

## The Way of the Kóryos, part 2

by Björn Ekdahl

The steppe was wide and empty around them, the grasses shifting in the wind like the backs of endless waves. Time had lost its meaning somewhere in the endless cycle of day and night, of moving forward without any clear direction. They had traveled far—too far to go back now, even if they wanted to.

Kérnos sat on a mound of earth, knees pulled up, elbows resting, head bent forward, eyes on the horizon, where the sky bled into the earth. He thought about the stories they had grown up hearing, the tales of heroes and warriors who had carved out their place in the world, who had faced the unknown and come out on the other side. And he thought about the village they had left behind, the familiar paths, the faces he had known since childhood. It was a place that no longer wanted them, a place that had turned its back on them once they left, to fight, to seek out something beyond the fields and pastures of their fathers. They couldn't go back, not as they were now. He felt a weight in his chest, a dull, throbbing ache that had become a constant companion since they'd left the safety of their childhood. A gnawing question that refused to let him go: *Do we have what it takes?* And the steppe rippled and whispered, endlessly.

A cold wind swept over the plains, ruffling his hair, still stiff with blood from the battle that had ended the night before. They had won. Victory. But no one felt like singing. Around him, near the smoldering remains of their campfire, his bandmates were scattered, equally silent. None of them had spoken much since the night before. They were supposed to be celebrating, but now that the thrill of the fight had faded, all that was left was emptiness and questions. They had expected something—something big, something to rush in and fill them up after a victory, a sense of power, of purpose. But instead, they felt as though something had drained out of them, like they'd given away a piece of themselves they hadn't meant to lose. The vast steppe felt even larger now, like it was yawning open, ready to swallow them all.

Kwontokos was sharpening his axe with slow, deliberate strokes, the metal edge whispering against the stone.

"Do you know where we're going?" he asked, though Kérnos knew he wasn't really asking about the steppe. There was a desperation in his voice, a thin thread of hope that he might somehow have the answers.

Kérnos looked at him, really looked, and saw the lines of fear etched into Kwontokos' face, the rawness in his eyes. He wanted to say something, anything, to pull them back from this ledge, to fill up the silence that gnawed at them. But what could he say? What did *he* know of life beyond the rush of blood, the thrill of danger? What did *any* of them know? They were just boys pretending to be men. They were all searching for the same thing, all longing for the same sense of purpose, of direction.

Gwókleptos kicked at a rock, sending it skittering across the ground. "Then why are we still walking? What's the point?" He turned to face Kérnos, eyes bright with anger, or maybe fear. "Why not just stop? Why not just... go back?"

"Go back to what?" Kérnos shot back, sharper than he intended. "To the village? To the people who sent us out here to prove ourselves? What would we tell them? That we're still just as lost as before?" He clenched his fists, felt the calluses scrape against each other, reminders of the battles fought and the scars earned. "We can't go back!" he continued, his voice raw. "We can't go back to being what we were before."

Nerthos, leaned back on a fallen tree, his hands absentmindedly tracing the carved patterns on his spear, broke the silence first, his voice quiet and cracked, as if the words

were being dragged out of him. "We'll never be like them," he said. "The heroes in the old songs."

The wind shifted suddenly, carrying with it the scent of smoke and something else—a smell that didn't belong. Meat, roasting. Fresh meat. Kíwontókos caught it first, his head jerking up, nostrils flaring. "Who would be out here *cooking* at this time?"

They exchanged nervous glances. Camps meant people, and people most likely meant threats. There was no way to know until they were close enough to see the eyes of the men who awaited them. Kérnos stood slowly, his muscles protesting, still aching from the fight. "No one from our band."

"Could be scavengers," G'ókleytos offered, eyes narrowing. "Herdsmen, maybe."

"Let's see," Kérnos said, a small spark of something—curiosity, hope, maybe—flickering to life inside him.

