

Stone Lord

By Brenna Lyons

Note: The muse loves games of ‘what if.’ In this case, the game went something like... We know that the Stone’s plans are capable of going awry. We know the young Stone lord is typically in his twenties, thirties, or even forties, when the previous one dies, leaving the younger lord to the Stone.

So, what would happen if the Stone’s timeline for succession to the Stone was fouled, and the young Stone lord was a child, when his predecessor died? Would the Stone be lost to them, until the new lord was cursed? Would a child hold the Stone? As it turned out, the Stone gave me the story of a young Stone lord from an earlier Beast War, in just such a situation. The answer was...neither of the above...

Happy reading!

Brenna

{Come to me. Come now.}

Brand went still, listening for the voice again. Who was it? The bright sunlight and the lack of response from his older brothers who had sealed their curses attested that it wasn’t a beast.

{Come now.}

His head spinning, he launched into the trees. His young legs pumped hard, and he scrambled over rocks, jumped obstacles, skidded down steep inclines.

His lungs burned. His muscles ached. Brand was sure he was bleeding from a dozen places, and still he ran, following the voice calling to him.

At last, he collapsed, panting, shaking, coated in sweat. His body protested a hundred abuses, and he was too weary to do more than scoop a handful of water from the rushing stream an arm’s length away and give in to his body’s

demands to crumple.

Brand stared at the darkened sky in disbelief. His mother hadn't summoned him to midday meal yet when the voice had called to him. He'd lost the day? Though his aching body confirmed that he could have run that long, his reasoned mind insisted even a Warrior sealed in *Krankheit* had limits that didn't stretch this far.

How far had he come? Why had he? There were no answers forthcoming.

{*Sleep.*}

In the next instant, he did.

* * * *

"We will find him," Tel promised his mate.

How the boy had managed to disappear so completely was a mystery. One moment, he'd been playing with his brothers and cousins. The next, he'd vanished.

So far, the best trackers had only been able to follow him a league, and they'd lost his trail four times, in that length. A trained Warrior couldn't travel so stealthily, let alone an untrained boy. But, he had.

"Why would he do this?" Gia sobbed.

There was no answer to that. It was as much a mystery as everything else about this situation. Brand was a responsible child...or had been until this.

At a loss to offer any further comfort, he hugged her to his chest. Gods but her pain killed him. When he found Brand, the boy would learn a lesson usually reserved for those cursed already.

* * * *

{*Wake, young Warrior. Come to me.*}

Brand dragged himself up, emptied his bladder, and swallowed several mouthfuls of water. He looked around, but he didn't recognize his surroundings. Plants he'd never seen

before confirmed that he was far from the safety of his home.

He'd spent the night in the open, only his father's amulet protecting him, and he had no idea which way was home.

{I protect you. Come to me.}

Brand winced at the sharp edge to that voice, and it softened.

{Come to me, Brand of the Sword.}

He nodded numbly, pivoting on his bare heel. Where had his boots gone? Had he lost them the day before and not realized it?

The voice crooned to him. He placed the sun at his back. Then he was in motion again.

The world sped past him, around him, a blur of motion.

He stumbled to his knees, letting his head fall back. The sky was dark again, the day inexplicably gone. Brand slid to his side, reveling in the damp soil beneath his cheek, letting his eyes close.

How long would this last?

{Tomorrow. Come to me tomorrow.}

Brand groaned at the idea of another day like this.

{Sleep.}

* * * *

"How could you lose him?" Tel shouted at his brother.

Bil ground his teeth. "I cannot explain it. How could a child do this?"

Tel's answer was lost in the thunder of hoof beats. He turned, watching Alreed of the Sun pull his horse to a halt. The other man tipped his head in a curt welcome.

"We need your son, Tel," he blurted out.

The words to reply stuck in his throat.

Bil did it for him. "You need *which* son? And why?"

Alreed sighed. "My father is dead."

Tel's heart pounded in fear. "The Stone." Gods alive! Had the Stone called for Brand?

