

Kryon: Birth of a God

A Rogue's Phoenix Novella

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Kryon

The Birth of a God

Slash.

Stab.

Parry, kick, stab again.

The shouts of anger and the screams of the fallen drowned out even the clash of steel on steel as Kryon pulled his blade from another enemy's chest.

One more down, thousands to go.

Kryon's army was heavily outnumbered, but it didn't matter. He could see the fear etched plainly on each of his opponent's faces. The wild laughter of his men rang out above the cries of the wounded.

Kryon grinned into the terrified eyes of the next closest unfortunate. The man threw a frenzied overhand chop, which Kryon

caught with his longsword before slicing under it with the scimitar in his left hand. The man whimpered and fell to the ground, trying to keep his intestines inside his rapidly emptying abdomen. Kryon stepped over him and moved on.

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An hour later, the fight was done. Most of Kryon's men lay dead. Their enemies were not so lucky. They had been slaughtered to a man.

General Thracius Kryon surveyed his remaining troops. There were no more than two hundred left of the original thousand, but men were easily replaced. It wasn't the training that mattered. It was the fear. Kryon's mercenary legion was known world-wide for its ferocity. Every man was whipped into a frenzy of bloodlust by a special concoction of herbs and mushrooms that ensured each man would fight to the death. They fought viciously and fearlessly, and they had never lost. Their armor, like Kryon's own, was blood red leather studded with black iron spikes, which served both to intimidate and to wound when in close combat. Each man wore a helmet cast to resemble a snarling demon complete with horns that could be used to gore in a pinch.

The ensemble was even more impressive on Kryon's massive frame. He stood head and shoulders above the tallest men in his army. Spending most of his time in the sun had left his skin a rich mocha color, which shone with sweat. He had stripped to the waist, discarding his armor in favor of the cool breeze that had picked up. He smiled again as the scent of blood blew into his nostrils.

The men he had lost would easily be replenished. Their deaths would only make Kryon's cut larger. More importantly, Kryon's current employer would be incredibly pleased.

* * * * *

"He's growing too powerful." Braxus stood up from the great marble table around which sat the most powerful men in the world.

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He stood before the other members of the Council of Nine, a group of powerful men who ran the world behind the scenes. Kings and queens were as puppets to them, and each of the Nine relished pulling their strings. “Something must be done.”

“I don’t know, Braxus, I don’t seem to have any trouble controlling him.” The cold way that Commodus spoke the words sent a shiver down Braxus’ back. Commodus was the only man at the table who had never personally killed anyone. It wasn’t difficult to see why. The man was short and plump, red of face and somewhat effeminate. He wore a white wig over rapidly thinning hair that he could not stand to show in public. He was a hedonist to his core, indulging in any perversion his mind could conjure. Currently, his favorite fetish involved violence on a larger scale than would conveniently fit inside a bedroom. Though no one had died by his hand, the number of people who had been slaughtered at Commodus’ word had risen beyond counting.

“Only because you give him tasks he enjoys, good Commodus,” warned Victor, the newest member of the Council. “Set him a task he does not relish and see how quickly your dog bites its master’s hand.” Victor was young, but very ambitious. He had earned his way into the Council of Eight last year by starting a plague that killed his predecessor. If Victor saw an opportunity for a double-cross, he would almost always take it, just to see the look in the victim’s eye when he realized the betrayal. Fortunately for Braxus, that made him predictable.

Commodus put down the chicken bone he had been sucking. “Luckily, *good* Victor, his interests and mine lie together. I, therefore, have nothing to worry about.”

“Don’t be a fool, Commodus.” Braxus had heard – indeed, had *used* – that same argument before. He had been mistaken then, just as Commodus was mistaken now. “Kryon kills for the joy of killing, but when he realizes that he can kill on a much grander

scale, he will be coming for all of us. We must stop him before his list of victims includes our own names.”

“What do you suggest we do? Kill him ourselves?”

Shouts of agreement or dissent broke out from all around the table.

“There is no doubt that we cannot hope to best Kryon on the field of battle.” The voice of Matthias, the oldest and most revered member of the Council silenced the argument immediately. “However, there might be another way.”

Braxus paused in his pacing. He had been wracking his brain for months trying to find a way to rid Commodus of his increasingly powerful pet. He had never considered, until now, bringing the matter before his fellows on the Council. He knew that it would anger Commodus, but there had never been any love lost between the two anyway. Victor seemed to be on his side, as did Kraven and Xander. If, as his last statement would seem to indicate, Matthias was on his side, that would give him the simple majority he needed to have the Council move against Kryon, which would tie Commodus’ hands. To go against the edicts of the Council meant death for anyone, member and non-member alike.

