strapped to their backs, their bodies covered in thick, scaled armor that glistened in the rain. Bullets were near useless against

them, especially in this weather. Their claws and teeth were their real weapons, and now they were using them to rip through Sloane's men, their bodies scattering into the mud.

Sloane gathered what few men he could—a dozen at most. "Move! We head for the sand pits! We can't hold this ground!"

The rain mixed with the screams, a sickening symphony of violence. Sloane and his men broke into a run, the muck and mire sucking at their boots with every step. The camp was lost, the bunkers compromised, and every second spent standing ground was another second closer to death. There would be no fighting off the Lizard Drinkers, no heroic stand in the name of the baron. Not against these odds.

One of the newer recruits, barely in his mid-twenties, sprinted beside Sloane, panic etched across his face. The young man's foot slipped, and in an instant, he was gone—pulled down by the muck as if the earth itself had claimed him. His scream was short-lived, the quicksand-like mud swallowing him whole. There was nothing to be done. Sloane didn't stop. He couldn't stop.

"Keep moving!" he roared, pulling the men forward through the treacherous mud. Behind them, the sounds of the Lizard Drinkers grew closer, the wet thud of bodies hitting the ground punctuated by the hiss of the rain. The creatures hunted them relentlessly, emboldened by the cover of the storm.

Another man was lost to the mire, sucked down into the ground as the rain churned the earth beneath them. Sloane's breath came in ragged gasps now, the weight of his soaked clothes and the relentless terrain sapping his strength. He glanced back, seeing shadows moving through the rain, closing in on the survivors.

"We're almost there!" he shouted, though he didn't believe his own words. The safe point, a small outpost twenty clicks from the bunker, was their only chance. If they could just reach it, they might be out of the Lizard Drinkers' hunting grounds. But with every step, the odds felt slimmer.

The terrain was unforgiving, the mud pulling at them like some vengeful force. The storm showed no mercy. A flash of lightning illuminated the night, and for a brief second, Sloane saw the sheer number of Lizard Drinkers trailing them, their forms moving effortlessly through the rain-soaked earth. There were too many—too fast. His heart pounded in his chest as he pushed forward, his legs burning with effort.

The screams faded into the storm behind him, the bunkers now little more than a distant memory. Whatever position they had before, whatever sense of safety they'd clung to, was gone. The only thing left now was the sand pits ahead—and the slim hope that they might make it through alive.

Sloane grit his teeth and pressed on, leading the few survivors into the maw of the storm, knowing that if they didn't move fast enough, they'd soon be nothing more than bones in the mud, swallowed by the world that wanted them dead.

"IT'S A FUCKING GOREHEAD! GET DOWN! IT'S GONNA FUCKING EXPLODE!" Sloane's voice tore through the rain as he threw himself into the muck, the weight of the situation hitting like a hammer.

The grotesque creature lumbered into view—a bloated, swollen abomination of a Lizard Drinker, its skin stretched tight over bulging sacs of thick, viscous fluids. The Gorehead, an especially vile mutation, was practically gorged with its own filth, waddling forward like a living landmine, its body groaning and sagging with each labored step.

There wasn't time to warn the others. The creature's bulging eyes locked onto them, and before anyone could react, it let out a grotesque, gurgling screech. The wet pop of its distended belly was drowned out by the explosion that followed, a violent blast of gore, acid, and viscera that swallowed the screams of three men in an instant. The force of the blast hurled bodies through the air, the thick muck splattering in all directions.

Sloane hit the ground hard, the wind knocked out of him as the rain splattered his face. He gasped for air, trying to block out the smell of burning flesh and rotting insides that now filled the air. Around him, the remains of the exploded Gorehead sizzled in the mud, the acid from its ruptured organs eating away at the ground—and the bodies of the men it had claimed.

He forced himself to his feet, eyes scanning the terrain. The blast had taken out three, maybe four men. Sloane barely had time to count before another scream tore through the night. The lieutenant—a young man who had survived so much of the night's horrors—was now gone, consumed by the acidic muck. His body melted away, little more than a charred outline against the rain-soaked earth.

Sloane gritted his teeth, pushing through the pain that shot through his body. He knew the Goreheads well enough. If the Lizard Drinkers were sending them, they had to be close to the edge of the hunting grounds. The Goreheads were like sentries—vile, living traps meant to guard the outermost territories of the hive. And if they were this close, it meant they were nearly through.

