

The Way of the Hunt

by,

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Genre:

Fantasy Literature

In preparation for his unexpected exile, Kyrin packed whatever necessities he could feasibly bear over the gulf of distance and time that stretched before him. He peered into his rawhide satchel and saw there was precious little space left in it for much else. Star charts and astrolabes dominated his short list of supplies, and the strange devices made the bottom of the bag swell to the point of awkwardness. On his left hip hung the sword that he had inherited in his childhood after his grandfather's death. The weight of it forced him to stand straighter, making him appear taller than he already was. Slung across his wide back was a battle axe with a well worn haft, a reminder that Kyrin was a slayer long before he turned to stargazing.

His home was quiet this early in the morning. It seemed all the world slept, and though he wished it, he knew this was not so. He could hear the entire village scuttling about just beyond his front door. The meager abode was scantily furnished, yet Kyrin begrudged it not. Memories raced through his mind. He saw the hearth where his son had fallen and chipped a tooth as a child. To his left, the narrow hallway that led to his bedroom looked as it always had, cozy and inviting. Behind him was the entrance, where both wife and children had rushed to greet him after his labors for the day. Soon they too would be but a memory. He gripped the hilt of his grandfather's sword with his left hand as he stood at attention, an effort to muster as much courage as he could. Would he live long enough to give the sword to his own grandson, who had been born only hours before? And so unexpected! On this matter, the stars, who had always been so open in their purpose to him, had strangely been veiled.

"You will return," his wife said, who must have sensed the question rippling through Kyrin's mind. He had almost forgotten Ameryn had been standing next to him throughout his preparation. It marveled him how a woman could know a husband so well. Her mellow voice

soothed him like an elixir. “You are destined to do great things, Kyrin. A great man spoke those words, and never could something have been more true.”

“That man is gone. What I would not give to hear my father’s counsels on this matter.” He smiled at his wife, admiring her gray eyes and feline grace that he found so engaging when they first had courted so many years before. “Do great things? Ameryn, I am not the man I was once. I have not been for a great number of years. Taking a man’s life had almost become foreign to me, save my nightmares. Now, the gods will that I should take up sword and axe again like an adolescent soldier.” He laughed bitterly. “I had the feeling we would have a granddaughter, yet I was never confident; the stars refused to tell me. And now we have a grandson. Think you this some cruel joke the gods play on us?”

“Never do the gods jest,” she said quietly. “You must never say that, Kyrin. You have not forgotten the ways of death; I know you too well. That is good, for you will need all those dark skills that you were once so well known for. It is those skills that I pin my hopes to even in this dreadful hour.”

Kyrin took Ameryn in his arms and kissed her with great passion. He attempted to take note of every last detail, the taste of her lips, the perfume of her skin, the heat of her body. Every minute thing was noticed, for he knew this would be their last time together. For how long, he knew not. Perhaps it would be forever. Soon she would belong to another, and Kyrin would be absolved from his bond of matrimony.

“I can’t leave you here for another to enjoy,” Kyrin said in anguish. “You belong to me and we to each other. How will I ever forget you?”

She embraced him, and their hearts pounded in unison for perhaps the last time. “You must forget me if you are to ever have a chance of returning. A slayer bound by marriage will

not last long in the wild world. Your new wife is Death herself, and she is a jealous and vengeful mistress. Do not cross her. See that you do not forget that, or you will never again return to Elchalon.”

Kyrin breathed deeply, taking in his wife’s aroma as if it could infuse his soul with the confidence and power he needed so desperately. He vowed to see himself through this, for Ameryn, if for no other reason. At last, he said to his good wife, “Live your life, and do not burden your thoughts worrying about me. If the gods will it, I will see you again as husband in this life. If they do not—”

She covered his lips with her fingers. “Oh, utter it not, lest the gods think we have lost all hope!” She gripped Kyrin as if he alone kept her from plunging into an abyss. “I want you back at any cost, even if it come at the cost of my brother’s life. If one, and only one, of you must return, then I wish it to be you.” Tears flowed from her eyes. “You must think me a horrible person to say such a depraved thing.”

“Your brother is called to the hunt,” Kyrin soothed. “And you are called to make a choice. Though it be bitter, the choice must needs be with your husband. It has always been that way. Don’t cry any more. I would have you spend time with Pethyn while I take my lead. Above all, do not tell him to turn from his charge, either by voice or countenance. And do not speak of me, for that topic will only drive a wedge further between the two of you.”

Ameryn nodded as she wiped the tears from her face. “Is this what my foremothers had to endure? Husbands hunted by brothers?”

Kyrin left her questions untouched, for they both knew the answers already.

A knock came at the door. It was Daeryn, the village master who had only recently sent his own father from his people, as he was about to do to Kyrin.

“The time has come, Kyrin,” the young man said. “Do you stand ready to see your grandson and make proud your ancestors?”

“I do.” The answer came without hesitation.

“Then follow me.”

