

The Way of the Kóryos, part 3

by Björn Ekdahl

The fire crackled softly under the vast sky, the moon heavy above, stars casting their silver light over the faces of the young men huddled around the flames. They had been traveling together for many nights, moved like shadows across the steppe, their figures barely distinguishable from the endless sea of grass. Now there was a stillness. It had been weeks since they left their village, and the excitement of their journey had given way to the grinding uncertainty of life on the move. Each day was a test of endurance, hunger gnawing at their bellies, and the questions that lay unspoken in their hearts grew heavier with each step. Kérnos could feel the unease simmering in the group. The camaraderie that had once felt so natural was now tinged with tension, as if each of them were looking for something—some sign, some sense of direction that would tell them where they belonged, what they were meant to do.

He sat with his chin on his knees, staring into the fire. His fellow warriors, his *kóryos*, were silent too, each wrapped in their thoughts.

"Why are we even here?" G^wóklēytos murmured, more to himself than to them. But the others heard him.

"What do you mean?" Kérnos asked, frowning.

"Here," G^wóklēytos repeated, gesturing vaguely to the steppe. "Why are we here? What are we doing? Wandering, fighting, running... what does any of it mean?" His voice caught, and he hated how it sounded—weak, uncertain.

For a moment, no one spoke. From across the fire, Nerthos glanced up. His dark hair was tangled, his face worn from days under the sun, but his eyes, as always, were sharp.

"We're here because we chose to be," he said, but his voice, too, carried an edge of doubt. "Because we left everything behind. Because... because we're meant to be more than what we were."

"I thought by now I'd feel... different," G^wóklēytos murmured, breaking the quiet that had followed.

"What did you expect?" Nerthos asked, his eyes narrowing.

"I don't know." G^wóklēytos sighed. "Maybe that the gods would show me who I am. That I'd know my place."

Nerthos, the strongest of them all, gave a low chuckle. "The gods have more important things to do than worry about a bunch of lost boys."

The others laughed softly, but there was no malice in it. They all felt the same uncertainty that gnawed at G^wóklēytos. They were on the brink of becoming men—warriors, hunters, protectors of their kin. This trial, the time spent away from their families, away from everything they knew, was meant to forge them. And yet they were still uncertain.

Kérnos picked up a stick and stirred the fire. "When I first led us out here, I thought the same as you. I thought there would be some sign, something that would tell me the path. But we are not children to be told who we are. The fire does not tell the tree it is wood; the tree burns because it is its nature. It is the same with us."

G^wóklēytos frowned, not fully understanding. "So, we have to find it ourselves?"

Kérnos nodded. "No one can tell you your path. You must feel it."

Kwontókos, who had been silent for a while, suddenly spoke. "Do you remember when we saw the bear? When we thought we could take it, that it was our test from the gods?" He grinned, though the memory was far from pleasant.

Kérnos remembered it all too well. They had tracked the bear for days, hungry and desperate for food. When they finally cornered it, they had attacked blindly, recklessly. The beast had scattered them with ease, and it was only by luck they escaped with their lives.

Κwontokós laughed again, this time louder. "I thought I was invincible. I thought, 'This is my moment. I'll kill the bear, and the world will know my strength.'" He shook his head. "But it wasn't. I'm strong, yes. But not like that. The bear showed me what I am not." "We are not the bear," Nerthos said, echoing the thought. "But neither are we the boys who left the village. We have seen what we are not. It's time to bring out what we actually are."

"We're no longer boys," Kérnos murmured, breaking the tension. "But I don't feel like a man either. I don't even know what that means."

"That's because we were always told what to be," Κwontokós said. "Our fathers, the elders... they shaped us, molded us into warriors. And now that we're free of them, now that they're gone, we don't know who we are."

"What if it's all for nothing?" Gwókleytos finally said, voicing what they all feared. "What if we never find a place? What if all we have is this—standing here, not knowing who we are, not knowing where we're going? What if we wander forever?" The words hung in the air, heavy and raw, the doubts, the uncertainty, curling around their minds like the smoke from the fire.

Nerthos spoke again, softer this time. "Maybe that's the point," he said. "Maybe we're supposed to choose now."

"Choose what?" Gwókleytos asked, frustration flaring in his eyes. "There's nothing left to choose from! There's no home to return to, no people to call our own."

"That doesn't mean we can't build something," Nerthos replied. "Maybe we take what they gave us—the strength, the stories, the songs—and we make them ours. Maybe that's how we find out who we are. Where we should be going."

