

KURINTOR NYUSH

BOOK I

AARON-MICHAEL HALL



KURINTOR NYUSI
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1 KALVGAH

A plume of dust wafted into the air when the blow struck, propelling her backward to the ground. Nurisha grunted, glaring up at the man. She nursed her throbbing wrist, uncertain if she could withstand another one of his powerful strikes.

Get up! Get up! her thoughts urged, willing her body to submit to her mind. She focused on the dangerous man stalking toward her, his sword glinting in the dawning rays cresting over the treetops. Each of his calculated steps matched a beat of her pulse, sending a rush of blood through her heart.

She slid backward, desperately groping for her dropped sword, never taking her eyes from the daunting figure. He was but strides away when her fingertips grazed the edge of the pommel. After reclaiming her scimitar, she sprang to her feet, assuming a defensive posture.

“You should’ve stayed down, lass.” His enormous build shielded the sun’s rise, casting an obscuring shadow over her slight frame.

“My Da taught me to never stay down.”

Dodging the oncoming sideswipe, Nurisha dove forward, ending up at his back. Though his weapon missed its mark, her foot didn’t, kicking him hard in the gut as she went by, landing in a crouch beyond his reach. It was a well-landed kick, and he’d felt it.

“Your size is your weakness,” she said. “And so is your arrogance.”

“You’ll pay for that,” he said, tightening his grip on his sword.

“We’ll see.”

With seemingly unnatural speed, he roared, attempting a glissade. Her eyes widened, retreating instead of parrying as he’d predicted. She whirled from his reach again, initiating a backward somersault while drawing her second sword. Leaping from a defensive crouch, she crossed her scimitars, meeting his downward swipe. The strength behind his attack nearly drove her to her knees and she struggled to remain upright.

“Your Da should’ve taught you to stay down,” he sneered. “It would’ve

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been easier on you.”

“The Sans don’t do ‘easy,’” she said, breathlessly.

Nurisha’s visage and movements were contrary to her words. Her arms shook violently, pushing back against his blade. She couldn’t match his strength or his weight, which he applied to deliberately attempt to overpower her.

Her teeth gnashed as she gave ground, rolling to the side, barely missing the tip of his blade. She leapt back to her feet, only to be forced into a backbend by his powerful thrust—his blade but digits away from her face as she hit the dirt. She rolled again, clumsily regaining her footing while parrying his sword a hair’s breadth from her face. When he reached for his dagger, she dipped low, side-sliding, catching him in the ribs with the hilt of her sword. As he stumbled, she kicked up, sending his weapon high while thrusting forward with her left sword. He parried the poor attempt, shifting his dagger in a reverse-cut position.

Nurisha blocked his next thrust, but paid for it with a wicked slash at her throat. As she fell away, she lost her right sword and tried to compensate with her left. He laughed, batting away her scimitar and clutching her wrist.

“You should’ve stayed down,” he said, his dagger’s edge against her throat.

“Qaradan? Qaradan?” A voiced called from behind them.

He released an exasperated sigh, tapping his dagger against her chin. “There’ll be no one to save you next time.”

“Qaradan! How long ya gonna make me wait? Lareese might toss my meal to the pigs if ya don’t get this wheel fixed. C’mon now, I’m miss’n my meal.”

Qaradan winked, clapping Nurisha on the shoulder. “Always listen to your Da,” he said, gesturing toward their barn. In truth, it was a modest six-room cottage with a smithy and barn attached to it. They’d lived in the town of Kalvgah since she was a child. Her father, Qaradan, was the only smith within the neighboring villages. With the lack of farriers, wheelwrights, and armorers available to the commoners, the stream of customers was constant, but the earnings meager.

Most of the folk in the villages couldn’t pay for the goods and services he provided. Ofttimes, Qaradan would accept livestock or other wares in trade. Now, they had a fair amount of goats, cows, chickens, and pigs for their farm. It was a good living, and a simple life that she’d grown to love.

“Move along, Cassie,” she said to the goat as it came up beside her. “I need to fetch some eggs for Da’s breakfast. Move along.”

Nurisha chuckled, roughly patting its ears as she went about her daily routine. She could hear Qaradan and Strähn bickering about the morning meal as usual. Strähn’s cart needed repairs often, and he squabbled about its condition and Qaradan’s lax demeanor when fixing it.

