

AFTERLANDS

BEFORETIMES

VOL. 1

MONTHLY
SERIES

Afterlands stories of the Continent, from the time of the
Mother's war against the Once King, before the Harrowing.

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THE HARROWER

WORDS AND ILLUS BY BOOTS



For seventeen generations the Continent's sovereign house quashed the legacy of the Aestus-wielding Harrowers from their bloodline. Now the Mother welcomed one back to Court.



**AFTERLANDS
BEFORETIMES**

BY BOOTS

Volume I

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*An injustice had been done.
So the People of the Mountain
and the Grasslands went to war.*

THE HARROWER

I. THE MOTHER.

THE HARROWER IS INTRODUCED TO THE PEOPLE.

The Harrower knew what he was about to do and the consequences of doing it. He also feared the consequences of disobeying the Mother. She had just seized her brother's throne, her followers were legion, and even now they had gathered up all who opposed her rule, to make an example. For him to make an example.

From the Citadel Palace balcony overlooking the packed public square where the King's loyalists were chained to a pillar, the Mother now addressed her people.

She wore an elaborate crown of thorns that pricked her brow—her chosen symbol of universal suffering, staining her fair hair that nearly touched the ground.

"The man who called himself your king has left a terrible gift on vacating his throne," she told the avid crowd. "As if his crimes of office weren't enough."

Despite the crown, she did not declare herself Queen, but bid all to call her the Mother. And though for seventeen generations the Continent's sovereign house had quashed the legacy of the Aestus-wielding Harrowers from their bloodline, she intended to welcome one back to Court.

"Behold," the Mother said dispassionately as she gestured, "a Harrower."

From the shade, he stepped forth—a beast dark as coal with turned horns and a long shag of black hair that fell over his eyes. He wore copper armor now

synonymous with the Mother's armies: pauldrons over leather, segmented gauntlets, and a collar, all embossed with twined thorns. His eyes smoldered red like molten ore as he parted his doublet to reveal the pulse of his flaming heart. His nostrils issued fire up and over the long slope of his nose, and a great cloud of black smoke chuffed from his body.

Nobles on the adjacent promenade gasped and backed away. Below, the crowd surged from the Palace as if an incendiary had been dropped among them. They had been silent before, but now a great wave of oaths rose up.

"It is an abomination!" one brave woman shouted from among the crowd.

Emboldened by her voice, others joined with further objections.

"It should have been put to death!" cried an old man. "So says the Law!"

The Mother raised her hand to quell them. "I am the Law! Be still!" she demanded.

Under the glower of the winter sun, the people were stunned silent. However frail her bone-thin frame and crepey flesh, her voice was powerful with royal authority.

"You who are loyal have nothing to fear," she then told them with barely concealed impatience. "The Harrower obeys only your Mother. He is no threat to those who serve me."

The history of the Harrowers was well known to all but the Harrower himself, yet no one living had ever seen one outside of the Palace. The Mother was once accused of being one—the pretext by which she was robbed of her birthright as the Then King's eldest child—and she had only been spared because her latent traits never manifested. She could not control the

Aestus, though many believed she could touch fire and not burn.

“We need no Harrower, Mother,” implored one woman who, like many other devotees, wore a crown of thorns of her own after the Mother took the Citadel. A ripple of agreement coursed through the uneasy crowd, a restlessness which the Mother addressed in a gentler tone that nevertheless brook no arguments.

“The Harrower will be kept—for now—for all of us,” she said. “The coward King So-Called yet lives. For what nefarious purpose he secreted the Harrower we may never know, but let that purpose be his downfall.”

She then redirected her attention to those men and women chained to the pillar, the fate of whom was now grimly clear.

“Traitors below,” the Mother proclaimed, “you committed treason against the royal house, abetted the King So-Called in his crimes, refuse to renounce your allegiance even now, and therefore are condemned. After today your names shall be forgotten, your deeds never again be spoken, and let no one hold a lantern to light your way in the After.”

She then turned to the Harrower. “Let it be done,” she said.