They moved quietly as they crept over the ridge towards the scent. It didn't take long before they saw it—a small camp nestled in a dip between two hills, a lone figure tending a fire, a haunch of meat turning slowly on a spit. The man was old, *much* older than Kérnos had expected. His hair hung in long, tangled braids streaked with grey, and his skin was weathered, marked with the lines of many winters. But his eyes were sharp, and fixed on the boys even before they made a sound. "If you're hungry," the old man called, "come and eat. There's plenty."

Kérnos hesitated. He felt the others' eyes on him, waiting for him to decide. He took a breath and stepped forward. "Who are you?"

The old man's mouth curled into a half-smile. "My name is not important. What's important is why you're here."

"We're hungry," Nerthos said, almost defensively, stepping forward too. "We've just come from a fight."

"Ah," the old man said, nodding as if he'd expected as much. "Young men and their battles. Always so eager to prove yourselves. Come, sit. You'll need your strength for what's ahead."

The young warriors exchanged glances, but something in the old man's voice drew them in, and they found themselves moving forward, settling around the fire, reaching for the meat he offered. They ate in silence, tearing into the flesh with their teeth, their hunger overpowering their wariness. When they'd had their fill, the old man spoke again.

"Tell me," he said, eyes flicking over each of them in turn, "what was the battle about?"

The question settled into Kérnos like a stone, heavy and cold. "We were attacked. We *had* to fight. And we won!"

"We *had* to fight!" Nerthos filled in, almost more to convince himself than the old man.

"That's what men do. We were there to take what's ours!"

The old man chuckled, a dry, rasping sound. "So what did you take? And what did you *lose*?"

"I don't really know," Kérnos said finally. "But it doesn't feel like victory."

The old man nodded, as if he'd been waiting for those words. "There is a power in taking, yes. But there is a greater power in understanding what it is you take—and why. Every man must face his own shadow. The steppe is wide, and it doesn't care for your victories. But you—" he looked directly at Kérnos now, and it felt as though the old man's eyes were piercing straight through him— "*you* must care. Or you'll be lost to it."

Kérnos swallowed, his mouth dry despite the meat he'd eaten. "Maybe we *are* lost. How do we know what we're supposed to do? I don't know where I'm going, but I know I have to keep moving. Because if I stop... I'm afraid I'll disappear. How do we find our... our path?"

The old man's smile softened, became something almost kind. "You listen. To the wind, to the earth, to the beat of your own heart. You listen, and you keep moving. And when you fall, you rise again."

For a long moment, none of them spoke. Kérnos looked out over the steppe, at the vast, open space, at the sky that seemed to stretch forever. "That reminds me of what my grandfather once told me," he began, "that his grandfather had told *him*. That the wind speaks to those who listen. That it carries the voices of our ancestors, their stories, their hopes and fears. Maybe we've forgotten to listen."

The old man smiled. "The strength of the Fathers—their fathers, grandfathers, and beyond—is not just a memory; it's a living force that pulses through our veins. We are the culmination of generations of men and women who have faced hardship, who have fought for their families, who have carved their place in this world. It's like the grass," he continued, his voice gaining momentum. "Look at it. It bends but does not break. It grows, nourished by the earth beneath it, shaped by the wind above it. We are the same. We have the roots of our fathers to draw strength from. We have the wisdom of their struggles, the knowledge of their victories. It's all here, inside us. We just need to remember how to bring it out."

The young men sat silent for a while, their gaze drifting over the horizon. Kérnos nodded, feeling something inside him shift, something that had been wound tight finally beginning to unravel. And for the first time, he felt something other than fear, something other than emptiness.

While they were sitting there contemplating, staring into the ashes, the old man had risen, gathered his things and vanished with the night, moving with the slow, deliberate grace of one who knows the weight of many winters, leaving behind only the echo of his words. Now, as the first light spilled over the horizon, they could find no trace of him: no footprints in the dirt, no warmth where he had sat. The others turned to Kérnos, confusion and unease etched on their faces. And, faintly feeling the rhythm of the earth and the beat of his own heart, he understood. "He was never here. Or maybe he always was." And the steppe rippled and whispered, endlessly.