

The Way of the Kóryos, part 1

by Björn Ekdahl

The moon hung low over the endless steppe, a cold and silver disk shrouded in a thin veil of clouds. The grass whispered in the night wind, a sound that sent shivers down the spines of the young Kóryos. These youths, freshly sent out from their village, had come of age, and with it came the duty of the Kóryos—to become wolves, warriors without hearth or home, bound together by blood & the sacred vows of brotherhood. Tonight, they were to prove their worth for the first time. Tonight, they would take their first step toward becoming men of renown. Kérnos, the leader of the band, stood in the center of their camp, his eyes gleaming with fierce pride. Around him, his brothers sat, their bodies painted with swirling patterns of ash & ochre. They were the sons of the village, but now they were something different—something wild. No longer allowed to sleep beneath their fathers' roofs or eat from their mothers' hearths until they had earned the right. They would hunt, raid, and live by their own strength. It was the way of their people, the way of the Kóryos. Before them, a fire crackled, casting dancing shadows over their tense, young faces. At the edge of the flames, a sacrificial altar had been raised—a simple stone slab adorned with offerings of barley, honey and clarified butter. An older man, the village's ghóstis, their spiritual guide and ritual host, stood before the altar. In his hands, he held a clay cup filled with freshly drawn blood from a sacrificial goat. He muttered ancient words, his voice low and gravelly, as the flames hissed and sparked. "For Sky Father, for the Striker & for the Wolf-god, we offer this blood!" the ghóstis intoned, pouring the blood over the sacred stone. "Guide the Kóryos through the night. Strengthen their arms, sharpen their senses & may the omens be good." The warriors grunted in agreement, their eyes fixed on the blood as it dripped down the stone, soaking into the earth.

Next came the divination. The ghóstis crouched before the fire, his wrinkled hands clasping a bundle of bones—those of a hare caught earlier that evening. With a practiced flick of his wrist, he scattered the bones across the ground. The young warriors leaned in, hearts racing, as the ghóstis inspected the way the bones fell. After a long silence, he spoke. "The omens are clear. Tonight is a night for wolves." His eyes flashed toward Kérnos. "But beware—great danger lurks in the darkness. The steppe is wide and wild, and not all enemies have flesh and blood," he said, pausing, his voice lowering to a rasp. "But neither does every prey and booty." A murmur of unease spread through the band, but Kérnos stood tall, his chest swelling with defiance. "We are the Kóryos!" he shouted. "The wolves of the steppe! There is no foe we cannot defeat." With that, they extinguished the fire, donned their wolf-skin cloaks, and set out into the night.

The steppe stretched before them, an endless sea of grass under the cold, uncaring stars. The wind howled, and their breath came out in frosty clouds as they crept toward the distant lights of the neighboring village—their target. The plan was simple: steal their cattle, strike fear into their rivals, and return as heroes. Each step was calculated, silent, their hearts pounding with anticipation and fear. But as they neared the village, something

shifted in the air. A strange, oppressive feeling settled over them. The wind seemed to die, leaving the night unnaturally still. Kérnos halted, raising his hand. The others stopped in their tracks, listening, their senses heightened. Then, from the darkness ahead, came a low growl. Kérnos' blood ran cold. He turned his head, searching the shadows, but saw nothing. The growl grew louder, closer, more feral. It was not the growl of any animal he had ever heard. It was deeper, darker, filled with something ancient and hungry. Suddenly, out of the gloom, figures emerged—massive, shadowy shapes with glowing eyes. Wolves, but not ordinary wolves. Their bodies seemed to shimmer in the faint moonlight, as though they were not entirely of this world. Their eyes burned with a cold, unnatural light. The Kóryos warriors froze, their weapons raised, but the wolves did not attack. Instead, they circled the band, their movements fluid, almost ghostly, their growls reverberating in the air like thunder. "What are they?" whispered one of the younger warriors, his voice trembling. "The spirits of the steppe," Kérnos said, his voice barely more than a breath. "The spirits of the place. The wolves of the Wolf god himself."

The ghóstis' warning echoed in Kérnos' mind. *Not all enemies have flesh and blood.* One of the wolves stepped forward, its glowing eyes locked on Kérnos. It snarled, baring its fangs. Kérnos knew that this was a test, a challenge. To turn and run would mean death. To stand and fight would mean proving their worth—to the gods, to their ancestors, and to the spirits of the land. With a roar, Kérnos charged, his spear raised high. The other Kóryos followed, their war cries ripping through the stillness of the night. The battle was unlike any they had imagined. The wolves were swift, their forms blurring as they moved. The warriors' spears found purchase in the creatures' bodies, but the wounds seemed to close as quickly as they were made. The wolves fought not with brute strength, but with the weight of the steppe itself behind them, their howls filling the night with an eerie, otherworldly resonance. Kérnos grappled with the largest wolf, his spear lodged deep in its side. Its glowing eyes bore into his, and for a moment, he felt as though the steppe itself was looking through him. Time seemed to slow, and he felt a strange connection—a bond between predator and prey, man and spirit. Then, as quickly as it had begun, the wolves vanished. The steppe was silent once more, the only sound the ragged breathing of the Kóryos. Kérnos stood panting, his spear still clutched in his hand. Around him, his brothers looked as dazed as he felt, their faces pale in the moonlight. The cattle raid was forgotten. They had faced something far greater than rival villagers tonight. As they regrouped, Kérnos felt a strange sense of triumph.

They had survived the test of the wolves. They had proven themselves not just as warriors, but as true sons of the steppe. In that victory there was also the insight that there is a sacrifice in everything. Just as the blood of the goat sealed their ritual, they too had given a part of themselves to the steppe. They had earned their place in the world—but the world had earned a place in them as well.