“Which way is that, Matthias?” Braxus caught himself wringing his hands in anticipation, an excited tic that he had tried most unsuccessfully to break. As Matthias outlined his plan, Braxus wrung his hands so hard they almost broke.

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Kryon stood on a ridge overlooking the small village of Thistledown, watching it burn. The screams of the villagers made a perfect addition to the scents of smoke and burning flesh. Still, the sight just didn’t satisfy him as it once did.

“I’m bored, Commodus.” He glanced at the fat little man next to him, noticing the enormous grin on his employer’s face.

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Commodus never took his eyes from the scene of carnage below. “Do I not keep you occupied?”

“You keep me occupied,” Kryon replied, “but not challenged. Burning hamlets and battling foolish dukes? Anyone can perform these tasks. I want a challenge that no other man can complete.”

The corner of Commodus’ mouth twitched slightly. “And where do you think that you can find such a challenge, my friend?”

Kryon shook his head. “I don’t know. I had hoped that you might know of something that might serve.”

Commodus was silent for nearly a minute before finally sighing deeply. “I think that I might know of something that might challenge one of your considerable skills.”

Kryon turned toward his master. “What is it?”

For the first time since the fire started nearly an hour ago, Commodus turned his attention fully away from the village.

“They say...” the fat man hesitated. “They say that there is a temple high up in the Moonpeaks where a man can go to challenge the gods.”

Kryon was stunned. “The gods?”

Commodus nodded. “The legend says that no man has ever returned from the Challenge – alive or dead.”

Kryon grinned. “Then I shall be the first. Where is this temple?”

“I don’t know.” Commodus looked back to the fire briefly before meeting Kryon’s eyes. “I know who does, but I urge you to reconsider. Think of the glory you can bring yourself working for me. Think of the riches.”

For the first time in years, Kryon didn’t think of glory or riches. He thought only of the Challenge. “Give me the name.”

Commodus sighed again. “Speak to the High Priest of the Weeping God.”

Without another word, Kryon strode off into the night.

* * * * *

The Temple of the Weeping God was someplace that Kryon had never imagined setting foot. The Weeping God was the patron of healers and those who chose to use their magic to help others, sometimes at their own expense. Such disgusting self-sacrifice never felt natural to Kryon. He had always looked out for himself at the expense of others.

The temple was massive. The entire building was constructed of stark white marble. The furnishings were all white as well. Kryon was nearly blinded by the reflection of the sunlight pouring in through the glass dome at the top of the vaulted ceiling thirty feet above.

A voice called out to him from the far end of the room. "You are known here, Kryon, and you are not welcome!"

Kryon looked up to see a thin, balding man in a white robe rushing toward him. "I seek the High Priest."

The little man shook his head. "The High Priest will not see you. You defile this sacred temple by your very presence. I ask you to leave at once."

Kryon pulled his longsword free and placed the tip at the priest's throat. "You will take me to see him, or it will be you who defiles the temple. We wouldn't want to stain this beautiful marble, would we?"

The priest swallowed hard and backed up half a step. "There is no need for violence. I am a healer. I do not wish to fight you. I merely want you out of this holy edifice."

Kryon put his sword away. "Then let us be reasonable. The fastest way to get me to leave is to grant my audience with the High Priest. Otherwise, I will pitch a tent here in your foyer and never leave."

The priest's eyes widened in shock. "You wouldn't!"
"I would. What is your policy on whores?"

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The little man sputtered incoherently for a few seconds before turning on his heel. "Follow me. I will take you to him, but I cannot guarantee he will see you."

Smirking, Kryon followed the priest into a door at the back of the room. The little man led him up three flights of stairs and to the end of a long hallway before stopping before a huge double door.

"Here is his office. You must wait—"

Kryon grabbed the handles and pushed both doors open as he strode into the office of the High Priest. An ancient man in a white robe sat behind an enormous mahogany desk that provided the only color in the otherwise stark white room. Another man was standing before the desk. He looked up in surprise.

"You cannot be in here! Brother Andrew, get him out of here. What is the meaning of this?"

"I have come to speak to the High Priest." Kryon pushed his way past the first man and stopped at the desk. "I assume that is you."