The three of them walked into the open air of the dark morning where the entire village was awaiting. All had gathered to see Kyrin off, and to wish him well in exile. In the crowd he saw his son, Kedyr, with an arm around his young wife, Birel. She held the babe, wrapped in a bundle of blankets. They had decided to name the infant Landyr, the name of Kyrin’s father. Beside them was Pethyn, Ameryn’s brother and soon to be hunter of Kyrin. He was a great warrior and would be a formidable hunter. Next to him was Dernyn, the man who was to replace Kyrin. That was perhaps the worst part of the entire custom. It was not being outcast from your people or hunted by your own family, but having a man take your wife from you. It enraged Kyrin to think of Dernyn sharing a bed with Ameryn, but there was nothing else for it. How his own grandfather had managed to handle it, Kyrin would soon find out.

The starlight winked high above them in the dark, cold morning like the blazing eyes of the gods. All around him, every face gathered was awash in torchlight, and Kyrin scorned the gods for not being permitted to see his grandson by the natural light of the sun.

“Kyrin,” Daeryn said. “As you know it is our custom that only two males of one house shall ever live in Elchalon. This evening has seen the birth of your grandson, Landyr. He is a fine, healthy boy. One you must be proud of, as we all are. Pethyn shall lead the hunt for you. You must never set foot again in Elchalon until you reach the age of elder. If death is to find you first, know that you are venerated here for the burden you undertake, and we mourn your absence. We feel it already. You are the augur of our people, the stargazer who can see the

faces of the gods in the heavens.” The young man stretched his arms to the sky in dramatic fashion, then lowered them slowly. “You may now take the babe in your arms and address your people for the last time.”

Kyryn walked over to Birel and took the child in his big arms. The babe was so small. He wanted nothing more than to take his family from Elchalon and live in the wilds. Away from their people, yes, but with one another. Yet he knew that was impossible. This was his home, and if his forefathers had been bound to this tradition, he was not about to shirk it. At any rate, he had read his destiny in the stars already. The veil was gone now. He knew he would travel to distant lands. Also, there were signs of persecution in his future. And he was inexplicably eager for it.

“Hello, little one,” he whispered softly. “I am saddened that I will not be able to see you grow up.” He kissed the babe’s forehead with quiet tenderness. “A person must live up to his name. Let us both do likewise, little one.” He kissed his grandchild one last time before handing him back to his mother.

“I would like to say that this is an honor for me,” Kyryn said for all to hear. “Not many in this land have ever lived to see their grandson’s birth. I take this charge as any man should, with dignity and awe. I wish to set an example of what honor is. My son shall be your new augur. I leave him and am pleased in him. To all of my friends and family, I give my heart filled with faith and love and devotion. And to my hunters, know this: enjoy your time before you pursue me. I give you fair warning that ere I was a stargazer, I was a slayer of men. That is a talent that can never be forgotten, for it is a gift of the gods. And not only can I take men’s lives with ease, I also have the gift of foresight and prediction. I am now a man without family, friends, or people. Many are my enemy and all cannot be trusted. Hear this! I intend to return to Elchalon

and see my grandson as a man and my wife where she belongs.” Kyrin turned as he spoke one last line to the crowd. “I shall return as an elder.”

Kyrin walked away from them all and everything he had ever known, taking measured strides to the city gate. A cry went up from the host he left behind, some that wailed and some that cheered his name. But what he heard above all else was his crying grandchild.

“I will return, little one,” Kyrin vowed. “By Valin and his brethren gods, I swear I shall return to take my place with my people once more. Let death now guide my hand and keep it steady. Let my eye never become trusting of man or woman. Let not my soul become corrupted by what I am about to undertake. Let my heart become a stone for others to break themselves upon!”

With that, as the gray dawn illuminated the road before him, Kyrin put as much distance between himself and Elchalon as he could before the next hunter’s moon shone brightly in the heavens. A great fury had now been unleashed upon the world, and Kyrin welcomed it like the bloody taste of a victory long forgotten.

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This was not Kyrin’s first time away from his people. In the prime of his youth, what now seemed like ages ago, he had gone on his first hunt for an exile. At the time he did not understand how someone who was so well liked among the people could suddenly be hunted like the stag. It had been explained to him, rather impatiently, that this was how the people of Elchalon were able to keep a balance of power among the tribes. Without such a law, one clan, in time, might be able to overrun all others, even though the male child was rarer than a great-grandfather. Kyrin, through the eyes of a green youth, could see the logic in it. Yet the barbarity of hunting someone so close to you always was a bit unsettling for Kyrin.

He tried to remember everything he could about that first hunt. The man they had pursued he had known little about, only that he was of some importance among his people. Perhaps the man had been a smith or farrier or both. Kyrin remembered the pursuit of the man had taken nearly three years to finally come to a close. It had been such a time for growing up then. Kyrin had first learned the touch of a woman's hand, and the sensual pleasures of the inner chamber of a brothel. He was also well on his way to mastering the art of death, and what techniques actually kept the charnel houses overflowing with flesh. Such churlish lessons learned on that first hunt had changed him forever.

There had been others of course, and with each he prayed to the gods they would be easily forgotten. They never were. He had never failed to catch prey on a hunt, and soon he had come to believe that no one had ever escaped to return to Elchalon as an elder. And now he was on the other side of the chase, determined to do exactly that. For now the goal was to continue to put distance between hunter and prey. Pethyn and his bunch would not fall for some trick like setting up a hiding place near Elchalon and under their noses. Only the foolish did things like that. He considered leaving civilization altogether, until at last there was no one for a month's journey in any direction. Like some spider, he could find a hole and bury himself from searching eyes until his time to return had come. But this was not Kyrin's way. Besides, he knew that such contrivances never worked. The more isolated you made yourself, the easier it was to find you.