The Harrower’s whole chest glowed bright with fire. His eyes and nose blazed, and the steam that rose from his body trailed in long black wisps like burning oil. Men and women to the right and left moved still farther back, startled by the transformation, as if he had grown still larger.

He inhaled, his heart visibly pounding.

Snow had just begun to feather down from turbulent clouds overhead, falling light and thick like white petals of some long-extinct flower. A child

clutching his father's hand in the courtyard tipped his head to catch it on his tongue.

The Harrower could never catch a snowflake or feel one on his skin, but he held his breath to appreciate the beauty of its lace. Then at last he exhaled, directing the heat of the Aestus to the pillar and its prisoners.

When the people burst into flame as if they were mere kindling, the crowd gasped and pushed several more feet back. Then the screaming began. And for as long as he would serve the Mother, the Harrower knew it would never end.

II. THE BOY.

THE KITCHEN PRISON AND EMANCIPATION.

The boy had no name and was rarely spoken to. The old cook sometimes looked on him with pity, but the younger assistants were brutal with both their words and the long fireplace poker, which they always had on hand. They were not allowed to beat him, but they did more than a fair share of prodding, jabbing, and stabbing.

The kitchen corner was his whole world. He lived and slept in the cinders and never strayed farther than the few feet he was allowed by the length of heavy links bolted into the brick hearth and attached to an iron collar around his neck.

He had meals of leftover scraps and was allowed to lick the pots and pans of whatever was caked or burned on them. He knew all the bright and savory smells of real food, but understood none of it was for him, so he never complained. Sometimes the old cook gave him a crust to mop up the day's fry grease – those meals were the best of all.

He had no clothes nor a pallet to lay on. One large

assistant routinely threw a bucket of cold water in his face whenever his heart glowed and his blood thrummed hot in his veins. Everyone in the kitchen shied from him in horror, but he was more afraid of them.

One day he was brought a tub of soapy water and a scrubbing brush used to clean the floors. The old cook told him to wash himself because he was summoned by the Mother. It sounded ominous, so he did as he was told, the soap sizzling on his skin and the bristles burning down to the woodblock in which they were woven.

The old cook put her hands on her hips and tsked at him with a frowning mix of dismay and disgust. "It'll have to do," she said.

Then a coterie of well-armed guards covered head to toe came in and removed the lock that secured him to the wall. They were faceless and terrifying men with only narrow slits in their helmets, and they treated the Harrower like an animal incapable of comprehension, prodding him up with spears. Panicked, he pressed into the corner and a plume of heat rose off of him to scorch the bricks, leaving a shadow of himself on the wall.

At first the guards retreated, but the captain, bravest among them, used a long hook to snag the boy by the collar and yank him to heel. The kitchen staff clutched one another and several fled when, at another harsh pull, the boy's heart flashed like a stoked brazier and all the kitchen lamps violently guttered.

He was brought cowering to an open courtyard where for the first time he saw an unobstructed view of the hazy ochre sky. In the middle of the yard was a running fountain and sitting on the edge was a woman in a simple crinkled copper-colored gown.

She was a Mountain woman with braids that had once been raven black and intricately twined according to the custom of her people, but now her hair flowed loose, thinning and grey. Her face was grey as well, lined with age far more advanced than her years, devoid of any blush of life.

“Leave us,” she ordered the guards, who were eager to go. The captain hesitated but she waved him away. “I’ve nothing to fear,” she said. Her voice was haughty and strained.

The boy stood naked on the paving stones, his chain hanging from his neck and heaped behind him. The bright sun hurt his eyes, but he didn’t want to close them and was grateful for the shade of his tangled hair.

The woman gazed on him intently—the first expression he’d ever seen untainted by fear. She had tiny ice blue eyes around which radiated a dense lattice of wrinkles.

“Do you know who I am?” she asked.

He opened his mouth but only ragged breath came out. Self-conscious of the glow emanating from his chest, he covered it with his hands. Every beat of his heart felt like the pounding of his Spark wanting to flee the prison of his rib cage. He feared overheating and exploding like a broken tap on a pressurized spigot.

“It’s all right,” the woman said gently. “Come to me. I know you can speak.”