"This is an outrage! You do not barge in to see the High Priest of the Weeping God without an appointment!" The priest Kryon had just pushed aside grabbed him by the shoulder and attempted to turn him around.

Kryon's fist shot out and caught the priest in the throat. He collapsed to the floor, gurgling and drooling blood. Brother Andrew ran to him immediately and placed his hands on the dying man's neck. A blue light filled the space between the priest's hands and when it faded, the priest on the floor was able to breathe.

Disappointed, Kryon turned back to the High Priest. "I would speak with you."

The ancient man nodded and waved the two younger priests away.

"Your Grace, is that wise?" Brother Andrew asked.

“Yes, Andrew. I will be fine. I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself. I thank you for your concern, but you may leave.”

The High Priest waited until the other two had filed from the room before gesturing for Kryon to sit in a white leather wingback chair. Kryon sat, trying to determine what power this old man had that he was not afraid of the most feared man in the world. Perhaps he was so close to joining his god anyway that he wasn't afraid to hasten the meeting.

“Dear Kryon.”

Kryon was used to people recognizing him. There were posters all over the world with his face on them above the words “Dead or Alive.” Still, the familiarity with which this old man used his name made him feel uncomfortable.

“I have been expecting you for some time.”

“Do I know you, old man?” For the first time in his life, Kryon found himself growing nervous. He didn't like the feeling.

“No. We have never met. However, when a man becomes as powerful as you have, petty evils begin to seem commonplace. Boring.” The priest leaned forward in his seat. “You want something more, don't you?”

Kryon nodded.

“You want a challenge worthy of your skill.”

Another nod.

“You want to fight the gods.”

Kryon closed his eyes and whispered “Yes.” Merely hearing the Challenge spoken aloud sent adrenaline rushing through his veins. He felt a thrill of excitement mixed with ecstasy.

“Are you prepared to die?”

“I am not afraid.”

“I would not have expected you to be. There is something you must know, however. Many have attempted what you are about to undertake. No one has ever returned.”

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Kryon grinned. "I shall be the first."

The old man shook his head sadly, reached into his desk and pulled out a piece of vellum. "Take this map. It will show you the location of the temple."

Kryon took the map and stood up to leave. When he reached the door, the old man's voice stopped him.

"May the Tears wash away your pain."

Kryon had never received a blessing before. He was pretty sure he didn't like it. Shaking his head, he shoved past the two priests who were still standing outside the door.

* * * * *

Brother Andrew of the Order of the Weeping God rushed into the office of the High Priest as soon as the barbarian had vacated it. Brother James was right behind him.

"Holy Father, are you alright?"

The High Priest was smiling behind his desk, something that rarely happened these days. "Yes, my young friends, I am quite well. Kryon has accepted the Challenge. Soon, he will be gone from this world and unable to harm anyone."

"Holy Father, what if he wins?"

"I do not know, Andrew. No one ever has. Kryon will be no different." The High Priest pulled a quill and parchment from his desk and quickly penned a letter. He sealed it and handed it to Brother Andrew. "Take this to Chancellor Braxus at the palace. He will want to hear this news."

Andrew took the letter and bowed deeply. "Yes, Father Matthias." Determined not to disappoint the Holy Father, Brother Andrew hurried out to deliver the letter.

* * * * *

Kryon stood before the temple, soundly disappointed. After the month of travel getting to the temple, he had expected it to be much larger. Instead, Kryon stood before a small hut that appeared

to be carved from a single chunk of stone. Ivy climbed up the outside, covering the entire front wall aside from the door and the window, around which it parted like water. The door seemed a little bit too big for the rest of the house and sort of ungainly.

Kryon pushed the door open, expecting to hear a crash as whatever was in the small cottage was swept aside by the huge door. What he saw astounded him. The inside of the house was at least four times larger than it had a right to be. Inside the small, ivy covered structure was an enormous room lined with golden statues. There were sixteen of them, eight on each side, lining a long walkway that ended in an empty pedestal, obviously a spot for another statue.

Kryon spared barely a glance at each of the magnificent statues as he passed them by. He cared not a whit for the gods or their likenesses. They had never done anything for him, and he would never do anything for them. By killing one or more of them today, he would be doing the world a favor.

Kryon chuckled to himself. This might be his first good deed. Nevertheless, damaging though it may be to his hard-earned reputation, Kryon was more than willing to do the deed. He'd thought long and hard on the matter during the month it took him to find the temple and had come to the conclusion that the world had a surfeit of gods and could certainly do without a few. With any luck, he would be able to kill the Weeping God, which would finally shut the white priests up for good.