So he walked for five days straight. Mountains ground down to steppes and at last to the tree line of a great forest. Such traveling in the open lands provided Kyrin ample opportunity for reflection. It was hard for him to accept that he was now alone in the world, and that men that he had called friends only days before would soon be set loose to hunt and kill him. Yet there was

no other thing to do but to recognize that men were impelled to do what the gods deigned, and to go against them would not only bring a harsh vengeance upon you, but shame and ignominy upon your own people. Kyrin's ancestors had tried this when the world was still very young, so it was said, and the gods had nearly destroyed the entire race of man. Yet one of the gods had saved a handful of them, and told them to make their families strong but keep them small. Valin had been that god, master of the hunt and chase.

Kyrin smiled. Valin had ordained the chase in the first place, and though the surly god was a hunter himself, his favor was with the exile. Not that the god would lift a finger to help Kyrin, nevertheless he was pleased with a great effort. Kyrin vowed to give him what he wished for.

Above all else, as fresh blisters burgeoned within his boots, his thoughts turned to his grandchild. Kyrin knew what it was like to lose a grandfather, like most boys born in Elchalon. He could not bring the boy happiness nor riches, but he could bring honor to him by doing as the gods bid. Besides, what would better curry favor for his family than pleasing Valin by slinging death to anyone who threatened Kyrin? The gods, after all, relished the blood of men. Indeed, they craved it.

He did not fear death. In his mind, his family was dead. Because of this, he would not quail when he encountered his wife's brother, for how can someone who is already dead be killed?

Such thoughts dominated his mind as he pounded the harsh landscape. On the fifth day, after almost continuous walking, sometimes running, away from his lands, he stopped. The forest loomed all about him. There was a slick feel to the place, as if a great multitude had been camped there and had suddenly left without much of a trace. He was uneasy, and every step was

more agonizing than the last. Despite every ounce of effort within him, he collapsed from exhaustion and lack of rest near an enormous oak tree. From the spot where he fell, he could see the jagged peaks of mountains like purple ghosts in the distance. There he knew his people were going on without him, his wife likely already in the arms of another man. He was safe for the moment, the hunters still weeks from the commencement of their mission. So Kyrin let the shadowy hand of sleep take him, until darkness covered his eyes from the world around him.

It was a dreamless rest. That slick feel of the forest bothered him even in his sleep, and he had the suffocating feeling that someone was just about to throw him in a hole and bury him for the good of the world. Phantom voices guffawed and crowed in that murky place, but inexorable sleep was not to be denied.

The sound of footfalls and ragged breath finally wrenched him from slumber. For an instant, Kyrin believed he had slept for one whole moon, and that Pethyn and his bunch had found him already, defenseless, without even a sword in hand or time to stand upon his feet and fight them off. The sky was black but growing lighter as moonrise neared. Kyrin quickly took stock of the stars through the towering trees and noted their relation to the rising moon. He had slept for less than a day, though it felt like the world had left him behind like an old loon.

The footfalls again pounded all around him as he blinked his eyes, trying to make sense of the tenebrous world around him. His hand went for his sword, the old instinct now fresh as warm blood. He wondered if he would take a life so soon into his exile. As the thought flowed through his mind, voices caught up in heated conversation reverberated through the forest.

“Don’t stop here,” the first one, that of a female in her youth, exclaimed. “We are almost where we may receive our aid. What are you doing? Even here they will find you!”

“I am tired of running,” the second voice groaned. The boy the girl was chasing came to a halt despite his brash words. “I would rather fight them all than take another step in retreat.”

“If you choose not to leave because you fear the Change—,”

“I fear nothing.”

“Then why do you not trust in me? They do not yet know that we are in love,” the girl said. “Let me plead with my uncle. It may be that in time—,”

“Your uncle is an evil man, you’ve told me that yourself, Niome. Yet I do not fear him either. Haven’t I proven that already? I was this close to snuffing his life out forever. I do not run from fear but out of love. The Change is a risk all our people face should they decide to leave our protected borders. I shiver to think what bloody work your uncle would do to us if he is allowed to live.”

Silence reigned once more in that dark wilderness. Kyrin watched them from the cover of a huge tree trunk, and he saw that the boy, despite his fears, was prepared to face whatever ill deed stood before him.

“My uncle has his tempers, Merin,” Niome said after a time. “But he can be mollified if you know how. You should not have tried to kill him.”

“It is a dark thing you speak of,” Merin said in disgust. “Young girls are not supposed to know their fathers and uncles in that way. What you say he does to you goes against the gods!”

“The gods themselves have declared that I know my uncle in such a way. The prophet Kaomb decreed it. We dare not go against the will of the gods, Merin.”

“And you think undergoing the Change will please the gods?” The boy threw his arms up in disbelief. “How can reverting to a beast form after being a human be our destiny?”

“The gods themselves often change their form. How many times must I tell you that in such a form we would be free to love one another without reprisal from my uncle?”

Merin spat. “His death would set us free. Believe me, your uncle will face the judgment of the gods someday.”