He took a sharp inhale, then he pushed with his diaphragm to form words, deep and tenuous. “You...are the Mother,” he said.

She smiled. The way she softened around her cold eyes calmed and cooled him.

“Yes, I am the Mother,” she replied. “Not *your* mother, unfortunate creature, but I welcome to my

breast all who have suffered." There was brittleness to her tone, but all he felt was warmth. "You were condemned since birth to the kitchens. Do you know why this was done?"

"Because...I am a Harrower."

He was pleased to know the answer and hoped to please her.

"Yes," the Mother said solemnly. "You are a Harrower. First of many generations. And in time I will teach you the story of your ancestors, but for now you will help me write an ending to the part where a wicked prince steals his sister's throne and must pay for that theft with his life."

While she spoke, she had risen from the fountain and drawn close—closer than anyone had ever dared come to him, so that she was inhaling the smoky heat that billowed lightly from his broad back. She reached out a finger towards his face and he reared instinctively, though his feet remained planted as if he was still chained.

"It's all right," she whispered reassurance. "You can't burn me. I am powerful, and together we will take back this stolen Kingdom." Her finger lightly touched his jaw and traced it to his chin. His every muscle tensed. He always believed it impossible to make safe contact, but she did so without burning.

From that day his life turned upside down. He was given an immense room of his own that was cold and empty but for a large fireplace. He could have stretched on the floor but preferred to curl up on the hearth. He burned handprints into the bare walls for decoration, then huddled in the corner when the Mother came to visit, fearing her anger.

Her pale lip curled at the markings, but she coaxed him up and reminded him:

“This is your place now. I give you permission to make it your own.”

He was expected to strengthen and practice his “craft” of setting things on fire. The Mother had a name for this power: the Aestus. She told him it was a special connection to the mysteries of the Spark, the Source of All Life. Only a Harrower could yield it.

But he didn’t need practice; the ability could scarcely be restrained. And after she didn’t punish him for the handprints, he saw that there were no buckets of cold water, no andirons, no hard words, no one to punish or scold him. He was encouraged to light fires – the bigger, the better. It scared everyone, but it made the Mother proud.

Once, he saw the old cook scurry away at his approach in the hallway. He missed the kitchen, the detached chatter of cooks and washers, the smell of many foods baking, simmering, boiling, and frying all at once. But he also knew he wasn’t wanted there – not anywhere. So he kept to his chamber with only the Mother for company.

She ordered him a suit of clothes that could endure his heat. To him, the weight of heavy leather was less uncomfortable than baring the Aestus for all to see.

She replaced the iron collar he had worn in the kitchen with copper so decorative it was like jewelry. Two retaining rings at the back reminded him, however, that at any time he could be returned to the end of a chain.

“As copper conducts heat best, this will help channel the Aestus to your will,” the Mother told him when she fixed it on him. He was grateful for the gifts and her middling attention. He wanted to believe her, so he did.

Supper was his only meal because the Mother kept

him hungry. She invited him to a sparsely set table in an oversized hall that used to be full of light and ornamentation. Now the windows were shuttered and ghosts of paintings and tapestries vaguely limed the walls.

"Are you well-pleased now with your place, Harrower?" she asked him, sipping from a cup of milky white liquid that seemed too viscous to be milk.

"I am," he said. "Thank you, Mother."

"So courteous," she replied with a hint of a smile.

He ate slowly to make the meal last. It was always a large piece of rare meat, which he didn't like, but ate without complaint. There was bread to sop the blood and he savored that.

She had taken the Kingdom, but had yet to catch the elusive King. He remained on the run, gathering forces, determined to seize back power. This made the Mother bitter and she dwelled on it.

"His time is over," she would say.

Then she told the Harrower his history:

"The Harrowers came from the Afterlands, across the Endless Ocean," she explained. "Lands destroyed by reckless use of the Aestus. They sought a new life on this lawless Continent and vowed to live in peace and order. Over generations they purged the Aestus from their bloodline—that the destruction could never happen again. So you see why it was wrong for the King to keep you?"

"I do," he answered.

"And why the people are right to hate you."

"Yes."

