

AFTERLANDS

BEFORETIMES

VOL. 1 }

MONTHLY
SERIES

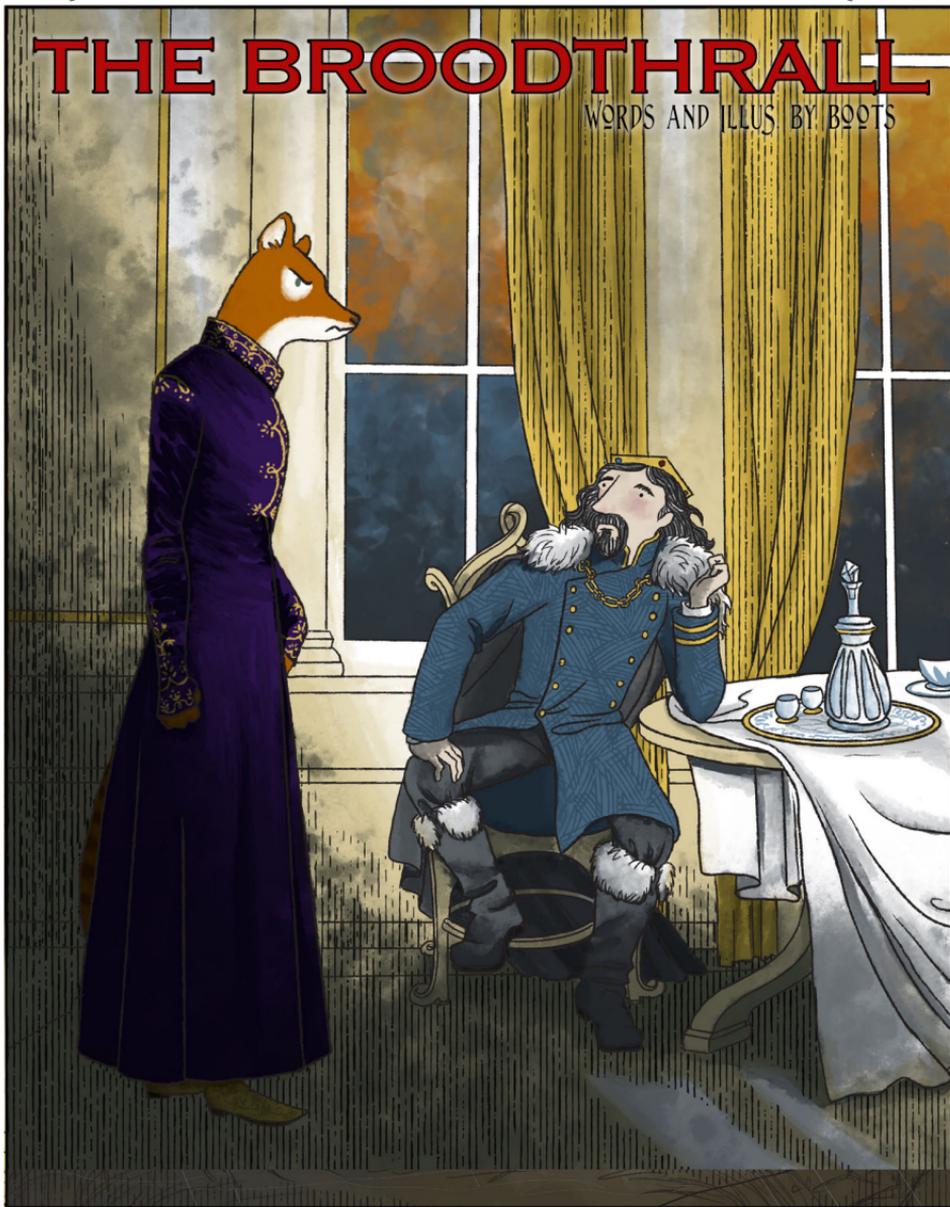
Afterlands stories of the Continent, from the time of the Mother's war against the Once King, before the Harrowing.

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{ No. 3 of 4

THE BROODTHRALL

WORDS AND ILLUS. BY BOOTS



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**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 BROODTHRALL

I. THE APPOINTMENT

IN WHICH NIX MEETS THE KING FOR THE FIRST TIME.

His father was dead and soon the King would probably put him to death for it.

There was no way to connect Nix to a murder—he was too clever for that—but the rumor was all through Court and back at him, because even if there was no way to prove he had done it, everyone knew he wanted to.