The pedestal at the end of the walkway was not, as Kryon had originally thought, totally unoccupied. Upon the pedestal sat a scroll. Kryon picked it up and unrolled it. It contained instructions on how to initiate the Challenge.

*If one should have hubris to Challenge the Gods,
The first step is to consider the odds.*

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*Sixteen are we, while you stand alone
Immortal we are, and you flesh and bone.
No steel can pierce our Immortal skin,
Nor spell snuff out the life within.
If contest you must, then draw out your blade
In striking the stone, the Challenge is made.*

Without hesitation, Kryon drew his sword and brought it crashing down onto the pedestal.

The world exploded into white light and pain. Kryon was sure that his eyes had been burned from his skull, for he could see nothing. He could feel the light stabbing in through the holes where his eyes used to be, but was unable to close his lids against it. If he was certain that he still had a body, he would have writhed against the pain, but he was either totally immobilized or dead and existing in sprit form, for he couldn't even feel his extremities. The only things that existed were the light and the pain. He was glad that he had no mouth or ears, for he didn't want to hear himself screaming, as he surely would be.

Suddenly, the light was gone and with it, the pain. Kryon breathed a sigh of relief and realized that, not only did he still have eyelids, but they were clamped shut so tight that it was painful. He reveled in that small discomfort. Compared to the agony of the light, it seemed a lover's caress.

Slowly, Kryon opened his eyes. The temple was gone. In its place was a vast meadow. Knee-high grass stretched out as far as the eye could see in any direction. The grass waved lazily from side to side, but there was no breeze to stir it. Nor could Kryon find the sun that was providing the illumination for the meadow. There were no shadows; only diffuse light that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere.

“What business do you have here, mortal?”

Kryon spun around to find a giant standing behind him. The massive figure stood at least sixteen feet high, wore a suit of brilliantly shining plate armor and held a twelve-foot-long battle axe in one hand as though it were a feather. The giant's face was unlike any other Kryon had ever seen. He could only describe the figure, however masculine, as beautiful. In a flash of recognition, he realized that he was standing before the Screaming God, the lord of battle.

“Come now, Sabian.”

Kryon spun again to find a woman behind him, where before the meadow had been empty.

“Let us not be rude. He dealt with the Cleansing so well.”

This newcomer was nearly as tall as the Screaming God, though much more slender and feminine. She wore a scarlet dress that hugged her figure tight enough to stir feelings in Kryon's groin that he had not allowed himself time to acknowledge in some time. This must be the Kissing Goddess, matron of love and fertility.

“Indeed, Arianna. That he made it through at all is a wonder.”

Kryon turned to his left to find the Weeping God, resplendent in his shimmering white robe, his long snowy hair cascading down over his shoulders, though his face was young and unlined.

“It is rare that one with so much darkness in his soul can survive so long in the light.”

Kryon turned slowly in a circle to find that he had become surrounded by giant gods. He recognized the Smiling God, the Starving God, the Running Goddess, the Stalking God, and the Growing God. He had never paid enough attention to learn the names of the other eight gods. If he was completely honest with himself, he would have to admit that until this moment, he still hadn't been positive that any of them actually existed.

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“What do you mean?” Kryon turned back to the god whose temple he had so recently visited. “What is ‘the Cleansing’?”

“Sadly ill informed, is he not?” the Smiling God laughed. “One would think that he would learn as much as possible before attempting the Challenge.”

“Now, now, Thomas,” the Kissing Goddess admonished. “Can’t you see that he’s frightened? You were too, as I recall.”

“And neither did you know what the Cleansing was,” the Weeping God added. “The Cleansing, dear Kryon, is the removal of all of your earthly deeds. You see, after a few centuries, your actions begin to haunt your every thought. Eventually, all you have are your reminiscences, and all of them seem unbearable. So, we created the Cleansing.”

“And why do I need to be cleansed? I’m not immortal”

“Not yet, dear,” the Running Goddess said. “You do have one more test before that happens.”

“One more test?” Kryon was beginning to get confused, which always made him angry. His hand moved unconsciously to his longsword. “I am here to fight you, not to become immortal.”

The Smiling God practically fell over laughing. “You just don’t get it, do you? There is no fight! That would be stupid and pointless! You’d just die and it’d be over. What fun would that be?”