"It's a terrible thing to be denied what you were meant to be."

At that she rose. He started up as was the courtesy, but she only needed to raise a finger to keep him

down. She looked into his eyes, and touched him lightly—under his jaw to his chin in that way that made his flesh prickle and his chest seize. It was all the affection he had ever known and now all he desired.

“Never forget that I liberated you,” she told him breathlessly: an intimate secret just between them. “Now. What shall you do for me?”

In that moment his answer was clear and obvious: *anything*.

III. THE DUTY.

THE BOY BECOMES A WEAPON IN THE MOTHER'S ARMY.

The boy was fifteen years old when he was deployed to war. After executing the “traitors” in the Citadel, the Mother had begun an aggressive campaign to hunt down the King and his allies.

The Harrower was excited at first to go beyond the Mountain, to see things he had never seen before. But the hostility he encountered at the Palace was everywhere. Animals fled from him with their teeth bared and their ears laid-back, people cursed him and refused to look him in the eye.

Imperators in the Mother's legions ordered him about—to burn bridges, barns, warehouses, and fields. But always with a deference he assumed was respect for the Mother's supreme authority. All orders flowed from her will and from her whim. If she deemed it strategically necessary to render forests to charcoal or boil rivers to steam he would—and did.

By then, the Harrower knew what it was to be cursed, scowled at, spat on, and attacked from a distance by the supporters of the King. He had

disintegrated hundreds of arcing arrows, which he had learned to feel in their thermal signature on the wind, and never doubted that the King's people were hostile and dangerous enemies.

"They would not hesitate to kill you," the Mother told him. "Or me."

Her words fueled his desire to protect her, even though he found the role of shadowy nightmare of brimstone and cataclysm worryingly destructive.

He sought detachment to escape the everyday horror, but could never quite fully block out the sound of his victims' screams. And the more terrifying he was, the more the Mother made use of him—not only against enemies allegiant to the deposed King, but within her own court, real or imagined.

And the Mother had enemies.

She called the Harrower back to the Citadel frequently so that he could smolder menacingly in the presence of anyone who displeased her, no matter how petty the slight.

Five years and five hundred fires later, the Mother's conquest was nearly complete. Forests and fields that had once yielded crops and been green through the summer were burnt out and fallow. Whole cities had fallen. But the King still eluded capture and her endless pursuit made the Mother increasingly venomous, even toward her own people.

"Lord Kenson is a posturing bore," she said to the Harrower one afternoon when the noble arrived at Court to deliver some minor report.

Kenson was pompous in bearing and address, but brought no complaint nor showed any disrespect. Nevertheless, the Mother expected the Harrower to make an ominous advance toward him, merely for sport.

"Is the Mother displeased with me?" Lord Kenson asked. He stepped back, hat in hand, neck bowed slightly to demonstrate his deference. His eyes ratcheted at the Harrower's glowering approach.

"You are dismissed," the Mother replied with a bored tip of her wrist.

Kenson bowed deeper and skittered away. He wasn't yet out of the chamber before the Mother burst into cruel laughter.

"You are most useful, Harrower," she told him privately when he returned to his place at attention behind her. The Mother observed him, brows raised. "I wonder," she said, "whether it is a great pity that you have never learned to laugh."

"Does the Mother wish for me to learn?" he asked. He so rarely spoke, his voice was like gravel crushed under a wheel.

The Mother scowled, mercurial and violent. "Don't be absurd."

The Harrower's chest tightened, hot and pulsing beneath his leather. The spike in his anxiety caused all of the lamps in the chamber to flicker and flare.

"You too are dismissed," the Mother then told him sharply, and she added so that all the nobles present could hear: "We shall discuss your insolent distemper and *correct* it."

Afterwards, she came to his chamber, startling him up from where he was resting against the wall on the floor. She slammed the door behind her and made a dramatic turnabout in the center of the room, finger raised in warning.

"Don't ever speak to me with such condescension before my court again!"

Her voice was prickly with fury and it made his veins burn. His mouth dropped open, dumbfounded at

the slight he did not comprehend.

"I...."

"Did I give you permission to speak?" She cut him off like a violent thunderclap.