"He was carrying it," Alreed hurried on. "He died before

we reached him, and without the connection of his living injuries, we have been unable to find the Stone. Perhaps...your son could--"

"Brand is missing," Tel grumbled. "But now I know why he is."

Alreed let loose a string of harsh curses. "I must return to my range. We will have every Warrior searching for the young Stone lord."

"Wait!"

Alreed turned back, his brow up in a silent question.

"I am coming with you."

He hesitated only a moment and then nodded.

* * * *

Brand hardly remembered rising that morning. He ran. All that was left was the steady burn of his moving muscles and the sweet voice calling to him.

He stopped short, his mind clearing. It had released him...yet not. Brand couldn't feel the bone weariness he knew was to come.

The cave he'd stopped at was deep and dark, even in the low sun slanting into it. A shiver worked down his spine at the thought of entering it.

{Come, Brand of the Sword. I protect you.}

He nodded numbly, staggering into the darkness, his legs quaking.

The smell brought him up short, and he gagged.

Beast. Surely, that stench could be nothing less.

{No, young one. There is no beast.}

His thinking mind--what little was left of it, in his exhaustion--cautioned that it was a trick...a trap of some sort. Something deeper won out. Without reason or explanation, Brand trusted the voice.

His eyes adjusted to the semidarkness, and shapes stood out from the rest. His eyes watered, and his nose and throat burned. With every step, it got worse. At last, he turned and

emptied acid from his clenching stomach.

Brand wiped the back of his hand against his cracked lips. His legs protested rising again, but he managed it.

A lump of fur and rags took shape into a fallen Warrior, sacred weapon in hand. The scream of horror he wanted to vent caught in his throat.

It is the life we lead, he reminded himself.

{Take his weapon.}

Brand shook his head, his voice rasping out. "I am not permitted to. Not for three more years."

{Take the weapon.}

His blood mark heated, searing his flesh. Was it the Stone commanding him? Why would the Stone speak to an untrained child? His hand shaking, Brand complied.

{Dig his rest at the mouth of the cave, young Warrior. Return my son to me.}

He turned, picking his way to the entrance. The first thrust of the blade into the soil met with resistance. Brand wrenched it free and attacked again...and again.

As when he ran, his mind deserted him, retreating from the pain and fatigue.

Brand came to consciousness over the open grave, the sun a distant memory, bowing his head. *Sleep*. He begged for it, sure that he would see none of it until the Stone allowed it.

{Soon. For now, we must lay your brother Warrior to rest.}

He groaned, hoisting himself up and stumbling into the cave. The Warrior was a large one, larger even than Brand's father was. How was he supposed to move him?

{You are stronger than you think, Brand of the Sword. You use my strength well.}

The first tug succeeded in toppling the foul bulk against him. The second moved them both half an arm's length toward the grave.

There was no retreating from this unpleasant task. Brand felt every tearing pain in his muscles, suffered every frustration, when the body caught on rocks and roots.

He certainly suffered the smell. Twice, he had to turn his

head and bring forth whatever his stomach would release, trying desperately not to lose his grip on the Warrior.

It was all he could do to fall atop the body instead of beneath it at the graveside.

{Remove his packs and belt. You will wear them now.}

Beyond the idea of arguing, Brand did as the voice commanded. He donned the weapons belt and sheathed the sacred weapon reverently. He left the rest on the ground, so as not to burden himself until he'd laid the Warrior to rest.

He rolled the body into the grave with a grunt of pain. Then he lay on the ground, begging silently for rest.

{Soon. Finish the task, young Warrior.}

Brand let loose a string of curses worthy of his father or oldest brother. He started pushing piles of soil over the body.

A poke at his ribs reminded him that he still wore his wooden weapon. *Weapon.* Warriors were buried with their weapons, when they fell in battle.

But the voice had ordered him to keep the weapon. Torn, he considered it. A Warrior was buried with weapons. His hand shaking, hoping it wasn't sacrilege, Brand dropped his wooden weapon into the grave.