“Please do not say such things. My uncle may visit me in my bed from time to time, but he is not an evil man. You, Merin, and no other have my love. In time my uncle may understand that. But for now you must flee until I have convinced him of—,”

“And what if you cannot convince him? Am I to remain a beast until time take me or the gods release me?”

She did not answer.

“Your uncle will never allow us to be together,” Merin continued. “Only his death will give us his consent.”

“You must trust me now, my love. Beyond these borders you may find a new existence as a wild stallion. If my uncle should find a kind place in his heart, I will discover how to bring you back or, if that fail, join you myself.” She turned her head as if she heard something. Kyrin could hear more footsteps approaching. The clanking mail let him know they were heavily armored. Instantly he knew this was not a searching party for the truant youths. *Why would they send such a troop to return these children to their homes?*

Perhaps the uncle was not as understanding as his niece believed after all.

“Run!” the girl whispered harshly, her thin frame more powerful than Kyrin would have believed. “Leave now or they will destroy you.”

Merin pushed her off of himself. “I take my risk now. I’ll not be a beast. If I die, then so be it.”

Spoken like a true fool, Kyrin thought. At least Merin had come to some conclusion regarding his future. Unlike the boy, Kyrin was in a rare moment of indecision. Every part of him wanted to help the youths, yet it certainly was none of his business. He knew better than to intrude on a course of action that did not concern him; that was the way of folly. Yet the allure of adventure was too much to resist for Kyrin.

He encroached a little more upon their space, all methods of stealth now surging to the front of his mind as if he had never stopped using them in the first place. They did not see his large frame or dark eyes close though he was, yet Kyrin was able to take stock of the both of them almost instantly. The girl was only just a woman, her large eyes and shallow curves accentuated in the waxing moonlight. She had the look of aristocracy about her, her hands were like milk, soft and supple. Her beaux bore looked impetuous, with more fight than either brawn or skill to match his bravado. At least, Kyrin thought, he had the gear of someone on a trek, unlike the girl who was still dressed in what looked like ceremonial robes. She tried vainly to push the boy away, but he stubbornly held his ground once more.

Four men then bounded into the clearing, swords flashing silver moonlight in deadly fashion. As they came to an abrupt stop, it was not certain what took them by surprise more, the two youths struggling against one another in what nearly seemed like a fight, or Kyrin, the grim mountain man who held a fierce sword in one hand and a deadly axe in his other.

“Niome!” one of the four exclaimed, as if he had not expected to see her so far from home. By his mien and austere look, Kyrin took him to be the captain of the guard. “Your uncle is fraught with dread for you.” He seemed bewildered. “We saw the tracks leading from our fair city. How have you come to be here?” He stared at Merin harshly. “Who are you? Speak! And what foul alliance have you made with this wild man?”

The two youths turned to see Kyrin for the first time, and the sight of him nearly overwhelmed them. “I do not know this man,” the girl pleaded, her eyes glistening suddenly. Then it seemed an idea crashed down upon her from a dark oblivion. A look of horror and relief covered her natural beauty like a winding-sheet as she indicated Kyrin. “This man means to take me from my lands and sell me as chattel. The trip must have been overlong, for he tried to ravage me in the open forest until—” She ran into the captain’s arms, pointing to Merin. “Were it not for this young man, who has always respected my uncle and looked softly at me from time to time, I’d certainly not have lived to see my people again!”

Kyrin betrayed no emotion in either his black eyes or swarthy face, and neither did he lower his weapons, which seemed to convulse with an eager life all their own.

“What say you, stranger?” the captain of the guard asked, his subordinates already spreading out in preparation for what was to come. “What have you to say to these monstrous charges this girl lays against you?”

“Death knows me well,” Kyrin began as he gripped his death implements tighter. “And you can see the look of death is all about me. It penetrates like a night sweat, saturating me like an unction. Of those who have ever contested me, few now live, and fewer still have walked away from me unchanged.” He waved his blade at Merin and roared in laughter. “Now look at this boy. What man would think twice to the truth of the girl’s contention if they could see him next to me? The gods themselves would needs help him cast me from any purpose I might have, be it for good or ill.” He turned to leave.

“Stand fast there!” The captain looked again at the girl and his eyes were filled with doubt. “Girl, be you sure this is what occurred here? Understand that what you say may determine the next few minutes and the end of a quiet peace.”

She shot a quick glance to Merin then at Kyrin. Her mind was set when she spoke again. “I am certain that he is a liar, a scout for a warring people who mean to overtake us. You must not let him get word back to his armies. Have you not sworn to defend me and my uncle and all of his lands until death take you?” She did not wait for the captain’s answer. “Kill him now, and let his head be set high upon the banner-post of our citadel for all to see.”

“She’s right,” another guard, a beast of a man with great broad shoulders, spoke. “We can’t let him escape.”

“I’m for it,” grunted another, blessed with long limbs and the face of a thief. “Look at him. If he is not a destroyer, then there is no such thing in all of the world. Where do such dark fighters come from but an evil place.” He hesitated as his captain glared at him. “Even if she is lying, our land would be better off without such a one as this for the same reasons jackals are hunted. Not for what they have done, but what they might do.”

A third guard sneered. “But this is no jackal, Ryner. It is a man, though dark he may be. And a man must be given a chance to clear his name, by the gods.”