As he awaited an audience in the cold hallway of the Keep under the watchful eye of a guard in battle armor, Nix maintained his poise, even as his heart fluttered. He sat erect, eyes bright, spine straight as the guard's long spear, wits even sharper. But he was so tired.

He hadn't anticipated just how much the old man's death would take out of him. It was as if he had scaled a summit beyond even the highest mountain and now stood on the peak with nowhere to go and little air to breathe.

If the King ordered his execution, he wouldn't have cared—but for his children and the life he carried even now. It disgusted him to think of throwing himself on the King's mercy. But Nix accepted that his will was weak—he'd spent a lifetime subordinating himself to inferior people, even when he knew it was wrong.

The guard didn't look at him and he felt judged.

But he felt judged all the time regardless of whether someone's eyes were on him. And if there was no one to look, he judged himself, and was probably the most harsh of all.

But not today. Today he was free of the tyrannical man who had enslaved him to the King's twisted purpose. He was determined to rally his strength and courage. At long last he would have the ear of the King and if he was going to die, he would at least have his say.

When the doors opened, the bolt thumped loudly and Nix's heart leapt. His hands clenched tight enough that his long gilded fingernails drove into the soft flesh of his palms.

A porter emerged and looked down his nose, even as Nix rose from the bench to his full height. "The King will see you. Be brief," the porter ordered in a stuffy tone.

Whatever the King's reduced circumstances, everyone at Court maintained the courtesies. Everything remained formal and orderly in spite of the fact that the war had eroded the Kingdom and all of its riches around them.

Nix took a deep breath, forced his ears forward proudly, and, attempting to relax his fists, he entered the King's chamber, rehearsing in his head what he wanted to say. It felt like a tangle of demands and excuses—too emotional, too vulnerable. He had to be strong.

He decided to let the King prompt him.

The chamber was more austere than Nix expected, the drapery still showed evidence of the King's love for color and finery, but everything was faded, just like the dim sun that even now set on this sad King's reign.

He was, indeed, a sad King. Nix hadn't expected the long, drawn face, the hollowed eyes rimmed with red. The old noble looked as tired and played out as Nix felt.

Nix hovered near the door as it closed behind him. The King gazed mournfully out the window, disheveled, and seemingly unconscious of his company. He was focused on something out there. The view was of the courtyard and the road beyond, advantageous to spot anyone advancing on the Keep.

Nix cleared his throat. "Majesty," he said tightly, and then he bowed as was proper. He waited to be acknowledged, though cheated a look up after several moments passed. The King finally turned from the window and Nix dropped his gaze again.

"Nix," the King said, sounding surprised. "Yes, of course. Come. Come in."

Nix glanced furtively left and right. He was in, so he wasn't clear what the King expected. He also realized that although there were guards outside and maybe the porter, they were alone. His eyes darted to a table set nearby, scanning for a knife, a letter opener—anything he could use as a weapon—he'd been too cautious to attempt to bring his own. If this was his chance to kill the King, he'd take it.

But for his children and the life he was carrying.

He let the idea of murder fade even as he called himself a coward.

The King didn't seem to think anything unusual about the arrangement and remained at the open window, looking like a man who might want to throw himself out of it, to his death in the courtyard below. He was so weary, so longing, that

Nix's hard heart ached a little. He wanted to speak, but waited for the King to prompt him. The King sighed.

"Do all fathers fail their sons?" he asked at last.

Nix understood the question was rhetorical, though it could have been meant for him specifically. It didn't feel like a trap, but Nix assumed everything was.

Finally the King turned from the window, a hand dramatically at his temple as though he was suffering physical pain. "That's my son who approaches," he said, eyes misty with suffering. "Do you suppose he has come to kill me?" Again he drifted to the window.

The full meaning of what the King said eluded Nix. He wondered whether the question was meant to solicit some first-hand perspective on the point of patricide. His mind turned, trying to decide how to answer. He craned his neck slightly to see what the King was looking at outside the window, but other than the smell of drifting smoke, nothing struck him as unusual.

"I'm sorry," the King said, shoulders pulling back to straighten his slumped posture. "You came to me on...some other matter?"

"I came because you called, Sire," Nix said plainly. He decided the best course of action until he understood his circumstances was to continue to let the King do the talking.

"Of course you did," said the King. Then his mind finally seemed to clear and he gestured to a chair. "Please," he said.

Nix's very nature was to be contrary and even though he knew he should take the seat, his rebellious blood stirred. "I prefer to stand Sire," he

said.