Once she’d fried the eggs and ham, she heard Qaradan’s heavy footfalls

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on the wooden steps. She rushed around, setting out his meal and pouring him a hot cup of coffee.

“Smells good, ‘Risha. Any biscuits left?”

“They’re warming now, Da. Did you want some honey, too?”

He rubbed his hands together, offering a broad smile. “Nothing better than your hot biscuits and honey.”

“Well, I can think of a few things,” she said, bringing the basket to the table and taking a seat across from him. As he began to eat, she nibbled her bottom lip, looking up at him. Qaradan was a large man, larger than most in the surrounding towns and villages. Although nearly fifty, his work as a smith had kept his considerable six-foot-five-inch frame well-toned and muscled. His raven curls was shorn short, still full, yet peppered with streaks of silver. Nurisha didn’t miss the attention he received from the women in town. She smiled at that. If her Da noticed the extra attention that they paid to him, he didn’t make it known. He put his energies into their small family and farm.

“You’re sure quiet today,” he said, shoveling another spoonful of eggs into his mouth. “Don’t worry about your training; we’ll have more time before evening meal. Gotta focus more on the sword than those fancy tricks you like doing with your bow. Now, you got Aljoša doing them, too. You both need more sparring practice, but I’ve got a few things lined up today, and the animals need tending first.”

“You’ve been more aggressive lately,” she said, stroking the fresh bruise on her arm. “I used to fare better when we sparred.”

“Can’t get better by staying the same,” he said, motioning to his empty cup.

She grabbed the tin of steaming coffee and another slice of ham. “I know, Da. I’ll do better next time. I’ve had a lot on my mind.”

“Not Druehox, I hope. That coxcomb skamelar ain’t worth teats on a bull.”

“Da!”

Qaradan shrugged. “Well, he ain’t.”

“Don’t worry about Druehox. He’s the last thing on my mind. I was thinking about heading down through Shade Fall to do some fishing after tending the bees. It’s been a while since we had some fresh fish.”

“Might be best to wait and we’ll go together in a few days. Folks been talking ‘bout some big cat roaming around Shade Fall. No telling what might be lurking in them woods.”

“Da, I’m not afraid of any cat. I’ve been trained by the best.” She smiled. “I’m no stranger to the woods either. Besides, not even a wild cat would dare approach the daughter of the formidable Qaradan San.”

He chuckled at that, leaning back in his chair. “Still, no sense taking unnecessary chances. We’ll go down to Crossover River in a day or two. Plenty to do here first.”

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She sighed wistfully, offering a nod of assent. As he continued his meal, she thought about the last time they'd trekked down to Crossover River. When they traversed the earthen trail, she felt as if someone or something was watching them. Nurisha couldn't shake that feeling, and the hairs on her arms rose as she thought about it.

"Is that still bothering you?" Qaradan asked, noticing her rubbing her wrist.

She examined the raised, discolored mark again. It *had* begun bothering her lately, and was larger than it had been. She'd been born with the mark, and never thought much of it until a few weeks ago. After her twentieth name day, she noticed the elongation. Now, it was nearly three digits...twice the length it had been. At first, it merely itched as if a dozen insects had stung her during the night. Lately she'd noticed a strange shimmering and tingling sensation as well. She didn't mention that to Qaradan. He worried too much as it was.

"Just itches a little."

"Best be going to visit Chaween and have her look at it. She'll make up a salve for you and probably a tincture of herbs. Can't have the best archer in town missing her shot 'cause her wrist won't stop itching."

She laughed. "I can do without Chaween's concoctions. They taste horrible."

"Yep, always have, and they always work."

"Da?"

He shook his head, stuffing the rest of a biscuit in his mouth. "Ain't taking no for an answer, 'Risha," he said, rising and kissing her cheek. "Tend to your chores for now. Aljoša will be by soon enough to help in the smithy. I want you to pay Chaween a visit on the morrow and get some of that pinacate salve when you go."

Her face scrunched. "Da, it stinks!"

"Worse thing I've ever smelled 'cept a rotting boar." He chuckled. "If we're going through Shade Fall it'd be best to have the salve. Now, go on and tend your chores, got plenty of my own to do."

"Yes, Da," she said, not turning until the door had closed behind him.