"Move!" Sloane shouted, his voice hoarse, but urgent. The men who were left—just four now—scrambled through the muck, dragging themselves out of the blast zone.

Lightning split the sky again, illuminating the writhing masses of Lizard Drinkers in the distance, hundreds of them shifting and weaving through the rain like dark specters. They were still far off, but it was a grim reminder that their enemy was always watching. Always waiting.

"Come on!" Sloane urged, grabbing one of his men by the arm and pulling him up from the mud. The muck clung to them like glue, sucking at their boots with every step, but there was no

time to stop. The safe post was close now—he could feel it. If they could just push through this last stretch, they might make it.

The rain poured harder, and the muck beneath their feet grew deeper, more treacherous. One of the men, a grizzled veteran named Tark, let out a shout as his foot plunged into the ground, sinking into the quicksand-like mire. Sloane turned just in time to see the look of sheer panic on Tark's face, his hands clawing at the earth as he was pulled down, inch by inch.

"Help! Fuck, help me!" Tark screamed, his voice filled with terror. He was sinking fast, the rain and muck swallowing him whole. Sloane lunged forward, reaching for him, but it was too late. Tark's hand slipped from his grasp, his body vanishing beneath the surface with a sickening squelch. The mud churned, and then there was silence.

Sloane cursed under his breath, his chest heaving as he turned to the last three men. They were barely hanging on, their faces pale and hollow, soaked to the bone and shaking from the cold and fear. But they were still standing. Still alive.

"We keep moving," Sloane growled. "The safe post's close. We're not dying here. Not like this."

They trudged forward, the storm continuing to rage around them, each step a battle against the earth itself. The sand pits ahead were barely visible, the horizon swallowed by sheets of rain and flashes of lightning. But the safe post was there. It had to be.

They moved in silence now, their energy spent, their minds focused only on survival. The lightning illuminated the Lizard Drinkers again, closer this time, their scaled bodies shifting in the distance like a living tide. But they hadn't attacked. Not yet.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Sloane saw it—a small, fortified structure jutting out from the sand pits ahead, its walls battered but intact. The safe post.

"There!" Sloane barked, pointing toward the structure. "We make it there, we're clear!"

The men pushed forward, desperation fueling their last few steps as they reached the safe post. Sloane's boots hit solid ground as they crossed into the perimeter of the outpost, the walls looming above them like a sanctuary. They stumbled inside, drenched and exhausted, but alive.

Behind them, the Lizard Drinkers loomed in the distance, their dark forms silhouetted against the flashing sky. They watched

but did not advance, held back as if by some unseen boundary. The safe post, though battered, had once been a bastion of defense against the creatures that roamed the sand pits. Its defenses still held, though barely.

Sloane collapsed against the wall, his chest heaving, the bitter taste of bile rising in his throat. The remaining men, the last three who had somehow survived the nightmare of the night, slumped beside him, their faces gaunt and haunted by the horrors they'd witnessed. The rain continued to pour, but inside the walls of the safe post, there was a brief moment of peace.

"Are we... clear?" one of the men muttered, his voice shaking.

Sloane nodded, wiping the rain and mud from his face. "For now. We made it." His voice was rough, strained from the night's madness, but there was a note of grim relief in it.

Lightning cracked across the sky again, illuminating the landscape beyond the walls. The Lizard Drinkers were still there, hundreds of them shifting and swarming in the distance like a living mass of darkness, but they did not approach. Not yet. They watched, waiting for an opportunity, but for now, the men were out of reach.

"We can rest here for a few hours," Sloane said, his eyes flicking toward the horizon. "But we'll need to move again at first light. This place... it's not built to withstand them if they decide to press in."

One of the men, still trembling, nodded silently, his eyes wide with fear. "We... we lost so many..."

Sloane didn't respond, the weight of their losses pressing heavily on him. Too many men, gone. Eaten by the Lizard Drinkers, consumed by the muck, torn apart by a Gorehead. And for what? For a wild chase after a mythical herb that probably never existed.

He leaned his head back against the cold wall, closing his eyes for just a moment, letting the exhaustion overtake him. The storm raged on outside, but for now, they had survived. Tomorrow would bring another battle, another fight for survival in this endless wasteland, but for tonight, they were still alive.