“Would you feel same with him running unchecked through our lands, Berlig?” the first guard asked the third. “What if the girl is right and there are hundreds of his kind ready to pour into our city?”

“And what if the girl is lying, Poeril?” Berlig snapped. “Will you and Ryner here risk killing an innocent man?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve killed an innocent,” Ryner said under his breath. “And I’ll do it again to keep murderers at bay.”

“Peace!” the captain exclaimed. “I’ll not start a war or execute a man on the unsubstantiated charge of a girl, no matter whom she might be related to.” He turned to Kyrin.

“Come now, man. Tell us what has brought you hither to the borders of our realm? Is it as this girl speaks and you are preparing to make war upon us?”

“You cannot believe he will speak the truth!” Niome exclaimed, now safely in the arms of her beaux.

Kyrin glowered at the girl, and instantly she was silenced. “What is your name?” he asked the captain.

“Quent,” came the reply.

“Quent, I am an exile from my lands. Where exactly my lands lie, I am bound not to tell anyone. In truth, I am at the service of no king or lordship or land, but myself. I alone dictate where my boots might take me. These two children stumbled upon my place of slumber and awakened me, for I had fallen asleep from the exertion of my journey. They are in love, but are afraid the girl’s uncle will not allow their union in marriage. Mayhap they are running away.”

“Lies!” the girl hissed.

“It is not a lie,” Kyrin continued, “unless what I heard the both of you speak to the night air was a lie.” He turned to Quent. “You seem to be a man of learning and wisdom as befitting your rank. I only wish to pass through your lands unhindered.” A dark look flashed across his face. “But I can deal death for those who would crave the bitter dish. I have come not to maim and cripple and kill, yet I can do all those and more with ease when pushed to my limit.”

The captain was quiet for a moment as he mulled his decision. His hand scratched his stubbled chin. “I believe the best solution to this problem is for you to come before our king so that he might hear your case.”

Kyrin shook his head. “That is not possible.”

“Why?”

“I cannot tarry from my quest or linger in uncivilized lands where the lies of children reign.” Kyrin held his axe aloft and his blade low. In the moonlight he looked like a wraith.

“You will either let me pass or I shall cleave a way through you. Have what you will.”

“Listen! Such defiance within the borders of our own lands,” Niome said.

“He insults our king by not following our orders,” Poeril menaced, his thick arms flexing.

“Let’s kill him and be done with it,” Ryner agreed.

“Come then!” the man of the mountain growled. “Bastards and dogs keep the same place in hell, where the squalor and filth of evil ones are piled over an eternity! There shall you meet each other again, once I am finished with you!”

The four guardsman surged upon Kyrin and tried to smother him, taking his mobility away. But his fell axe created space enough of its own as it wheeled in a deadly arc. It cut through the air and whistled until the shiny helm on Ryner’s head stopped it abruptly from singing. The wrought metal was not strong enough to ward the blow completely, and bits of brain exploded into the cool night, splattering upon all who were close.

Ryner’s body had not yet impacted the ground when Kyrin’s blade sang a song of its own. Poeril, the biggest of the four, lunged at Kyrin, spear in hand, with a thrust bent on impaling the heart. Kyrin warded it at the last moment with his blade as he spun to his right in an effort to regain his balance. The spearhead had missed its mark, but found another part of Kyrin’s body to open just the same. He grabbed the side of his ribcage and felt the hot blood flowing forth from the wound.

There was no time for him to probe to see how well the spearhead had done its job. The three charged Kyrin again, this time in a triangle phalanx meant to succeed even if the first guard were dispatched. He gathered and made himself a low target, his thighs bunched into huge knots

of muscle ready to uncoil with a tremendous force. As the guard advanced on him he shot forth, starting with a high attack but almost immediately returning to his low position, wielding his blade in another arc that ended in a crash to Poeril's knee. Dark blood issued forth as if from a well. Sinew and bone lay exposed in the open air as the man shrieked in agony. A second blow cut short the man's cry and life at the same instant.

The two men behind Poeril faltered, and for the first time they might have understood that they had been sorely outmatched by this strange, dark man. These two did not want to challenge Kyrin in the first place, yet the hand had been dealt, and now the endgame was here at last. Now the captain and his last guard, Berlig, remained. Kyrin let loose a terrifying bellow and charged, as if the terrors of hell had been set free. He drew his sword back and brought it down upon Berlig's own blade, which shattered into many pieces, leaving the short hilt in the guard's hand. Stunned, he raised his arms to ward a second blow from Kyrin, but too late. His blade found a home deep into the guard's chest by way of the neck.

He wrenched his blade free and flashed its tip before the captain. Dark thick fluids dripped from it as he spoke.

"I will let you live," Kyrin menaced. "Leave me in peace and forget that you ever saw me."

"I have seen you in action, stranger," Quent returned. "And I would leave you alone if I could. Yet I think letting such a dangerous thing as you roam through our lands would be folly indeed."

Kyrin looked about. The two youths had fled the scene, gone into hiding until their unambiguous tracks would lead searchers right to them yet again. He scorned them both. Now three men lay dead because of them.