{Well met, young son.}

He nodded and went back to filling in the hole. He knelt wearily on the loose-packed soil. *Please...may I sleep now?*

{Soon.}

Fury lit in him, and he cried out in anger.

{Open the pack but do not touch the object within.}

Brand stomped to it and fumbled the ties open. His breath caught at the sight of the Stone, the blue glow radiating out in warming waves.

He glanced to the grave and swallowed hard. The Warrior had been the old Stone lord. Ready or not, trained or not, Brand was next in line.

{Draw your blade and touch it to me. Quickly now. There is much to do.}

His hands trembling, Brand did as the Stone bid. His head rocked back at the connection, and his mind went numb

at the knowledge coursing through him.

{Remove your amulet, young Warrior. You must protect me, as a Warrior would.}

I do not know how. He had no training. Even if his curse was upon him, Brand had only seen his brothers train and played at battle with wooden weapons. He couldn't protect the Stone that way.

The flow of information increased. Snips of strategies and battles fought passed by him.

{Remove your amulet, Brand.}

He reached up with his free hand and snapped the thong.

The flow sped past, so quickly he couldn't focus on single items in it. At last, it ended, and he slid to the ground, his breathing harsh. There was blood in his mouth, and his jaw ached. In the distance, the first rays of rosy dawn were breaking.

{Collect what is yours. Go into the cave...and sleep.}

* * * *

"Nothing," Tel complained. He'd hoped he'd find Brand in Sun range, catch him crossing the border between their lands and those of Ice range.

As if Alreed had heard his internal musings, he nodded grimly. "He is a boy on foot. Perhaps he will not arrive for days."

"If he lives that long."

"He has protection of the Stone."

"It did not save your father."

Alreed sucked in a breath, averting his eyes at the sacrilege. "I cannot speak for the Stone, but I would wager your son will be safe. At the very least, he still carries your amulet."

But the amulet wouldn't save Brand from more mundane beasts. He nodded. "What if he has already passed us?"

“A boy...on foot?” Alreed scoffed. “How would he?”

“How did he travel more than a league in the moments it took his brother to realize he was missing? How did he disappear with the gods’ stealth, when he is not yet cursed?”

There was a moment of silence. “A fine point,” he conceded. “There is a hut in the area where my father was lost. We will search from there.”

* * * *

{Wake, young Stone lord.}

Brand shivered. His body felt too hot, the air too cold and moist. His clothes chafed at his skin, pulling as if they were too tight.

There was little light coming from the mouth of the cave. Either it was darkly overcast, or he’d slept the day away. It was hard to say with certainty. He didn’t feel like he’d slept that long. Then again, he’d never exerted himself as he had in the last few days.

{Come, Brand. We have only to reach your father.}

He groaned at the thought of another three days of travel. Peering at the darkness, he revised that. *Three nights of travel.*

{Not so long.} The voice was lyrical...soothing. *{He searches for you.}*

That sent Brand to his feet. He wavered a moment, his balance uncertain. Then he checked his belongings: pack containing the Stone, weapons belt and weapon, the old lord’s pouch full of amulets, including his own. Content that he’d forgotten nothing. Brand set out.

There was no harried pace this time. Brand stumbled along, his arms wrapped protectively around the pouch that held the Stone. His mind was muddled, and he was only half aware of the Stone’s directions.

{Move, Brand!}

He dodged the blow instinctively. Before his mind cleared, the weapon was in his hand.

The beast stared at him with hot red eyes, hate radiating off of him. "Give me the Stone, boy."

Brand shook his head, his heart hammering alarmingly. His brothers' training and the Stone's echoed in his mind. "What is your name, beast?"

His voice was deep and even. Brand almost looked around in search of what Warrior had said it, but he knew he'd done so.

The foul creature laughed. "Where is your lord, boy? How old are you? Surely not more than sixteen. I can smell the *Krankheit* upon you."

Brand's musing that the beast must be comparing him to human children if it thought him as old as fifteen or sixteen died at the realization that it had said it smelled the sealing sickness. His rational mind confirmed that he'd never been sick...that Warriors never got sick, save *Krankheit*.