The three men huddled around the small fire they'd managed to build inside the safe post's walls. The flames crackled weakly, fighting against the damp air, casting flickering shadows across the worn, concrete shelter. The rain outside continued its relentless assault, but inside, the warmth of the fire provided some fleeting comfort. The men sat close, their clothes still wet, their faces drawn and hollow from the horrors of the night.

Sloane sat with his back against the wall, staring into the flames, his mind running through the faces of the men he'd lost. Seventeen dead. He had been in the baron's forces for over two decades, and still, the loss of men never got easier. These weren't just numbers on a report. They were men with families, hopes, and dreams, all snuffed out in a storm of violence. His hand instinctively rubbed his aching knee, an old injury from years ago—another scar, another reminder of how long he'd been in this godforsaken life. Twenty years of service, and no end in sight. No retirement. No peace.

The young private, Petro, spoke softly from across the fire, breaking the silence. He was one of the few men left standing, barely out of his teens, born into the ranks of the baron's forces. His face still held the innocence of someone who hadn't yet been fully hardened by the wasteland, but the night's events had clearly shaken him. His hands trembled slightly as he warmed them by the fire.

"You ever heard of the *Leninomicon*?" Petro asked, his voice quiet but carrying an edge of curiosity.

Sloane didn't respond immediately, his eyes still fixed on the fire, but he gave a slight nod. The name stirred something in his memory, but he didn't let on. He'd heard whispers, fragments of old stories in the barracks, but nothing concrete. He was more interested in why a private barely old enough to shave was talking about ancient books and lost histories.

Petro glanced at the other surviving soldier, who was already half-asleep, his body too exhausted to care. The young private leaned in a little closer, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper.

"The *Leninomicon*, it's supposed to be a book. More than a book, really. A weapon. It was lost after the war, after the Red Guards fell."

Sloane raised an eyebrow, finally giving Petro his full attention. "The Red Guards? Thought they were nothing but a myth. Just another bunch of dreamers who got themselves killed going up against the barons."

Petro shook his head, his eyes flickering with the glow of the fire. "No, they were real. My grandfather told me stories. Said the Red Guards fought against the barons, tried to break their

hold on the wasteland. Said they were the last real army that stood for the people, before everything fell apart.”

Sloane shifted uncomfortably. He'd been in the baron's forces long enough to know that stories like this didn't get passed around lightly. Talk of rebellion was dangerous, even in whispers.

“Your grandfather lived through that?” Sloane asked, his voice low.

Petro nodded, a somber look on his face. “Yeah, he was there, fought with them for a time. Said they were different. Not like the mercenaries or the hired guns we see today. They had a cause. And at the center of it all was the *Leninomicon*.”

Sloane snorted, more out of habit than disbelief. “You really believe in that old legend? A book that could turn the tides, bring down the barons?”

Petro looked away for a moment, his brow furrowing as he stared into the fire. “I don't know what I believe. But my grandfather did. Said it wasn't just a book. Said it held the history of the old world, the knowledge of how to rebuild. And that's why the barons fear it. They know that if it's ever found, if the Red Guards' legacy is ever remembered, it could threaten their rule.”

Sloane leaned back, his mind turning over Petro's words. He'd heard plenty of myths in his time—stories of old technologies, lost cities, magical herbs that could cure blindness. Most of them were nonsense, but some... some carried a kernel of truth. And the way Petro spoke, the way he clung to the story of the *Leninomicon* like it was more than just a fairytale, gave Sloane pause.

“You're talking like you've seen it,” Sloane said, narrowing his eyes.

Petro shook his head again, his expression growing distant. “No, I haven't. But I've seen the places where it's supposed to have been. The ruins of the old libraries, the vaults beneath the cities that were destroyed after the war. My grandfather always said that if we could just find it, if someone could just *read* the *Leninomicon*, it could bring back something better. A way to fight back. A way to end all of this.”

Sloane rubbed his face, feeling the weight of exhaustion settling into his bones. The idea of some ancient book holding the key to fixing everything seemed far-fetched, but then again, wasn't the whole world built on impossible myths? The barons themselves clung to their thrones, ruling over a wasteland built on the backs of dead men and shattered dreams. What was one more myth among the ashes?

But what gave Sloane pause was the fear. Not his own, but the barons'. They'd gone to great lengths to wipe out any trace of the old world's history. To control the past, so they could shape the future. And if there was even a hint of truth in Petro's words, it meant the barons feared

something that could challenge them. Something that could upend the fragile power they held over the wasteland.