“I am not your problem, captain. The girl has been ravaged by her uncle, so she says. And the boy has murder in his eyes for that man as well. Would you not be better served in finding them and letting the law of this land settle this in whatever way seems best?” He lowered his blade. “Let me pass, and you shall—” He saw a flash of movement from the corner of his eye, and only too late realized what it was.

“No!” Kyrin cried as he lunged at the captain, for he saw what the captain could not. The boy had returned with a weapon of his own. Kyrin had just enough time to see it sparkle in the silver light before it was driven home into the captain’s back. In a matter of seconds, he was gone.

“You fool!” Kyrin roared at the boy as Quent gasped his last. “This was a good man, who might have understood your plight and helped you. Now you have sealed your own fate, for you have murder on your hands. The both of you.”

“Now you can leave,” Merin replied defiantly. “We will not hinder you further.”

“It is your own fault for meddling in business that was not yours,” Niome chimed. “You murdered those men. But don’t worry. The gods will repay you for it. And may their vengeance come in the form of a slow death for you.”

“May a man not defend himself? I’ve seen more death in my time than should be allowed, and never have I seen men killed so needlessly.” Kyrin wiped the blood from his death-implements and retreated a few steps, keeping the young couple well within his line of sight. “The both of you are the biggest fools I have ever seen. You cannot run far enough from the king to be safe. Believe me, for I know about the hunt and chase better than anyone. I would advise you differently, but you have made it clear you do not wish me to meddle. Fair enough!”

He turned from them and said his final words over one shoulder. “But I have read the stars this evening, and they tell me your time will soon be at hand.”

“Do not listen to that craven,” Niome said lovingly to Merin as she took his hand. “You shall soon undergo the Change, and after I will join you, my love.” She kissed him, then shouted curses at the wild man of the mountains, his form slowly merging with the pale darkness of the woods. Her words were more appropriate for a dungeon full of murderers, full of loathing and wretchedness.

But Kyrin heard them not. He could only hear the blood hammering through his ears and the rhythmical steps of his feet as he continued on his trek.

[3]

Three days from the spot where the four guards of the king had fallen and many miles hence, Kyrin at last saw another person in those wooded lands. In the bright sun of the afternoon, he had spied the woman on horseback long before she had. It did not deter his direction, however, as he continued to tread the land in his own steady gait.

“Avast!” the woman called when she was near enough. “I have been searching for a man of your description and would speak with you.”

Kyrin gave her a warm smile. She was extraordinarily beautiful. He thought of his wife, but he could no longer see her as she had once been. By the gods, he no longer had a wife! And thinking of his prior life in that way was apt to get him killed. Still, it was hard for Kyrin to overcome the guilt that washed over him upon seeing the woman. He may no longer have been bound by matrimony, but his heart still belonged to his wife. While his body might move on in the world and seek earthly pleasures, he swore that his heart and love would belong to Ameryn or to no one.

He thought of the woman's search for him, and had more than a clue as to what the purpose might be. "Then I would say you are in luck," Kyrin said at last.

She returned his smile. "I am Lemer, and I serve the Lord Tangol, king of these lands. We are always happy to have foreigners visit our great kingdom." She leapt from her steed with the grace of an acrobat. "I am sorry if I misled you a moment ago. I have been searching you by order of the king."

"The king? But I have never met your king."

Lemer took Kyrin's hand in token of friendship. "That is not surprising. Yet we have reason to believe you may have been witness to grisly murder and evil deeds." She eyed his weapons. "You are heavily armed for one who is a traveler."

"An axe may serve many purposes. For me, it is the hunting weapon of choice."

"You hunt with an axe?" Lemer said in surprise.

"Aye. As do many of my kinfolk."

"And from what lands do you hail?"

Kyrin motioned in the direction behind him. "The northern most tips of yonder mountains. I have butchered and dressed a hog only yesterday that fell by the curve of my axe."

He reached within his satchel and pried a piece of salted meat free for the woman to behold.

"You'll not find better, I'll warrant. I have found great meat while in your lands."

She ignored his complement. "And your sword?"

"No traveler should go swordless. One must always be ready to defend oneself from marauders and highwaymen."

“That is true. Yet two of our citizens claim that you, or one that fits your description, massacred four guardsmen only a few nights ago, armed with a sword and axe. What have you to say to that?”

Kyrin popped a sliver of meat into his mouth and chewed. “I do not know, but perhaps someone is sporting with you. I have encountered few people while within your borders. Why, before you, I have only seen a young girl and her beaux chattering through the forest one night. They woke me up with their talk of uncles and love and other such things. I made to talk to them, but they bade me leave and mind my own business. That is all.”

The woman’s brow furrowed in lines of concentration, giving a serious aspect to her beauty. “Is there nothing else you wish to tell me that may help the cause of justice?”

“Justice? Why what is the matter?”

“These two youths are charged with conspiring to kill the king. Their plot was discovered this very morning. Yet they claimed they were working at your behest.”

Kyrin went wide-eyed. “Murder of a king? The gods save us! I did hear the young boy speak of killing the girl’s uncle, yet I don’t see how that has anything to do with all of this.”

“You do not know what you say,” the woman exclaimed. “The king is the girl’s uncle! If I have it right you yourself heard the plot to assassinate the king!”

“Is that so?”