Gods, I'm changing.

{Yes, you are. Now, attend, Warrior!}

The beast was moving closer, scenting the air. "Did you escape your keepers, child? Did you think yourself Warrior enough to fight your betters?"

His fury rose at the condescending tone. He could feel *Blutjagd*. Brand savored it.

{Good. Very good.}

"How precious," the beast taunted. "A boy's *Blutjagd*."

"What is your name, beast?"

It launched at him without answering.

Hundreds of computations rolled through Brand's mind, moves that had been taken before, moves that he might take. He chose one that appealed to him and struck it, opening a long bleeder on the beast's chest.

Brand jerked away from the flashing claws, hissing at the line of blood winding down his arm from the one that caught. He glared at the beast. "Name. Yourself."

It looked up, a calculating look on its face. Then it came for Brand again.

The next bleeder was easier to strike, and he didn't take

an injury in return. His fury burning hot at the beast's continued refusal to answer him, Brand strode toward his enemy. "Name yourself?"

The beast made a swing for him, and Brand ducked it. He buried the blade in the beast's chest, twisting as his father had taught his brothers. Then he ripped it free.

"Then die without a name to console you," he growled.

The beast fell to its knees then pitched forward, landing at Brand's feet. For a moment, Brand didn't move. Then he started walking, leaving the slain animal far behind. A nameless beast deserved no better, and Brand had neither flint nor kindling to destroy the beast by fire.

He didn't sheathe the blade. There might be more beasts about. Moreover, if he sheathed it without cleaning it, he would smell like beast until he could replace the weapons belt.

{Ahead.}

The Stone's voice came without warning, shocking Brand back to realization of his surroundings.

The hut was most likely a Warrior refuge. Whether it was or not, the Stone was directing him there.

His arms and legs trembling in a mixture of exhaustion, nervous energy, and the searing sickness, Brand made for the door and fumbled the latch open.

* * * *

"If it is one of yours, why has he not appeared yet?" Tel grumbled.

"Probably destroying the beast."

Something worked at the latch, and Tel ground his teeth that Alreed had been correct again. Where was Brand? How long would it take to find him?

"Ah, this would be--"

Alreed pushed to his feet, his eyes going wide. His jaw dropped, and his face paled.

Heart skittering, Tel snapped his head around.

What he saw made no sense. The Warrior was a young male, perhaps a trainee or first night. He was tall and lanky, not yet grown into his adult muscle mass. What was such a young man doing without an older Warrior? Young ones never hunted alone.

The rest took a moment to sink in. He was unwashed, and his clothing was ripped and stained in blood, vomit, dirt, and beast blood. Even the smell of the beast couldn't cover the smell of sweat, sickness, and death...human death, decay, rot of the body.

And his clothing didn't fit. It almost seemed the Warrior had stolen the clothing of a much smaller man...or purchased it, but nothing about him spoke of enough honor to purchase anything.

A half-mad laugh escaped the man's mouth. "She was correct. You *are* here."

Scenting danger in the air, Tel pushed to his feet. He rested his hand on the hilt of his dagger, waiting for the Warrior's next move, if the man could truly call himself a Warrior.

He took an unsteady step into the room, and Alreed curled his lip up in disgust. Tel agreed with his assessment.

His breathing rasping, the intruder took a second step. He cocked his head to one side. "Father?"

Tel was about to make a sarcastic remark, but he met his opponent's eyes...and went still. Beneath the filth and disuse was the pleading expression he knew so well. When Brand misbehaved, that was the look he adopted.

He examined the clothing closer. It was the same tunic Gia had lovingly stitched for Brand only months earlier. He'd lost his boots, but the tattered remains of his leg wraps were right.

But how had his son aged years in days? Such things did not happen. This young Warrior had the shadow of a beard, when his son had a babe's face at their last meal together.

"By the gods," he breathed. "Brand?"

A smile stretched cracked lips, and a low rumble that

sounded of pleased laughter shook his chest.