Qaradan was the only father she'd ever known. Nurisha's mother, Esmel, died when she was but ten. That's when she'd learned she wasn't their natural child, although she always felt as if she was. In fact, many townsfolk had commented on their likeness. Esmel had the same caramel-colored skin and coiled tresses as she did. Nurisha even had one brown eye like Esmel, the other grey like Qaradan.

They loved her endlessly, and probably would've never told her if Esmel hadn't insisted after falling ill. They'd discovered Nurisha at the edge of the Matryohn Wood near the northeast side of the kingdom. Esmel had spoken of it as a miracle straight from the goddess Yemojan.

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When they set camp near the tree line, Qaradan inspected the area carefully, as he always did. After years of scouting and serving as a sentry in Zradiir, he knew the best areas to camp and those to avoid. With the rogues and banditti stalking the main roads, one had to be cautious, especially when traveling with women. He set his usual traps and kept watch most of the night while Esmel slept. However, when the moon surrendered to the sun, the brightest ray shone on a basket tucked beneath a bush. Nurisha's basket.

They couldn't offer much information regarding her birth parents or home, just that they were traveling from Zradiir to Kalvgah and found Nurisha along the way. Esmel had recently lost their third child before they'd decided to make the trek. She'd enjoyed her tenure as a teacher, but there were too many memories in Zradiir, too many reminders of hurts and disappointments. When they found Nurisha abandoned, they felt the gods were blessing them and their new start. Nurisha had never visited Matryohn Wood, though she'd promised herself that she would. There might be answers there, and she intended to find them.

With that, she glanced down at her wrist again, sliding her fingertips over the raised, jagged mark. It looked more like a strike of lightning than anything else... a peculiar mark that matched the color of her one pale grey eye.

She sighed then, pushing up from the table. Those answers would have to wait.



Nurisha removed her tunic and lifted the smoking pan from the fire. She did her best to clear her recent thoughts and focus on her chores. When she opened the door, she could hear Qaradan arguing with another neighbor about prices. They didn't need the extra coin, but he wasn't working for free, either.

"Folks don't value what they don't earn, 'Risha. You don't have to charge 'em a lot, but charge 'em something. A man feels more a man when he's earning his keep," she thought, recalling Qaradan's words.

Waving the billowing smoke from her face, Nurisha stepped down to her worktable. After scooping a ladle of roasted fenugreek from the pan, she sprinkled it in a large bowl of wild mallow and olive oil. As Nurisha continued to mix the sticky concoction, she gazed out at their ploughed fields. The new planting season was fast approaching, and Aljoša would be at the farm more often. Although he helped her Da in the smithy, during the planting and harvest, he spent more time with her. She wouldn't admit it, but she enjoyed being with him more each season. She smiled at that, spreading the fenugreek mixture over her arms and face.

"You don't need to be putting that stuff on to keep me away. All you have to do is say so."

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She suppressed her smile, turning around to face Aljoša. “I’ve said so more than once. How’d that work out?”

“Well, you didn’t really mean it then,” he said, leaning down to kiss the one clear spot on her cheek. “Besides, it’d take more than that to keep me away. Not even your Da could do that.”

“It didn’t appear that way a fortnight ago.” She chuckled. “I’ve never seen anyone run so fast. Tell me: how’d you get your face to change color like that? It was paler than last winter’s hard rime.”

He joined in her mirth, removing his baldric and jerkin. His smooth, almond-colored skin glistened in the sun’s light, and she did her best not to notice. Aljoša dipped his hands in the bowl, rubbing the mixture down his chest and abdomen.

“Can you put some on my back?” he asked.

She looked up, examining every inch of him. His corded muscles flexed, and she followed the alluring curve down his back, admiring the perfect fit of his trews. Licking the dryness from her lips, she cleared her throat, turning back to the table. “You don’t need any on your back, or anywhere else for that matter. I don’t want you going near my bees. I swear: you and Da are worthless when it comes to such things. Haven’t you been stung enough?”

He shrugged. “Just helping out where I can. Besides, Chäna was asking ‘bout the honey mead.”

“You tell Ms. Chäna that I’ll be adding a few casks to her regular delivery soon. It needs a bit more time before it’ll be ready. Don’t worry,” she said, grabbing a pail from the ground. “You’ll have your mead and some roast boar, too, if you’re feeling up to a hunt.”

“I’ve been practicing, you know?”