"So what then?" Sloane muttered. "You think this *Leninomicon* is just sitting out there, waiting for someone to pick it up? And even if it is, what's stopping the barons from just burning it, like they do everything else?"

Petro met his gaze, a fire in his eyes that hadn't been there before. "Maybe nothing. Maybe everything. But we have to try, don't we? My grandfather said that if the Red Guards had found it before they were wiped out, things would be different. He said we have to keep looking, no matter what. Because as long as that book's out there, there's still a chance."

Sloane didn't say anything for a long time. The fire crackled, and outside, the rain continued its steady drumbeat on the roof of the safe post. He thought about the men he'd lost. Seventeen lives spent chasing a mythical herb to save a baron who didn't give a damn about any of them. And now here was this kid, talking about lost armies and forgotten histories, clinging to the hope that maybe, just maybe, there was something out there that could change everything.

"Kid," Sloane finally said, his voice gruff but softer than before, "you hold onto that hope. But don't let it blind you. This world chews up people like us. Dreamers don't last long out here."

Petro nodded, but the spark in his eyes didn't fade. "I know, Commander. But I've seen enough to know that something's out there."

Sloane leaned back, his body aching from the night's fight, his mind heavy with the weight of twenty years in service to a cause that had never truly been his. Maybe Petro was right. Maybe there was something out there worth finding. Or maybe it was just another story to keep them all going in the face of a world that wanted them dead.

Either way, Sloane knew they wouldn't last long if they stayed here. The Lizard Drinkers would return, and this fire, this momentary respite, wouldn't protect them for long. Tomorrow, they'd have to move.

Sloane and his remaining men trudged back into the baron's citadel, their faces gaunt, their bodies aching from days of slogging through the muck and rain. The sand pits had taken their toll, and yet, as they entered the grand halls of Baron Kraag's fortress, the weight of their failure hung heavier than the battles they'd survived.

The baron's court was a monument to excess in a world of scarcity. Marble floors stained with the blood of past executions gleamed under flickering torchlight. Gilded pillars loomed above, their once-grand beauty now tarnished with soot and grime. The baron sat upon his high throne, his body draped in fine fabrics, eyes milky and unseeing beneath the ornate bandages that covered his face.

He couldn't see them, but he felt their presence as they entered, and his voice, cold and sharp as a blade, cut through the air.

"Commander Sloane," Baron Kraag rasped, his blind eyes hidden behind the gauze. "You return... but without the herb."

Sloane stepped forward, his boots heavy on the stone floor. The few survivors stood behind him, silent, drenched, and broken. Petro among them, his young face still carrying that glimmer of idealism even after all they had seen.

"We lost many men," Sloane said, his voice flat, his body rigid with tension. "Seventeen of them. To the storm. The muck. The Lizard Drinkers. The herb... it was never there."

The baron's head tilted slightly, his lips curling into a thin smile that sent a shiver down Sloane's spine. He wasn't interested in hearing about the horrors they'd faced, the lives lost, the danger they'd survived. No. The baron wanted only one thing—results. And they hadn't delivered.

"The herb was all that mattered, Sloane," the baron whispered, his voice smooth, dangerous. "I have no use for your excuses."

Sloane's fists clenched at his sides, but he held his tongue. He knew better than to argue with the baron. His life—his position—had been spared time and time again because of his value, his skill in battle, his decades of service. But even he wasn't immune to the baron's wrath. And today, someone would need to pay the price.

"Someone needs to be made an example of," Baron Kraag continued, his sightless gaze turning toward the soldiers behind Sloane. "Your failure cannot go unpunished."

Sloane felt a knot tighten in his chest, his heart pounding in his ears. He knew what was coming before the baron even spoke the next words. He had survived too long, served too long, to believe otherwise.

"You," the baron said softly, pointing a withered hand in the direction of the young private, Petro. "The youngest among you. A survivor of my army's shame. You shall serve as my example."

Petro's eyes widened, his mouth parting in disbelief. "No—" he started, but there was no time. The baron's guards moved swiftly, seizing him by the arms, dragging him toward the center of the hall. Sloane stood frozen, every instinct in his body screaming to intervene, but his years of loyalty, of survival, held him in place.

