

Kyle held his horse's bridle as he walked slowly along the road. A dusty wind blew across his boots at the edge of town. His cloak hung off his shoulders and his hood lay flat on his back. His swords were secured in the bedroll that was tucked away on the horse's back. Kyle idly chewed a stick of black-root as he patted his horse's head.

Sand crunched under Kyle's feet as he walked along the unpaved main road. The lush grass that peeked between buildings was worn away on the well-trodden path. Wooden structures lined the street and a dry breeze blew past Kyle's lips. Children played in the distance. Their voices cascaded through the small town. Their carefree sense of wonder was like music to Kyle's ears.

In the distance Kyle watched three men exit a building with a woman in between them. She was slight of waist and fairly small in stature. Curly golden-brown hair bounced atop her head. Nicholas, a tall, sandy blonde male walked behind her with his palm at her back. He nudged her forward whenever her steps slowed. Two broad shouldered males, Garret and Adrian, shielded her as they stepped in unison.

As Kyle neared, she stopped briefly and locked eyes with him. There was such a desperate fire in her eyes that Kyle stopped in the middle of the road. The tall male pushed her forward and sneered at Kyle. The sun gleamed off the young woman's eyes. She stared at Kyle with unwavering focus. Something in her eyes pleaded with Kyle. Nicholas saw it too and broke off from the group.

Nicholas approached Kyle with the arrogant familiarity of a young Warrior. Nicholas absentmindedly tapped the hilt of his sword as he neared. He used a finger to adjust the glasses that slid down his nose.

"You should watch where you look, friend," Nicholas warned.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Kyle replied.

“Keep your eyes off of things that ain’t yours,” Nicholas said.

“I don’t know what you’re getting at, but I’m just passing through,” Kyle softened his tone. “I’m not looking for trouble.”

“Damn right you’re not,” Nicholas said as he turned away. “You better remember that.”

Kyle watched as Nicholas walked back into the distance. Garret and Adrian waited atop horses for him, as did the young woman. The woman looked back at Kyle again, tearing through him with her gaze. Nicholas saw the look as he mounted his horse. He looked back and saw Kyle’s stoic acknowledgment. Festering anger made Nicholas dismount and unsheathe his sword as he charged at Kyle. Kyle smacked his horse lightly on the back and it trotted a safe distance away before stopping. Kyle stood alone on the dust blown road.

“The Priestess is waiting, we don’t have time for this,” Garret reminded Nicholas.

“I’ll make time!” Nicholas yelled as his first slash rained down at Kyle.

Kyle dodged to the left with liquid speed and Nicholas’ blade sailed past his head in blind rage. Nicholas continued his unrelenting attack and Kyle answered by dodging, escaping and pivoting out of his way. Nicholas attacked with fury that made Kyle backpedal and watch as the sword passed a hair’s breadth in front of his face. On that dusty road, Kyle and Nicholas danced to the serenade of death like two old partners. Kyle’s grace matched Nicholas’ fury as they moved around each other.

Kyle planted his back foot and felt the stairs of an abandoned building behind him. Nicholas rushed forward with a mind to split Kyle from clavicle to abdomen. Kyle lunged, grabbed Nicholas’ sword arm and placed a hand on his chest. Kyle pushed Nicholas back and startled by the move, Nicholas lost traction for a split second. He moved towards Kyle again

with a wild looping slash. Kyle back flipped as the sword sang just beneath him. Kyle landed on the top of the stairs and Nicholas landed there with him. Kyle pressed his forearm into Nicholas' neck and as Nicholas drove his sword forward. The blade stopped when it punctured the wall behind Kyle. Kyle remained with his back against the wall and his forearm at Nicholas' throat. Nicholas breathed down on Kyle with his sword lodged in the wall.

“Nicholas, that's enough!” Adrian commanded.

“Yeah,” Nicholas' halfhearted answer rang out across the road. He lingered there with Kyle, still locked in his eyes. “He's had enough,” Nicholas growled as he pried his sword from the wall.

Nicholas kept his eyes on Kyle as he casually walked back to his horse. Garret handed Nicholas the reins before he mounted. Kyle searched for the young woman's eyes, but she turned from him. She placed on her hood and bowed her head.

Kyle stayed against the wall until Nicholas and the others until they trotted down the road and out of sight. He walked down the stairs slowly and noticed his piece of black root, trampled during the fight. Kyle retrieved his horse and tied it to the front of a nearby cottage. Kyle patted his horse's head again and rubbed under its chin. He threw his bedroll on his back and walked inside.

“Are you Thomas?” Kyle asked as he entered the cottage.

A gaunt older man awaited Kyle as he entered. The old man pretended to dry a glass as he looked out the window. His liver spotted skin hung off his bones. He stood at the counter near the entrance. Kyle dropped his bedroll on the counter and Thomas jumped a little.

“Thomas is the surname. How do you know?”

“It says it outside,” Kyle said, as he fiddled with the leather straps of his bedroll. “Who were they?”

“They’re from the Order of the Broken Cross. And that’s all you want to know about them, trust me,” Thomas replied.

“Do they stay in town?” Kyle asked.

“Up the road a ways and to the west. You can’t miss their church.”

“Is that so?” Kyle said, as he opened his bedroll.

Thomas jumped in shock when Kyle’s assortment of blades revealed themselves on his bedroll. Two thick leather belts held Kyle’s long swords. The rest of his tools of war slept quietly in special designed pockets.

“What do you plan to do, mister?” Thomas wondered, as Kyle strapped on his sword belts.

“You have rooms available here?” Kyle asked as he sheathed throwing knives in his belt.

“Yes. Well sort of. I have one,” Thomas stuttered. “No one’s been up there in a while.”

“Clean it up, put the rest of my things up there and feed my horse,” Kyle said as he placed a billfold on the counter. Thomas’ eyes brightened when he flipped through several hundred-mark notes. “Tell me when that runs out,” Kyle said, indicating the mark notes.

“No problem mister,” Thomas answered as he put the mark notes in his pocket. “You going to be here long?”

“Not if I don’t have to,” Kyle said as he walked towards the door.

“You’re not about to do something foolish, are you? Mister? Mister?”

“I’m just going to have a little chat.”