Kryon shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

“Did you even read the scroll?” The Smiling God was nearly consumed by paroxysms of laughter.

Kryon did not enjoy being laughed at. He drew his swords and stepped toward the Smiling God. “It warned of the futility of fighting a god. I have no qualms about proving it wrong.”

The Screaming God stepped from his place in the circle, axe at the ready, to stand between Kryon and his intended victim. The Smiling God continued to laugh.

Kryon slashed low with his scimitar, letting the god lower his axe to block before stabbing just above it with his longsword. The blade glanced off of the god's mirrored greave, sliding harmlessly to the right. Kryon spun around the axe handle, using it as a pivot point and slashed backhand with his scimitar at the unprotected back of the god's knee. Before the blow could come close to landing, Sabian swept out with his axe handle, sending Kryon tumbling head-over-heels across the meadow.

He stopped rolling and instinctively dove to his left just as the god's axe buried itself in the ground where his head and upper torso would have been. Kryon launched himself to his feet, taking advantage of the moment Sabian took to extract his axe to snake his longsword between the plates over the god's foot. The Screaming God seemed to take no notice. Kryon's blade came back clean.

The god kicked out and caught Kryon a glancing blow on the leg as he dove aside. Kryon fought a scream back as he felt his hip and femur shatter.

He hit the ground and rolled to his feet, using his scimitar as a crutch and not looking at his mangled leg. He didn't need the distraction at the moment.

Knowing he could never block it, especially in his condition, Kryon ducked a sweep of the giant axe that would have removed head and shoulders from his body. Springing off of his good leg, he slammed his sword down on the bit of flesh that showed on the god's wrist. The blade shattered.

Kryon had never been one to give up, but he felt a sharp pang of despair as his leg struck the ground. Despair mixed liberally with pain. A whimper escaped his throat as he landed on his back on the grass, unable to move.

The Screaming God redirected his sweep, circling the axe up and around before bringing it hurtling down toward Kryon's

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midsection. A sharp pain followed by a blessed lack of feeling from his destroyed hip told Kryon that he had been cleaved in half.

Before the darkness took him, he summoned what was left of his strength to make one last slash at the god's ankles, then he knew no more.

* * * * *

Kryon awoke. That was his first surprise. The second one was the fact that he could feel his legs, which were both intact and painless.

He sat up in the grass, still surrounded by gods. "Why am I alive?"

He looked up at the Screaming God, who was extending a hand to help him up. Kryon took it and got to his feet.

"Balthasar healed you, at my request." The giant god smiled at him. "You fought incredibly, even to your last breath. If you can reign in your temper, your stubbornness will bear you easily through the Challenge."

Kryon had lost count of how many times he'd shaken his head today, but he found himself doing it again. "That was not the Challenge?"

"No, dear Kryon," the Weeping God said. "That was not the challenge. The real Challenge does not take place in this world. It will take place in another world, one you create."

"I don't understand."

"You don't challenge the gods by fighting us!" The Smiling God exclaimed. "You challenge us by proving that you can do a better job than we can!"

The Kissing Goddess knelt down and put a hand on his shoulder. "You will create a world and rule it as you see fit. You will become a god."

"I..."

"Don't understand?" the Weeping God asked gently. "It is hard to imagine, we know, but you will come to terms with it in

time. You will have one thousand years once your world is created. If, after that time, your world flourishes, you will return here to take your rightful place among us.”

“And if I fail?”

The Screaming God frowned down at him. “Don’t.”

The Smiling God grinned hugely. “You cease to exist. No afterlife, no second chances, just nothing. How’s that for intimidating?”

“We will leave you to your creations now, Kryon.” The Kissing Goddess gave him a peck on the cheek that covered most of his face, but still left him longing for more. “I wish you luck. Come back to us a god.”

With that, all sixteen of them disappeared, leaving Kryon alone with no idea how to begin.

He closed his eyes, thinking of the Cleansing. He had no memory of his actions before the light had burned them away, only a vague sense of having done very bad things.

He felt fresh, as though he had been reborn through the fire. The rogue he had been died in the flames and rose again a new man.

Kryon had no idea where to begin building a world, but he figured the first place to start would be a good name. He would name his after the Cleansing process that created the man he hoped to become – the fire that burned away the rogue and allowed him to rise again from the ashes.

Kryon sat down in the grass and thought of how to create his world: Rogue’s Phoenix.

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