His dropped jaw snapped shut.

"Let me make this very clear to you—as much as your feeble overcooked brain can comprehend: you serve at *my* pleasure. I spared you from destruction under my brother's rule for *one* purpose. And at any time you cease to be purposeful, I have the right and the power to obliterate you from existence."

He wanted to tremble. He wanted to cry. But he didn't let his lips quiver and the moisture forming around his eyes sizzled off into nearly imperceptible steam. He couldn't stop his heart from pounding, however, nor his blood from running bright like magma under his skin. He was grateful for the leather shell that concealed his panic.

She didn't need confirmation from him—she was, after all, the Mother. Her words were her command.

Still, she reached for him as she had done that first day he was brought into her presence, and as she had done countless times over the years, and gently drew a finger along the line of his jaw.

His emotions roiled and he pressed slightly against her. Her lips curled with satisfaction as she withdrew, but her smile was not kind. From that moment, he knew that violence would eventually follow—if he displeased her again.

IV. HIS PURPOSE.

THE HARROWER QUESTIONS HIS WORTH.

The Harrower's opportunity to return to the Mother's favor came when he was sent to the plains to deal with

Grasslander factions that refused to submit. The Grasslands people were not warriors in the way that people of the Mountain were, but pushed to the limit, they were pushing back.

Their loyalty now was less to the deposed King and more to the memory of his long-dead consort, Queen Espiraella. She had been a Grasslander herself, Beloved among her people, and her death in childbirth had plunged the Kingdom into deep mourning. It also destabilized the King and set the stage for the decades-long war that now engulfed the Continent. There had been no peace since the King donned mourning ashes across his eyes, and the Mother declared there never would be until he and his adherents were wiped from the world.

So the Harrower went to these lands from which he understood by his horns that his *own* people had come, prepared to do whatever unspeakable things were asked of him to crush the hope of the ongoing rebellion.

Commanding the legion in this land was Emperor Laria. He knew she was favored by the Mother because her victories were legion and her Briar Legion was legend. She was spoken of around campfires and at Court as a great hero of the uprising. All the vast Grasslands that had thus far fallen, had fallen under her command.

Arriving on foot at the encampment, the Harrower was met with the usual nervous fear and quaking. Low-ranking grunts scuttled out of his path and the upper ranks puffed their chests and eyed him with false bravado to conceal their wariness.

Then a curly-haired lutra no bigger than a loaf of bread, driven mad by the dark smell of the Aestus, attacked with sudden ferocity, snapping and snarling.

The Harrower, in an unconscious blink of startled self-defense, set the little pet on fire.

The lutra howled and ran, trailing flames in its panic. Several enlisted men ran after it, but it perished quickly. There was such a great uproar that the imperator herself emerged from her quarters.

And this was the unfortunate circumstance under which Imperator Laria met the Harrower for the first time.

At first Imperator Laria just stared at him, disapproval creasing her brow. Her mouth was pressed tight against expressing any rash words. Around her, officers gathered, defensive, and with equally courageous bearing. Though he did not show it, the Harrower was deeply mortified by what he'd done and intimidated by the officers' disgust.

Laria's cold countenance and steely eyes reminded him of the Mother at her most harsh demeanor.

"Harrower," she said, nodding to him. It was not so much a greeting as simple acknowledgment. "A word." She didn't wait for him to answer though there was the tiniest hesitation in her turn.

Her subordinates would not have noticed, or might have attributed it to cautious reserve on putting her back to a dangerous monster. At first, the Harrower thought he saw doubt and self-concern in her expression, but he dismissed the idea quickly.

He had wanted to make a good impression and now feared there could be no accord.

She brought him into her quarters, which were austere and practical, and closed the cabin door behind him. They were alone with just a long meeting table between them.

She didn't sit, so neither did he.

Even if she had, he would have remained standing.

“Why did the Mother send you?” Emperor Laria asked. “What are your orders?” She spoke as one accustomed to being answered straightforward.