The King recognized the defiance in him. But rather than reflecting back displeasure, he seemed amused. "You're not so much like your late father, are you Nix?"

It was a risk to answer, but the King's easy mood made Nix bold. "Nothing of the sort Sire," he said.

"Your father was useful," said the King. "Will you too be useful?"

"Have I not been used enough?" Nix's temper flared, but he regretted it, blinking back the heat. "Sire," he added afterwards, but with little deference.

The King's brow knit tight, fresh consternation further darkening his already dark features. Nix could see that he had provoked him and leapt fully into the breach, braving the consequences of speaking out. "Sire," he said, drawing himself up, "about my children, Sire: I demand to see them."

No one made demands of the King, but Nix could conjure no more appropriate word. To his surprise, the King scarcely seemed to register this at all. He just looked confused.

"Has something happened?" he asked.

Nix checked his own confusion. Was the King so ignorant? Was this a game? "Of course something has happened," Nix answered sharply. "You've kept them from me these fourteen years!"

But before the King could respond, the chamber door was flung open and the porter rushed in with two guards. Nix backed away from the King and threw a protective hand over his abdomen, in case they had come to arrest him.

"Majesty," the porter said, breathless, "the

Harrower is at the gate.”

“Let him in,” the King ordered softly. And when neither the porter nor the guards reacted, he threw up his hands vehemently. “Go, I said! Let him in at once! Bring him to the south drawing room if he will accept the courtesy.”

The porter looked scandalized. “Courtesy, Sire? To....”

“A prince of the land! Go now and treat him as such!” the King bellowed.

The porter made a deferential nod and excused himself. He and the guards had just scuttled out, when the agitated King began to follow.

“Majesty!” Nix called him when he was nearly out the door. The King turned abruptly, looking more pained than ever.

“Oh, Nix,” he said as if he’d forgotten Nix was even in the room. “I don’t understand what you’re saying, but I must meet with my advisors. Let us take this up another time.”

And just like that, the King was gone and Nix was left standing alone in the chamber wondering what exactly had just happened.

He went to the window to look down into the courtyard. He knew of the Harrower, of course, had heard lurid stories of his destructive power. As he followed the campaigns when his father forced him, like a common concubine, he had seen cities and countryside savaged by fire. But he had never actually seen the Harrower himself.

In the courtyard rose a clamor of excitement: guards rushed with spears, a garrison was called up at the ready. Then the great gate opened and through it marched a terrifying specter almost too black to see in the dark of night but for his glowing

red eyes, nostrils lined with fire, the glint of copper livery, and a plume of smoke rising between his horns.

Nix watched with ghoulish wonder. If the Harrower had come to kill the King, would Nix become the property of the Harrower as the King's rightful heir? Or would he become chattel of the Mother, spoils of the conquered land over which she would reign supreme?

II. THE PROPHECY

HOW NIX CAME TO BELONG TO THE KING.

*Daughter born of pouchfolk,
an end to the Harrower's line
shall bring.*

Such was the proclamation of a Mountain Oracle from whom the King sought answers after the death of his Beloved.

And Nix's father, a low-ranking noble, remembering he'd sired a pouched bastard with one of his kitchen maids, took Nix from his mother, held him by the tail, and forced his fingers into any place they would go. A physician would afterwards certify that despite Nix's outward male appearance, he did have two wombs.

Nix was four years old at the time—and would never see his mother again.

He remembered her only vaguely. She was a lullaby and a warm embrace, bright green eyes unlike his own, which were a deeper emerald shade. He remembered she was kind, but also sad.

His father said she was dead now. Sometimes Nix didn't want to believe it and told himself his

father would've said anything to tear any shred of hope from Nix's soul. Other times he believed it because the world was cruel and he was ashamed that she might ever know what had become of him.

All because he was what Forestlanders gingerly called pouchfolk—as complete a specimen of his people's original form as anyone had ever seen. He had the snout and ears and dorsal stripes to the tip of his tail, which his father often dragged him by—traits long-bred out of Forestlanders so that only red hair identified them as having once *been* pouchfolk.

Others used the slurs “throwback” or “pouch rat”. People threw chicken bones at him and laughed, as if he were a mangy street animal.

Outside of history and generational stories, no one looked like him. Had he been born at any other time, he would have been considered a mistake and discouraged from passing his footprint down a family line. But Nix's father was an obsequious toady who knew the King's superstitious temper, and though he had no interest in raising his bastard, Nix's two wombs were too valuable to ignore.