“The king will want to meet you and hear your story. I am sure he will offer you a large reward.” She seemed hardly able to contain herself. “Perhaps a place of lordship within his fair lands!”

“I am not certain.” Kyrin frowned. “I really must continue my journey, for I do not have time to enjoy the good things of life.”

“Why?”

“I am an exile, and it is the custom of my people that I must be hunted until I am found.”

“This is strange, indeed.” Lemerith thought for a moment, until she smiled again. “I promise you this will only take a few moments, for the king is a busy man. Will you do me this honor?”

“Only if you will dine with me this eve.” Kyrin had spoken his heart before his brain could keep his tongue in check.

“Then it is settled. Come! We are not far from the palace.”

The woman brought Kyrin to the palace of the kingdom. Like all palaces it was a fortress veiled as a place of beauty. It was well defended, but Kyrin had once felt the thundering of siege engines while crouching behind thicker walls. As he entered, it felt no less than a prison, and Kyrin regretted not fleeing from the woman the instant he first set eyes on her. He berated himself for letting her beauty lure him into this situation.

She escorted him through the gate, past a courtyard of greenery and flowers, and into a hall that fed into the main court. There, seated upon a great throne was Tangol, the thirty-first king of Nurria, land of riches and spice. Kyrin gazed at the old man, and felt that he had a glint of fairness within his blue eyes and the heart of a warrior. Even in his advanced years, he bore chain mail as if he were ready to plunge into battle at a moment's notice. Though he was surely no holy man, the king was certainly not the man the two youths had described a few nights before.

“Sire,” Lemerith said as she bowed low, touching her forehead to her knee. “This is the man who was spoken of before. I believe he has a tale you would hear.”

“Indeed,” the king said after a moment. He looked at Kyrin with the hardened eyes of a general in wartime. “I would have you answer my questions honestly and fairly, since that is no doubt how you would want to be treated yourself. What is your name?”

“Only my kinsman may know that,” Kyrin said respectfully.

“A custom of your people? Then what shall I call you, stranger?”

“I read the starry heavens. Call me Stargazer,” he said after a moment.

Tangol was surprised. “Have you seen this girl before, Stargazer?”

Kyrin looked at Niome, held tightly by two guards. “Aye. Three nights ago by the light of the moon. A boy was with her.”

“And did you ever speak with them?”

“Aye. The conversation was brief.”

“What was spoken?”

“I heard raised voices in the dark while I slept. I set about to see what the commotion was. Scarcely had I time to speak when she told me to mind my own business.” He shrugged.

“With nothing else left for me to do, I turned and went my own way.”

“And did you see any of my guard that night?”

“I hesitate to answer you, sire. I am not of these lands, and you may mistrust those who are not subject to your rule, whatever words may be spoken.”

“You are here, Stargazer” the king said, “beneath this grand ceiling and therefore subject to my rule.”

“Aye, sir. In that case, you must know that I did raise my blades against your guard, but only in my own defense. I wished only to pass, and though I gave them fair warning, they would only have me dead. But this girl spoke lies against me to save herself. And when at last I

believed Quent and I had finally understood one another, Merin, like a sneak, stabbed the great man when he was not looking. That is the truth as the stars would tell you could they utter the tale.” He turned to Lemer. “The only wrong I have committed was lying to her. For that, I apologize.” She returned his sentiment with an understanding look.

The king nodded slowly. “You are in the good graces of the gods, do you know that Stargazer? What you have told me has already been confirmed by my spies this morning. Yet at the time when all of this happened, I dispatched my guard to find those who were conspiring to overthrow me. I did not know it was my niece until this morning.” His face grew pale. “Do you have anything else that may concern this girl and stay the executioner’s hand?”

“Aye,” Kyrin said without hesitation. “The boy who was with her made it clear that you had carnal knowledge of the girl. Your niece did little to deny it. I believe this was a lie that she told him to motivate Merin’s hand to strike against you. She begged him to leave, to undergo something called the Change, yet he was resolute in staying and seeing to your murder.”

“Alas!” the king said in a shocked exhale. “Such a foul thing to speak of.” He turned to his niece. “How comes it that you speak so ill of me? I have never touched you in that way, you disgraceful child. That you falsely accuse me, not only your uncle, but your regent, brings with it the penalty of death.” He averted his eyes in loathing. “I do not know you!”

The girl shrieked, screaming at Kyrin with tears in her eyes. “You murdered those men, you wretched foreigner! Their blood stains your soul, and my blood shall soon do the same!” Her speech lurched in heaving sobs. “Speak!” she cried in agony, her tone now changed. “A kind word to save my life. I’m too young to die!”

Death is blind to age, girl, Kyrin thought. “I have spoken,” he said quietly, turning to the king. “And what has become of the boy?”

The king was lost in thought and spoke as if in a dream. “He was handed over to us by our neighbors, the Incarians. They have the gift of Change, and when we approached them to inquire of the boy, we found they had already transformed Merin into a beast. Yet they knew a traitor and murderer when they saw one, as all good men do, and so he now exists in the body of a ravening creature, ape-like and unnatural. His mind has gone mad within the hideous body, and already has he slain three men since his arrival. Now he occupies the darkest corner of my dungeons, and there he shall stay until merciful death take him.”

“And her?” Kyrin asked, pointing to Niome.