They had reached this point because they had no other options—no elder to guide them, no chieftain to obey, no home to return to. All that remained were each other, the steppe, and the uncertain horizon. And so they sought guidance, the old way. The sacred space had been prepared for the divination ritual – sturdy branches, each carved with protective symbols, had firmly been planted in the ground to mark the corners of a rectangular area and each corner had been sprinkled with lustral water and barley, creating an invisible barrier between the world of men and the realm of the spirits. The sacrificial fire had been lit in the middle of the space, its flames flickering and dancing, casting long shadows, and clarified butter had been offered into it, to the Fire god. The scent of smoke mingled with the earth, and the air grew heavy with an ancient, expectant silence. A sense of anticipation hung over the young men, their breaths visible in the cool night air.

The wind carried the scent of smoke and blood as the band of young warriors stood in a circle around the fire. Kérnos stepped forward and held up his arms, a thick hide of a young bull draped over his shoulders. Its sacrifice had been a tribute to the ancestors in a public offering rite before they left the village. As was traditional the diviner was to drink the broth of the sacrificed milk-giving animal, and sleep in its hide, to receive the visions and advice from the Fathers.

As he had seen and heard the village elders do, Κwontokós led the others in a prayer read over Kérnos, sprinkled him and the cowhide with some of their last mead and then cut a piece of the cowhide and put it in the rest of the mead. He told Kérnos to drink the sacred drink, the broth of the sacrifice, while his comrades prepared a temporary elevated wooden platform, the high seat as he called it – just high enough to lift him a bit above the earth, closer to the sky and, they hoped, the spirits – where the diviner was to sleep.

"Grandfathers of our fathers' fathers," Kérnos called after a deep sip, his voice strong despite the tremble in his legs. "You who raised the herds and tilled the earth before us, you who hunted, fought and bled before us, so we could stand here today – listen now and guide us!"

The others echoed his call, stamping their feet rhythmically against the earth as if to awaken something deep beneath the surface. A second voice broke the silence—Nerthos, the quietest of them all, a youth with wild black hair and eyes that always seemed to be watching something others couldn't see.

“We ask the ones who came before us, and we ask the ones who walk unseen around us.” He gestured to the fire's shadows, where the young men had arranged stones to represent the spirits and the gods of the steppe. “You, who know the paths and the choices, show us the way.”

It was time for the vision. Kérnos nodded to K̄wontokós who moved forward, his face serious, his hands trembling only slightly as he took the hide from Kérnos' shoulders and put it on the platform. Kérnos was told to lie down on it and two of the boys helped him onto it. He lay down and the hide was wrapped around him like a cocoon. As he was looking up at the star-spangled night sky the others stood around him murmuringly and repetitively chanting another prayer over him. *Go to wisdom. Go to knowledge. Go to those who know. Bring back their wisdom. Bring back their knowledge. Bring back word of what we would know. May the Old Ones answer our prayers.* Their voices were blending into a rhythm, an unending chant that ebbed and flowed like the distant river they had crossed weeks ago. The low vibration passed through them, a sound that seemed to rise from the depths of their bones and join with the night. It was a song that spoke of longing, of desperation, of a hope so fragile it could barely be spoken. They prayed not just for themselves, but for the dreams of their fathers, the futures their mothers had hoped for, and the countless generations who had once stood in the same uncertainty.

It was said that the spirits could only speak through dreams when the living fell silent, and so the band made themselves still, becoming one with the steppe around them. The hum grew softer, until it faded altogether, and the only sounds were the crackle of the fire and the faint rustling of the grass. Kérnos closed his eyes. He could feel the warmth of the animal hide around him, willing himself to sink deeper into the darkness, to become weightless, to let his spirit drift free. And then, slowly, as if pulled by an unseen hand, he felt himself drawn into a deep sleep.

And there, in the darkness behind his eyelids, the vision came. He stood alone on the steppe, except it wasn't quite night, nor day. The air shimmered, and the grass moved in a slow, dreamlike way, like waves on a distant sea. There was a whisper on the wind, but he couldn't understand the words—only feel their urgency, their insistence. And then, from the shadows, figures began to form, each one stepping forward until they circled him: men, women, all draped in skins and furs, their faces ageless yet familiar. He knew them. They were the ones who had gone before, and in their eyes, he saw himself. He tried to speak, but the wind carried his voice away, as if it was unworthy to ask the questions that burned in his mind.

