

*Kytun Iye*  
The Edge of the Map

by Scott Walker

“Care for another?” the gray-haired man said, though it was clearly not a question. His wrinkled and scarred hands slid a mug of ale in front of Kytun, not waiting for a response. “One of the few privileges they left us, you know. It would have been easy to make us immune to alcohol.”

Kytun picked up the mug, began to raise it to his lips, then paused. “To privileges.” He managed to suppress a smile, but a smirk crept across his face.

“So, you haven’t completely lost your sense of humor. That’s good – you stop laughing, and all you’ve got left is pain. Trust your Old Kurn on this.” The old man winked at Kytun, but there was no humor in his lined face.

The men softly clinked their mugs, and each took a long draught. The inn was all but deserted, the fire a pile of glowing embers. Jania, the barmaid, clearly was trying to clean up as quickly as possible and ignored the man passed out in the corner.

“Plenty of that to go around these days,” Kytun said. He stared down at the foam-filled mug, rolled it slowly back and forth between his hands. He sighed, took another drink. “How much longer are you going to hang around this inn?”

Kurn grinned widely, gestured with a sweeping hand. “Leave this? Are you kidding? I have a soft bed, three hot meals a day, and damn near all the free ale I want. Women are available, maybe not the best looking, but friendly goes a long way in the dark, if you know what I mean.” Kurn raised his eyebrows to emphasize an already obvious point.

Kytun looked over at Jania; a fair girl, just past her prime. She had been more than attentive to the two men as they drank and ate their way through the evening, and extended the same courtesy to Kytun that she showed to Kurn, even though the old man had just introduced her to Kytun that night. Maybe Kurn was right – a life like this, with some stability, some



certainty, was suddenly more attractive.

“Best deal I’ve had,” Kurn continued, “and that includes the day I was embraced.”

Kytun thought about the runes that covered his body, the hidden runes that marked a man, to those with the Sight, as a Guardsman. He had received the training, the instruction, and the runes. He had endured hours of painful inscriptions and fearful rituals over the years of his youth. The entire process was to culminate in a ceremony involving the Emperor. Instead, on the eve of his ceremony, Kytun was ordered away from the Imperial Isle as The Destruction began, with no hope of finishing his indoctrination as a Guardsman until the Emperor returned.

“At least you know who you are. You were embraced by the Emperor Gallidon, one of his Guardsman. I’m...something else. More than a soldier, less than a Guardsman.” Kytun pulled back the sleeve on his left arm. “These runes mean nothing without the Emperor’s blessing.”

“Let’s see those marks, boy,” Kurn said, reaching out for Kytun’s left hand. As Kytun extended his arm, Kurn grabbed Kytun’s wrist with surprising speed, and slammed it against the table. Kytun’s instincts caused him to pull back, but his left hand was pinned securely to the table. His mind raced with various combat options, but Kurn’s glare seemed to paralyze him before he had time to act on them.

Kurn pointed at Kytun with his free hand, and his voice came out slow, almost a graveled whisper. “You listen good, boy, I’m only going to say this once. Being a Guardsman isn’t about hugs. It isn’t about ceremony. And it damn sure hasn’t got anything to do with the Emperor.” Kurn released his grip and leaned back in his chair, but Kytun didn’t move.

“But, the Emperor’s embrace is required to complete the initiation as a Guardsman. Otherwise, what’s the point?”

“Exactly,” Kurn replied.

Kytun considered the implications, weighed them against all he had been taught about being a Guardsman. No other Guardsman had talked this way to Kytun, and he was struggling to understand the implications of Kurn’s words if they were true.

Kurn watched the realization and effort at reconciliation play across the young man’s face. “Well, you’re slow, but you apparently aren’t stupid, and that’s something. Kytun, these are uncharted waters we’re in. We’ve slipped over the horizon and beyond the edge of the map. Forget the old rules, they don’t apply anymore.”

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Kytun said nothing, turning to the remains of the fire but looking at something else.

“I’ve found my peace as a barman,” Kurn declared. “You need to find yours as a Guardsman, whatever that means in this new age.”

Kytun was still sitting at the table long after Kurn had turned in, but he was far away from the inn by dawn.



Illustration *Edge of the Map* by Andy Underwood.

“Kytun Iye” created by Tony Graham in *Kytun Iye: Lessons*.

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First Published January, 2009.