“Far be it for me to keep true love separated.” A look of horror flashed upon Niome’s face as the realization of the king’s judgment descended upon her. “This vile creature, whom I took as my own and showered with love, has raised a hand to destroy me. It is the law that she get all that is coming to her, and more besides.”

Kyrin swallowed the bitter taste of the whole situation from his mouth. He had his own troubles to consider. “Your lordship, this no longer concerns me, as my part was but a little one in this drama. I regret your guards were forced into such a deadly situation, yet I must continue on my way, sir.”

“Indeed. And how may I reward you for your service to this kingdom?”

“Sire, if it is not too much, I would like a small place, the tiniest of places, where I may live without anyone’s knowledge save your own. Be it far or near, I would have such a place.”

The king waved a bejewel hand nonchalantly in Kyrin’s direction. “It is granted. My chamberlain shall draw up the paperwork.” He looked at Kyrin. “You shall dine there this very evening.”

“May the gods ever shine upon you and your kingdom, lord,” Kyrin said as he bowed low.

“Guards!” the king cried out, jabbing his scepter in his niece’s direction. “Take this wretch and give her over to her beast husband. And let that be the last of it, for I do not wish to hear of them ever again.”

As they led Niome away, Kyrin watched her in dread fascination. Perhaps she had believed the old king to be too old to guess her plans. She shrieked in terror as they dragged her below the palace, and Kyrin thought he heard the roar of some monstrous thing that been unleashed to what angered him most. Kyrin shuddered.

“One final matter, stranger,” the king said.

“Sire?”

“What is your name,” he asked suspiciously. “And why do your own people hunt you? Did you murder someone or commit some atrocity?”

Kyrin waded in his thoughts for a moment. He had killed before, and for that he had been revered and adored. How could he make the king understand the source of his anguish was the thing he cherished more than all else in the world, his grandson? “Sire, there are some things that a man must bear without assistance. I am forbidden to tell you why I am hunted; that is the tradition of my people. As for my name, if I were to tell you, your life would be at risk. These hunters will stop at nothing to discover where I may be resting my head.” Kyrin squinted his eyes in an effort to find the right words. “Do you understand my position, my lord?”

The king rose and placed a hand on Kyrin’s shoulder. “I wonder what lands may breed such men as you. Would that I had one thousand of you to guard my city! You have a pure heart, and I will respect the traditions of your people, no matter how uncouth they may seem to

me.” The king returned to his throne. “You may go now, stranger, and do what you must to stay ahead of your hunters.”

Kyrin followed Lemeru toward the exit, then stood fast. “King, I will leave you with this as a token of thanks. You have a weighty name, and you will be remembered for centuries long after your reign has ended.”

“How do you know this?”

“I have seen it in the stars,” Kyrin muttered, then left as fast as he could manage without running.

An hour later Lemeru took him to his new home, a small stone edifice within a massive copse of trees only a few leagues from the palace. There he relaxed for a few days as best he could, never fully though, as he knew he would soon be on the move again.

One late afternoon not long after, as he and Lemeru sat just outside of the abode as the day expired, he partially confided in the beautiful young woman.

“I cannot stay much longer,” he said.

“Are you certain of that? The king will see to your safety. No one will find this place.”

Kyrin laughed softly in his throat, but there was no humor in the sound. “Those who hunt me surely will. Nothing will stop them except my death.”

“Then what will you do?” She placed her hand within his.

“Well,” he said after a time. “I must continue on my journey. To stay still for too long in one place is to invite murder when you least expect it.”

“And this place?” she asked.

“You keep it. A gift for you.”

“To remember you by?”

“No. You would do well to forget me.” He squeezed her hand gently. “If I am ever near and I know you are here, I will visit you.”

“Is there anything I can do to help you?”

Kyrin looked into her eyes of blue ice. “Never speak of me. Not to your family or your friends or anyone else. Take my secret with you.”

Lemeri smiled. “Tell me something of your lands. Of yourself.”

How Kyrin wanted to tell her of his people! He wished to tell her they were miners of the great mountains and people of the stars. He very nearly spoke of the woman he loved, and of his children and grandchild. It would have done him good to release the melancholy that drenched his soul and burned his mind. Yet he was bound to his doom, and nothing but time and skill would release him from it.

“That,” he said as he pointed to a bright star in the sky, “is where it is said my people come from. We have many traditions, but the stars ever reveal our destinies.”

“I would know more of you and your people,” she said with intense curiosity. She went inside and began kindling a fire within the stove. “I will cook for you,” she called out, “and we shall enjoy our time together, whatever little we have left.”

Kyrin remained silent as he stared at the bright star in the heavens. This girl, with all of her energy and charm, was a cruel fantasy, Kyrin knew. In time, she would forget him, and he would forget her, as it should have been. That was the way of the hunt. He who is exiled may never have friends, nor can he have enemies. Certainly, there was a risk in letting someone get too close to him, but he was willing to accept that risk at least for the time being. Kyrin needed a friend right now.

Night had nearly fallen, and he noted the moon had only a few more days before waxing full, before turning deadly. Elchalon would then unleash her hunters upon the world as she had done so many times before.

Kyrin clutched his axe at the thought, testing the blade's edge with his thumb.

“And so,” he whispered to the solitary night. “It begins.”