Instead, one of the figures—a man with broad shoulders and a scar running down his cheek, pointed towards another vision – two ridges, twin giants rising against the horizon, their shadows deepening into a crossroad where no path seemed certain, no direction clear. *Go*, the gesture said. *Face it. There, you will find what you seek. There, you will understand.* It was a gesture filled with both command and invitation.

Kérnos' body jolted as he awoke, drenched in sweat despite the cold night. For a moment, he forgot where he was, forgot the ritual, forgot the others. But then he felt K̄wontokós' hand on his shoulder, grounding him, reminding him that he was not alone. “What did you see?” K̄wontokós asked, his voice low but insistent.

Kérnos struggled to find the words. “A crossroads,” he managed, his throat dry. “Between two ridges in the pale light of a crescent moon. The way ahead... it's there, waiting for us. It's... something has to happen there.”

The band exchanged looks, a mixture of fear and exhilaration passing between them. They had all felt it, that pull, that need to move, to seek, to face whatever awaited

them. There was no more debate, no more hesitation. They had sought guidance from the spirits, and the spirits had spoken. Kérnos nodded, the uncertainty in his eyes replaced with a glimmer of determination.

“Then that’s where we’ll go,” he said. “To the crossroads.”

They all knew, deep down, that the real answers would only come when they reached that point where all paths converged, and they would have to decide for themselves which way to turn.

The days that followed passed in a blur of dim light and shadows. On the ninth day the dawn came slowly – an uncertain glow spreading across the sky, as if the sun itself were hesitating – and Kérnos found himself and his brothers standing on a ridgeline, the wind tugging at their fur cloaks, tousling their hair. They were at a crossroads, staring out into the distance, trying to pierce through the haze that hung heavy in the morning air. The path ahead forked into two ridges, two trails. One sloped gently downward, leading to a wide valley with a river glistening faintly in the distance. The other ascended steeply, disappearing into the darkness of a thick, ancient forest that loomed like a wall against the horizon. Each one disappearing into the distance, into a future they couldn’t see. Each one staring back at them, silent and indifferent. And in that silence, Kérnos felt the weight of the moment pressing down on him, more than any spear he had ever carried. The wind sighed over the two paths, moving through the tall grass like a ghost, carrying with it a whisper whose words they could not make out. This wasn’t just about which way to turn—it was about something deeper. About who they were to become. Two paths. Two futures.

“We must choose,” said Nerthos, his voice rough. “In the forest there might be game, wood for fires, maybe even others who know this land.”

“The valley will give us water, shelter. A place to rest. It’s safer,” Gwókélytos replied.

The young men all voiced their thoughts. Some wanted the valley—its open space promised fewer surprises, fewer dangers, time to regroup and recover from the long journey. It was the easier road, the one that offered comfort, even if just for a little while. Others were drawn to the forest, sensing the challenge it represented, the unknown potential it held, the chance to find something greater than just safety. The forest would keep them moving, searching, growing. “If we take the easy road now, we’ll forget why we left home in the first place. We didn’t come all this way just to survive. We came to find something more,” was also heard among the young men.

When the time came for Kérnos to speak, he hesitated. While the others had argued his eyes had drifted toward the ground and surroundings. “We’re not the first to walk this path,” he said silently. “This is an old abandoned campsite. It must’ve belonged to travelers. In days of yore.”

Just a little way in among the trees there was a small clearing surrounded by a circle of moss-covered stones. Their discussion came to an abrupt end, and they stepped cautiously into the clearing, the grass parting beneath their feet to reveal the forgotten site. The air felt thick, as if the past still lingered here, watching them. At the center stood a large, flat rock, worn smooth by time. On its surface lay a small, roughly carved figure of a man—a totem left behind by those who had passed through here long before them. “A reminder of where they’d been,” Gwókélytos said in a low voice. Kérnos nodded, feeling the weight of the words. There was something unsettling about the totem, something that reminded him of their own journey. A reminder of the importance of having a direction, how easily paths could be forgotten, how even the most enduring things could be abandoned and left behind. Their eyes were tired, and though they did not speak of it, Kérnos knew they all felt the same pull, the same gnawing doubt that had haunted *him* since they left home. Who are we, now that we are not our fathers’ sons? Who are we, and where are we going?

He suddenly had a flashback, he remembered the words of one of the elders back in their village, on the day they left – words that had also recurred in his vision during the divination ritual. “When you come to the place where the world splits, make your offering,” the old man had said. “Speak to the spirits that dwell there.”