The Harrower, however, was not accustomed to being interrogated by anyone but the Mother. The lessons he learned about answering had been hard and memorable. He stared at Emperor Laria mutely, wondering whether he was being tested. That she was gazing back at him with a stoic expression of her own made him think she was wondering the same. This was not an exchange he felt prepared to navigate.

“All right,” she said after it became clear that the silence would not be broken. “Am I to assume then that you have orders I will not be made privy to? I received a peregrine that said only that you were coming, no more.”

He let out a nervous breath he had been holding. It puffed like exhaust.

“If you are trying to spook me, those tricks are wasted here—save them for the Mother's enemies,” she then said.

He wasn't trying to do anything but stand still and not betray his own fearfulness.

“Do you even have a voice? Are you a dumb beast?”

The heat of his nose flared. “I can speak,” he said, deeply and tightly from the back of his throat. Then he added, “When there is someone worth speaking to.”

It was his boldest rebellion to date: risky since he had no idea how she might react to his discourtesy.

Surprisingly, she didn't. “I expect you think you have no peers,” she said.

“I answer only to the Mother,” he replied and tried to soften his tone. He wasn't trying to pick a fight.

“As it should be,” she then said. “You may be the son of the false King, but you are still her flesh and

blood.”

It took a moment for him to register what she said, but even then he didn't understand it. "I'm...what?" he asked.

She blanched. "You're royal blood," she replied curtly. "Are you trying to trap me in some discourtesy? Is it an offense to say as much?"

"No," he answered quickly. He wanted to ask more, but kept silent.

She was studying him again and he was uncomfortable under her judgment. "You made quite a stir just now on your arrival," she said, shifting topics. "You and I must come to an understanding. I too take orders only from the Mother, so there will be no attempt for either of us to command the other. That said, I would appreciate it if you would extend me the courtesy of making your presence in *my* camp as little of a disruption as possible."

He was listening but the words were only half-heard. He tumbled in his thoughts—how it had never occurred to him to question his origins, to wonder at something like father or mother. He was more than the Mother's possession, he was her nephew—and she had never told him so.

He had a family who cast him off, imprisoned him, left him lonely and despised when he should have been loved and protected. The Mother had saved him from the Law, but he was subject to her as a slave.

"Harrower, are we in agreement?" the emperor was asking, insistent.

He nodded curtly, having no idea to what he'd agreed, and their meeting was done.

Night after night, awake under the dark cloud-cluttered sky as no army quarters could safely contain him, the Harrower imagined this father he had only

known as a mortal enemy – reluctant to kill his son and heir who wielded the the Aestus, but likewise too ashamed to claim him. He imagined this mother, Beloved Queen Espiraella. Had he been the cause of her death? Had she lived, could *she* have loved him?

His birth was an accident; that he survived to adulthood, a miracle. But the Mother who spared him had lied from the start. She talked of monstrous Harrowers from distant lands. She talked about royal bloodlines and her claim to the throne. She never once admitted they were one and the same.

Restless, the Harrower walked alone and lonely. He was unaccustomed to open spaces, but the song of the Grasslands was in his blood and he wanted to embrace it. He marveled at the vast dry plains, and as daylight was breaking caught a very rare glimpse of the twinkle of stars through the permanent haze—Sparks, he understood from overheard conversations. Lanterns of the lost, lighting the way for loved ones in the After.

The stories filled him with painful yearning. There would be no one to light his way at the End of Things. He longed for company – and more. All those parts of being human he could only see at a distance: touch, kindness, the hold of someone’s hand, the softness of cheek against cheek, the touch of lips on his lips, the sharing of Breath.

It was foolishness, he knew. The grass was dying and he wilted with it. Within a decade this land would be desert, but for now the Harrower walked through the meadow reverently, cautious of his contact with the driest brush.

He suddenly came upon an old man with worn horns reaping wild greens in a field at dawn. The man’s beard was white and his back was stooped. His hands were gnarled and when he swung his scythe,

there was little power in his arms. Instinctively, the Harrower let his eyes and nose flare, and smoke rose off his head. But the man was unimpressed.