Petro struggled, his boots skidding across the marble floor, but the guards were relentless. The baron's court watched in silent indifference, their eyes cold and detached. This was the way of things in Kraag's rule. Failure meant death, and mercy was a luxury few could afford.

"Baron, please—" Sloane began, but his words faltered under the baron's withering smile.

"I have no need for your pleading, Sloane," Kraag hissed. "Your years of service have earned you a place in my favor. But the boy? He is nothing. A failure. He will die so the rest of you may learn the price of failure."

Petro's face had gone pale, the fight draining from him as the guards forced him to his knees before the throne. His wide, terrified eyes met Sloane's, and in that moment, the commander felt a sickening wave of guilt crash over him. He had brought this young man back. He had told him to keep his head down, to survive. And now, here he was—about to be executed for a failure that wasn't even his own.

The baron's executioner stepped forward, a towering brute with a rusted blade slung over his shoulder. He moved with a deliberate slowness, savoring the moment, knowing the crowd watched in eager silence.

As the executioner raised his blade, Petro turned his head, locking eyes with Sloane one last time. His voice trembled, but his words were clear, carrying a weight that would haunt Sloane long after this moment.

"Remember what I told you," Petro whispered. "Don't let the dream die here."

Sloane's chest tightened, his heart pounding against his ribs. The *Leninomicon*. The Red Guards. The stories Petro had shared around the fire, stories of resistance, of hope in a world drowning in despair. Petro had believed in something more, something better. And now, that belief was about to be snuffed out.

The executioner brought the blade down with a brutal finality. The sickening thud echoed through the court, and Petro's body slumped to the floor, lifeless. Blood pooled across the marble, mixing with the rainwater that still dripped from the soldiers' boots.

Baron Kraag leaned back in his throne, his expression unchanged. "Let this be a lesson, Commander Sloane. Failure is death. Do not forget that."

Sloane didn't move. He didn't speak. His eyes were fixed on Petro's lifeless form, his mind swirling with a storm of emotions—anger, guilt, sorrow, and something else. Something that hadn't fully surfaced yet. Something that Petro's final words had stirred deep within him.

The dream. The *Leninomicon*. The possibility of a better world, one not ruled by men like Kraag. Sloane had spent twenty years in service to the barons, believing there was no way out, no other path but the one he had walked for so long. But Petro had believed differently. Petro had seen something beyond the walls of this court, beyond the blood and the violence.

And now, Sloane was left to carry that belief. To carry that seed of hope.

As the court dispersed, as the baron's guards dragged Petro's body away, Sloane stood alone in the center of the hall, his hands shaking, his thoughts racing. He had survived this day, but at what cost

? The image of Petro's lifeless body, crumpled on the marble floor, was burned into his mind. The young man's final words echoed louder than the screams of the battlefield.

Sloane clenched his fists, feeling the weight of twenty years of obedience crushing him. How many men like Petro had died in service of these monsters? How many had gone to their deaths believing in something better, only to be snuffed out before they could make a difference? The baron's indifferent gaze from his throne, the lifeless courts that watched without a word, the constant blood spilled to prop up a failing, rotting regime—it all felt so pointless.

But there was something in him, something Petro had planted. A seed that hadn't been there before. *Don't let the dream die here.*

Sloane inhaled sharply, the air bitter and cold in his lungs. He looked up at Baron Kraag's throne, at the man who had so easily condemned a boy to death for something as meaningless as a missed herb. The herb. That impossible, mythical plant they had all bled for. Sloane now realized it was never about the herb. It was about control. Always about control.

He turned his back to the throne, his heart heavy with the knowledge that the world wouldn't change on its own. But maybe, just maybe, there was something left to fight for. He didn't know much about the *Leninomicon*, or the Red Guards, or the rebellions Petro's grandfather had spoken of, but he knew one thing: the barons feared history. They feared knowledge. And perhaps that was the key.

As Sloane walked out of the court, his boots leaving bloody prints across the polished stone, he knew he couldn't go back to the way things were. He was a soldier, yes, but he wasn't dead yet.

Petro's words lingered in his mind, and for the first time in years, Sloane allowed himself to entertain the thought that perhaps the world didn't have to stay broken.

The rains had stopped by the time he reached the citadel's gates, but the storm inside him had only begun to build. He glanced back one last time, looking at the towering walls of the baron's fortress, and knew he'd have to face it again. One day.

But today wasn't that day. Today, he'd survive.

Tomorrow? He'd start to plan.