Alreed shot a look of disbelief at Brand and then Tel. “But...your son is--”

“I know.” Tel circled the table and headed for his son.

Brand tried to meet him halfway, but his balance deserted him. He landed in a heap on the floor just before Tel reached him.

The heat radiating off his body could only be one thing. Tel cursed aloud and shouted for a fur to wrap him in. Whatever the Stone had done, Brand was caught in the sealing sickness and suffering harder than most did.

He moaned, pitching his head back and forth. The language of the ancients left his lips on gasps. Tel listened in rising awe. Brand was reciting the rules of sanction, rules he’d only heard snips of before.

Alreed returned with the furs, then left again to attend to some other task. Tel set about the odious work of cutting off the foul clothing; they were too tight to remove any other way.

Brand didn’t react to it, until Tel tried to cut the pack from his shoulder. His son’s hand came up and circled his wrist, muscles like iron. A warning not to proceed left his lips in the language of the ancients.

“It stays, Brand,” he conceded. “The pack--”

“Pack?” Alreed barked from the fire pit. “It is the stone. It is no wonder he refuses to relinquish it.”

Tel nodded and pried his son’s fingers loose. Then he went to work on the leg wraps.

Alreed didn’t wait for orders. By the time Brand was stripped bare, there was a basin of water, warmed with the pot of tea they’d made. Tel looked up at him, questioning that last silently.

The Warrior raised one shoulder in a shrug. “The tea contains willow bark and lavender flower. It will be soothing and healing.”

“My thanks.”

Together, they scrubbed Brand down, washing away days

of dirt and death. They cleaned the beast blood from his hand after the rest. Before they did, Tel used it to draw the seals. His son had killed a beast in battle; he deserved nothing less. The seals would have to be washed away before they placed Brand in a bed, but they had been drawn and witnessed.

My son is a man...a Warrior sealed in battle.

One by one, the healing wounds of his flight and fights appeared from beneath the grime. It had been a hard road, but Brand had weathered it well, perhaps better than a full-grown Warrior would have.

Tel wrapped the furs around Brand and lifted him to the bed Alreed had prepared. It wasn't a proper bath, but it was the best he dared do; dunking Brand in the stream while he fevered was likely a poor choice.

The door moved again, and Tel turned toward it. Beside him, Alreed did the same. Alreed's younger brother stepped inside, stopped, and scrunched his nose with a growled curse.

Tel didn't give him time to complain. "The Stone lord has returned to us. Call in the men and send word to my mate." Gods, but Gia would insist on coming immediately, and how would Tel explain it to her?

Alreed issued orders of his own. "You burned the beast?" At his brother's nod, he continued. "Take those ruined clothes and burn them as well. Send out word. The Stone lord suffers his sealing sickness. I want the best Warriors at his side until this passes."

In the next instant, the young man was in motion, carrying out the orders he'd been given.

Silence fell around them, and Tel stared at Brand, questions tumbling in his mind.

"Your son is safe," Alreed assured him. "You have my vow on that."

Tel nodded. *Yes, but is he still my son?*

* * * *

Brand stretched, kicking the furs off. His bladder ached,

and he grimaced at the overpowering stench of himself. The pungent smells of death and vomit had his stomach clenching for another go at emptying.

His father and another Warrior he didn't know slept on trail mats on the floor. He worked at what possible reason there would be for them to give him the bed, but none emerged. Brand stared at the other Warrior, wondering who he was...where he was.

{*Alfred of the Sun.*}

He nodded, yawned, and pushed to his feet. Brand made his way to the door and out into the morning sun. His eyes fought focusing and wanted to slide shut again. His father willing--*and the Stone granting*--perhaps he would sleep more when he was relieved, fed, and clean.

There were Warriors everywhere, sleeping on trail mats. Two were awake, conversing at the remains of a fire. They looked up at his appearance, their eyes widening.

Brand ignored them and followed the Stone's directions to a nearby stream. There was nothing surprising about him sleeping in the nude. Nor was there anything shocking about him seeking out a bath or relief from his bladder this way. Women wrapped themselves in cloth, not children and men.