The Harrower thought to snort a warning, but the tired and resigned look of the farmer as he gathered his greens gave him pause. The Grasslander kept one watchful eye on the Harrower and gave the impression of hurrying without actually doing so—the only protest within his means. The defiance surprised the Harrower with its quiet courage.

He cooled his temper. The smoke evaporated and his eyes resumed their shiny coal luster. He walked slowly in an arc around the man, who collected his tools and the basket of reaped stalks, and then slowly slipped between the tall grasses and vanished.

Just an old man. Trying to get on in life.

The Harrower felt an instinctual kinship—or at least a desire for such—with these people who looked like him. They were enemies, but also just families, children, elderly neighbors. What did the war have to do with them? What did they have to do with the Mother's complaint against her brother.

What threat did they pose?

V. THE WAR.

THE HARROWER MAKES A DECISION (AND IT'S AS FOOLISH AS ONE MIGHT EXPECT).

Today the armies were poised to cross the meadow, capture insurgents, kill those who refused to come peaceably, and, at the end of the day, their homes and fields and livelihood would be set ablaze to ensure that these stubborn people were pushed into exile.

Where they went, the Mother didn't care, so long as they were dispossessed and shattered in spirit. Those

who did not fall in battle would die more slowly and cruelly, stripped of their hope.

The Harrower knew too well what hopelessness felt like and had grown weary of being the cause of it.

An injustice had been done to the Mother once. That was incontrovertible. Her brother had stolen her crown. But the Harrower could not reconcile his place in this world between them. He saw no future and dwelled in self-loathing, determined that the sooner the war was over the sooner the suffering could end – for all of them. Then, perhaps, there *could* be peace. Even if for him it meant the peace of a long overdue death.

With a confused and burdened heart, he went to Emperor Laria with a radical proposal. The way she looked at him made him fear she would report him as mad to the Mother, but instead she considered his offer gravely. Once again she had a flinty eye that suggested she felt her *own* loyalty was being tried.

“Let me understand,” she said. “You propose we send no army. You’ll set fire to the plains, burn them out. And they’ll just...flee without a fight.”

“Some will fight,” he conceded. “And I shall deal with them.”

“Just you.”

“Just me,” he replied.

That displeased her most of all. His naïveté came across as conceited disregard. She actually laughed at him, though her underlying anger was readily apparent.

“You want to take on the whole of the Grasslands, is that it? You, who know nothing of strategy or combat. You think you’re going to set a few fires and end a war that has persisted for twenty years?”

“Just so!” he said, eagerly agreeing as if she had not

spoken sardonically.

"We were always winning this war before she brought you," Laria hissed at him. "We didn't need you then and we don't need you now. You're a poison to the Continent. These people might have submitted peacefully by now had it not been for their protest of *your* existence!"

She stated this boldly, as if a challenge. Though her jaw was lifted and her eyes were full of defiance, he could see turbulence in her emotions, feel the heat emanating from her cheeks.

"You too, you protest my existence?" he asked stiffly.

Of course she did. But she checked herself, realizing she had misspoken. "As we agreed before, you are not mine to command," she told him. "So go: do as you choose and this time we will follow *you* to scrape the field clean when it is done."

The Harrower left the meeting more deeply troubled than before. He thought the imperator would be glad of his plan. He thought they might save lives, end the conflict more quickly. But Laria was right: he understood nothing of the art of war—only how to destroy things with the brute power of the Aestus.

As he made his way to their objective, the doubts multiplied in his revolutions of thought. If this *was* a test, he was failing it.

Midway across the plain, he encountered two boys, no older than thirteen, traipsing about on a lark. Startled, the Harrower's eyes and nose burst with fire. Terrified, the boys bolted, yelling to raise an alarm.

The element of surprise lost, the Harrower froze in the field, uncertain what to do, a black cloud rising from between his horns. He glanced back to where he knew the Imperator's army was concealed leagues

behind, hoping for a waving standard to instruct him, but nothing stirred.

Taking a deep breath, he made the fateful decision to continue, but only a few strides forward, he was ambushed by Grassland insurgents answering the boys' cry.

He felt the pain of a bolt strike him in the thigh before he heard or saw anything. Letting out a roar of pain, he flung out his arm and a wall of fire leapt up in his defense.