Kérnos had nodded back then, thinking little of it, impatient to be off, to test himself against the world. But now, here, he felt the weight of that wisdom.

“Hand me the bundle!” Kérnos shouted.

The others just looked at him uncomprehendingly. “Those are our last offering gifts,” Kwontókos snarled. “They’re for the full moon ritual!”

“Hand me the bundle!” Kérnos repeated in a very convincing way. It was handed to him. Wrapped in rough wool, it contained bits of meat, barley, resins, dried roots and herbs, even a sliver of the elder’s own hair. But what Kérnos picked up from the bundle was a small, smooth stone – a stone that had been given to them by their village’s ritual leader in the ceremony the night before they left.

“We should begin,” he said, breaking the silence. “Let’s perform a sacrifice ritual to the spirits that guard this crossroads. They know the ways of the earth, and paths we cannot see. Maybe they’ll show us where to go.”

They all purified hands, forehead and mouth – actions, thoughts and words – in the cold little creek running along the clearing. They then gathered around the flat rock, forming a loose circle, their hands resting on its cool surface. A small fire was lit on the rock, barley offered into it, for the fire god to lead them in ritual. Accompanied by Kwontókos’ chanted prayers a libation of silvery water from the creek was poured, and meat, resins and herbs offered into the fire – the young men’s gratitude and respect rising with the fragrant smoke to the spirits. One by one they approached and gave individual gifts. Nerthos, always the strongest among them, placed a fragment of his spear—a weapon that had saved his life in battle but was now chipped and cracked. Karn, who never seemed to stop smiling, even when they were hungry, set down a simple braid of grass, the kind his sister used to weave when they were children. Each gift was a part of themselves, a piece of who they were before they became the Kóryos, before they embarked on their quest to become something new.

Kérnos took a deep breath and spoke: “To the spirits of this place, this crossroads, to the ones who guide the wanderers, we make this offering.” He knelt and drew a small bronze knife from his belt, holding it with a steady hand as he made a tiny cut on his forearm, just enough to draw blood. It pooled for a moment, warm and red, before he smeared it onto the smooth little stone that now lay at the center of the flat rock. He had seen the elders do this back home, when they faced choices that seemed impossible. The blood, they said, would call to the spirits, would draw out guidance from the earth itself. “We have left behind our homes, our mothers and fathers. We seek a new path, a place to belong. Tell us... who we are meant to be. In what direction should we go?” Kérnos’ voice sounded small, but it carried. He waited, eyes closed, feeling the sting of the cut, the warmth of his blood on the stone, hoping, praying. But there was nothing. Just silence. “What more do you want from us?” Kérnos called out, though he wasn’t sure if he was asking the spirits or the one deep inside himself. “Where are we supposed to go?” For a long time, they stood there in silence, staring at the rock and the fire, waiting for some sign, some answer. But the wind carried only the sound of rustling grass, the soft cry of a distant bird.

The realization settled over them, like the first rays of sunlight breaking through dawn. The spirits would never tell them who they were to become. They would never have the answers handed to them. They would have to forge them, to carve them out of the hard earth. And in that act of creation, they would find themselves.

Kérnos reached out and took the smooth stone back into his hand. He held it up to the light, watched it, then turned and flung it out over the edge of the ridge, as far as his

arm could throw. It sailed through the air, catching the wind, before disappearing into the tall grass below. The others watched him, confusion flickering in their eyes.

“We don’t need it,” Kérnos said simply. “We’ve made our offering. Now, it’s time to move.”

Without another word, Kérnos took out his knife again and began carving into the flat rock. His brothers watched in silence as he worked, the sharp blade scraping against the stone, each stroke deliberate and purposeful. When he finished, he stepped back, revealing what he had inscribed. It was a single line—a simple, winding pattern that resembled the river they had crossed, and the path they were on. The others moved forward, one by one, and added their own marks to the stone. Nerthos etched a spiraling line that twisted in on itself, G^wókleytos carved a simple cross, representing the crossroads that had brought them together. As the firelight flickered and danced, Kérnos looked down at the wooden totem one last time, feeling the roughness of the wood beneath his fingers. It was crudely carved, its features indistinct, but there was something unmistakably human about it. With a small, deliberate motion, he placed it on the stone alongside their carvings. Each mark was different, unique, but together they formed something greater. It wasn’t a map, nor was it a message. It was a mark—a testament to their presence, to the fact that they had chosen their path, however uncertain it might be. An echo of that they had once been here. Right here. And that now they were somewhere else.