A sound behind him told Brand that one of the Warriors was following him. He sighed. Running as he had, caused by the Stone or not, his father had likely ordered a guard to make sure Brand didn't bolt again.

He emptied his bladder against a fallen tree, groaning as cup after cup made the exodus. *I must have slept a long time.* And yet he was exhausted, most likely due to his exertions before the Stone had allowed him sleep.

His needs attended to, Brand turned toward the stream, scrubbing his fingertips over his grit-filled eyes. He knelt at the edge, reaching for the water. His throat was parched, and Brand intended to see to that need before he bathed.

The face staring back from the surface wasn't his own, and Brand shot a startled look over his shoulder. There was no one there. The Warrior who'd followed him was four

body lengths away, too far to have cast a reflection in the still pool at the edges of the stream.

“Is there a problem, Stone lord?” the Warrior asked.

Brand didn’t answer. He stared into the water, at a loss to explain the apparition. It wasn’t the face of a child, but rather that of a man. There was a scruff of new beard on the face and a man’s squared jaw.

He dipped his hand in the pool...the hand of a Warrior.

“Stone lord?” The Warrior was approaching.

“Quiet,” he growled. Brand winced at the fact that he’d just given a Warrior an order. The truth that he’d been obeyed stunned him nearly as much as his own altered appearance did.

How long did I sleep? Years! It must have been years.

{A day and two nights.}

Brand splashed the water in a pique. *I have aged half a decade.*

The Stone’s voice was patient, without a hint of rebuke.

{The Stone is carried by a Warrior.}

His jaw clenched, Brand nodded. He forced it open, swallowing handful after handful of fresh water.

At last, he stood and strode into the pool.

“Do you require anything, Stone lord? Can I aid you, in some way?”

Brand paused, working at the request. “A soap stone.” He might use the whole of it to remove the foul humor from his body and mind.

The rushing feet were further away than he knew the Warrior to be, indicating that his fellow had also followed. In moments, he was back, striding into the water in his boots to place the soap stone in Brand’s hand.

“My thanks,” he rasped.

The Warrior bowed his head. “Your pack, Stone lord?”

Brand ran his fingertips along it. “It is my burden to carry.” What little he understood of his duties stated clearly that Brand was never to place the Stone anywhere but in Her designated cradle.

“Of course, Stone lord.” There was a moment of silence between them. “Are you well, mi’lord?”

Brand swallowed down a lump in his throat. “She speaks. I...am learning to listen, when She does.”

The Warrior bowed his head again and made for the shore. Brand fisted the soap stone, then ambled into the current to his waist and plunged beneath the icy water.

* * * *

The scream brought Tel to his feet, his hand wrapped around the hilt of his dagger. Gia came into focus slowly. His mate pulled at the furs, as if searching for something.

She turned to him, wide-eyed, dark circles beneath them. “Where is he? They said he was found.” Tears choked her words.

Tel came up with a series of curses. Surely, Brand hadn’t slipped away from them again. Why would he?

Warriors crowded into the hut, varying levels of *Blutjagd* searing his nerves.

Gia threw herself at him. “Where is my son?”

“Mother?” The voice was deep and strange, but Tel knew it was Brand.

Warriors parted, letting their son pass between their ranks. He was dripping, and the soap stone was still clenched in his hand. His feet were coated in a layer of dirt, proving he came at a run at a woman’s scream.

Gia stared at him, turning to Tel with a lost look.

He nodded. “The Stone... I cannot explain how the Stone did this, but...”

Brand advanced slowly, bringing his hand up. He glanced at the soap stone, handed it off to another Warrior, and started forward again, motioning for peace. “The Stone is always carried by a Warrior. Regeis died too soon, sooner than planned. To be a proper protector, I had to become...” He motioned up and down his body.

Gia stumbled against Tel, and Brand moved to support

her. Together, they guided her to the bed he'd vacated that morning.

"I am still myself, Mother," Brand breathed. "Gods believe me, I have not changed so much."