The insurgents shouted to one another, relaying orders.

"Steady! Box him in!" cried one as the Harrower felt another bolt pass dangerously close to his head and several more struck the ground nearby.

They charged and he panicked. The fire that had separated them now engulfed them all: the Harrower, the insurgents, the whole field.

They began to scream and retreat. Until now, the Harrower had only ever followed the armies, purging everything after the battle. He had never set fire to people outside the Mother's executions. Killing was the job of the armies, it was what soldiers did.

These screams now shattered his psyche. His nostrils filled with the smell of burning skin and hair, and although within seconds the cries died out, the Harrower heard them still.

He grasped the end of the bolt that jutted out from the meat of his thigh. He didn't pull, just incinerated it where it was stuck. Laying a hand over the open wound, he cauterized the flesh by pure instinct. The pain was immense and his eyes were blurry with hot tears that sizzled into steam as they cascaded down his overheated cheeks.

The burning brush belched an immense plume of

thick smoke, and between the opaque scrim and waves of heat, he saw the small Grasslander army advancing again. He looked back for support once more, but knew already the Briar Legion held in reserve.

He said he would take care of the battle, and it was clear Emperor Laria intended to let him. She would render no aid unless he begged for it.

Whether it was pride or stupidity – or perhaps both, the Harrower would not ask for help. If he looked weak, then the Mother would look weak. And if Emperor Laria was looking for an excuse to shame and dispose of him, she would have it in his failure.

He veered on another path, casting forth such intense heat that everything within fifty feet curled to char instantly. Then, breathing slow and steady to maintain this power, he marched away from the approaching army toward the Grassland village, leaving smoldering ash in his wake.

The Grasslander soldiers in their crude-cobbled armor and homemade weapons pursued, flinging spears and shooting arrows that his protective calefaction incinerated at his back before they came even close to striking. He wouldn't be able to sustain the burn, but he hoped to break them of their will to fight before it came to that.

At the village, no one could get close enough to attack and again, projectiles were reduced to sparks as they arced at him: crossbow bolts, long arrows, and whole javelins crumbling to cinder mid-air, blowing away to nothing in the wave of crushing heat.

The people fled, but he gave them no quarter. As he marched down the road to the village center, everything to the left and right went up in a great conflagration.

In his ears, even the roar of the fire could not drown

the screams of those who could not escape. The few who made a stand were immolated the instant he closed the gap between them. The air was choked with smoke and the iron taste of boiled blood.

Over the din of collapsing structures and retreating villagers, he finally heard the imperator shouting the name he was known by, but surely not the one his mother hoped for him at birth.

He turned to see Laria on an enormous white charger that reared away from his destructive perimeter. Her army stood behind her and he was struck by their orderly magnificence.

“Stop at once!” she demanded. “Have you no Spark of humanity, monster? There are Laws in war!”

There had been no battle. Had there even been a skirmish, it was over before it began. The Harrower exhaled to try to calm himself, but the heat did not abate. A rage had been let loose in him and he couldn't reign it back. For a moment he feared he would burn like this forever and all the world would burn with him.

Imperator Laria dismounted and let her horse flee the inferno. He didn't see her find a pail spared by his path or how she filled it from an open cistern. When he turned from his distraction again to find her, he took a full hit of water right in his face.

“Enough!” she commanded, dashing the pail to the smoldering ground.

The Harrower collapsed to one knee, streaming with steam.

The screaming in his head stopped.

In a moment he would rise and walk away without speaking to the Imperator. After five long years he had only questions—and they were not for her. But in that instant, staring at the blackened ground beneath his

feet, he was too stunned to even look at her.

For all his power, he was still just a fearful child of the kitchen cinders, undone by the blunt reprimand of his betters.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I love to write, I love to draw. I love winter and tea, Italian ice, and talking animals who wear cravats. I own a modest collection of nickel weeklies and a *massive* collection of 19th century-themed paper dolls. I eat a lot of crackers and never say no to sushi. I miss owning a dog, but one's heart can only break so much. If anything here resonates with you too, welcome to this adventure.

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