“I hope so, Joša. Maybe you won’t scare away our meal this time.”

“Ain’t no one as good as you with a bow, Risha, but I’ll be making the next kill.”

“That so? How about you tell Da that I need you for a bit. After I check on my bees, we’ll head into Shade Fall. Just remember: if you make the kill, you prepare the meal.”

“I can find my way ‘round a kitchen well enough. Chäna and Aemar made sure of that.”

“Better sharpen your skinning knife, then,” she said, walking away. “And put your clothes back on.”

Shytahn

Alyelu fastened the clasp on his claret cassock, stepping over to the hearth. A chill hung heavy in the air as the last of the embers glowed dimly within its stone encasement.

“*Mocheentäe*,” he whispered, extending out his right hand. The symbol on

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his wrist glowed, sending a jagged, flaming stream down through his fingertips.

The embers ignited, their orange and red flares leaping up and surrounding him before lowering back into the hearth.

He basked in the warmth, relishing the heat of the flames while reciting a prayer of supplication.

Alyelu was the Shytahn and most powerful of the Nyola priests. His tower was constructed on the northern edge of Falmehdorn, with his upper room facing the Nyusi Mountains.

For the past two decades, he'd headed the Nyola Order, gaining more prominence within the kingdom and beyond. Even the Premier, Radič Burián, sought his counsel and unique abilities. With Alyelu's elevation came power, and he utilized his position to further his own ambitions, not those of the Order.

"Pardons, Shytahn Alyelu," Veselin said, as he knocked and entered the room.

"I didn't want to be disturbed."

"Pardons, Shytahn. We've received a message from Varnas."

"Why would that concern me?"

"You'd ordered us to report any sighting of the beast, and we've received word of an attack."

Alyelu turned, his amber eyes flaring. "In Varnas? When?"

"It's not certain, Shytahn, but the sighting was reported by several people."

"Who sent the message?"

"Overseer Deòir."

He nodded, clasping his hands behind his back. "Leave me."

"Yes, Shytahn," Veselin bowed, exiting the chamber.

Alyelu moved to the window, opening the wooden shutters. He stared out over the vast city, and then beyond to his former home, Cyrehn. When his gaze rested on the Nyusi Mountains, his eyes narrowed, an inscrutable sensation encompassing his soul. "Varnas?"

"Is it the one you seek?" Zaharija asked, entering from a side room.

"It's doubtful, but I'll send some men to investigate."

"These sightings can't be a coincidence, Alyelu. It's been years and we've heard little. Now, the reports arrive nearly every full moon. This could be the one."

"Perhaps," he said, taking a seat at the table. "But there's been no evidence of that. Esuhnd has an intimate connection with the beast. If it was near, I'd sense something more from him."

Zaharija came up behind him, massaging Alyelu's broad shoulders. "Allow me to speak with Esuhnd. He might be more forthcoming if handled with a *gentler* touch. A hot bath and a good meal might weaken his resolve.

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I'm certain he tires of the hard bread and sour wine. If you'd consent, a bed as well. In better spirits and health, you might receive that which you desire." He smiled. "Just as I have."

"Have you?" Alyelu turned around to face him, removing his hands from his shoulders. "Is that all you desire, Zaharija? Are you so easily appeased?"

"That appeasement is temporary, and always at your behest."

He grinned. "I'll allow it. Esuhnd's worth depends upon his cooperation."

"Cooperation? It's been years."

"I don't need him to reveal the location to me. I only need his mind to weaken enough so I can enter it. Pain and starvation have done little. Perhaps your methods would prove more useful. He's a handsome specimen, isn't he?"

"I wouldn't know," Zaharija said, turning away.

"Truly? Your lust has been evident since first I permitted you access to his cell. Do you think that you can deceive me?"

Zaharija cried out, grasping his temples, overcome by the intensity of Alyelu's psionic probe. He crumpled to his knees, screaming in agony. "Forgive me! Please, forgive me!"

"I'd thought you'd learned your lesson the last time, Zaharija. I take no pleasure in reminding you of your place, or your inferiority. I rather enjoy your company." Alyelu removed the stopper on a ewer, pouring a glass of wine as Zaharija continued to writhe on the floor.

"After you've recovered, you'll see to our guest and attend him properly. If the beast has emerged, it must be found. It's the key to the lost city, and the beginning of the awakening.

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