So Nix was raised by nannies and boarded at schools in the days when such things still operated. He was taught to loathe and suppress his heritage, to set his ears back and keep his tail tight against his leg, to never show his teeth.

He learned to be stoic, though bridled at every attempt to make him obedient. The desire to keep Nix's outward appearance unmarred meant his father's brutal discipline was well-concealed. But the company at the academies was no less vicious

and Nix honed his own viciousness in return. He leaned into the Oracle to prop himself up, bragging on a destiny he didn't yet fully understand. In his loneliness, he indulged his voracious appetite and aptitude for learning.

Nix's father told him from the start that Nix was expected to produce daughters in service to the Kingdom—it would be the saving of the Continent. At first, in his naïveté, Nix looked forward to escaping his father and becoming a King's consort.

But then the King took a Grasslander to wife and Nix grew up and grew wise to the fact that he was not intended to produce daughters *with* the King, but *for* the King. As a Broodthrall he'd be forced to couple with whatever sires were deemed appropriate.

Despite this bleak outlook, he redoubled his studies, determined to demonstrate he had more to offer than his fertility, and set his mind to excelling in the sciences and engineering—building and designing machines was a new but fast growing art. The war was in full throttle by then, the Mother having raised a considerable army, and a serious threat to the King's Mountain Citadel was imminent.

Nix was prepared to present himself at court as a master architect, someone who could support the war effort through the construction of new and devastating weapons. He developed schematics for improved catapults with an emphasis on incendiaries, which were strictly against the Law, but for which he argued so eloquently, he won approval to continue his research.

All of his plans of glory were in vain, however. There was no honor in being the subject of an

Oracle, only duty. It was a role that demanded everything and gave nothing.

One day his father came to collect him at the academy and he was told to never look back. Nix had grown in size over the years and in confidence through the praise of his instructors, but his father beat him with a rod to remind him of this place.

"The only job you have is to open your legs and shut your mouth!" he was told.

Then his father ordered Nix to put on a split-back gown with no underthings, and, fearing his rebellious temper, had him dosed with a numbing aphrodisiac. The drug was so profound Nix could recall little of the servants putting glimmer powder on his eyelids and perfume behind his ears, only that the way he was made up was strangely ceremonious.

He likewise recalled little of the dinner he attended where his father entertained important dignitaries and military men, though he remembered feeling decorative like the multi-layered tray of finely wedged fruit and rare hot house flowers that served as a table centerpiece.

When the dinner was over and he was to be passed around to all of the guests, his body was heavy and obeyed none of his commands. His mind was sluggish and fogged.

Afterwards, Nix attempted to kill himself. Twice.

Then he gave birth to his first daughter and he knew that so long as she lived he could never part willingly from the world.

He learned to feign indifference to being bred, treated it as mere obligation. Though he had a bed, he never let his sires use it, and insisted on being

mounted with his hands braced against a wall so that he would never bend—not for them—not for anyone.

But having his children taken away to be raised by strangers caused him a suffering that was far more difficult to mask.

“They’re not your children,” his father scolded when he refused to get out of bed after the birth of his first set of what would be many twins. “They belong to the King and don’t ever forget it. Now stop wallowing as if putting out babies took any effort; it’s what you were made for.”

He was not expected to follow, care about, or even understand the political climate of the Continent. He was expected to be obedient and fertile, to look attractive even though there was no dressing up his acid disposition.

“I’m not here to flatter or entertain you,” he said to the men who were sent by his father to his chamber. If they took offense or threatened violence, he reminded them that he *was* the property of the King and any harm that came to him would be answered for.

Nix intermittently plotted, looked for opportunities, made politically advantageous connections, and eventually found a reliable and discreet contact among the nurses who cared for his children in a hidden location, far away, which even he was not privy to.

He was glad to know that they were cared for, deemed valuable enough to be brought up well by the order of the King.

At least the daughters were.

Because it was a daughter described by the Oracle.

Nix wrote long letters to the confidant nurse and to his eldest daughter as she grew up, but neither could tell him what had become of his many sons.

After the birth of his last son, he refused to give the child up. His father was called in to deal with the matter decisively.

“There are only two ways to handle this,” his father said. “You give up that child and let them take it away or I will crush it underfoot right in your pouch!” Nix called his bluff, only he wasn’t bluffing.

And that was the breaking point: the moment he realized that his daughters were safe and well cared for, but his sons, unnecessary to the Oracle’s purpose, had been disposed. There had been more than a dozen.

Nix was devastated. It was time for his father to die.

Now the man was dead and Nix felt the hope of freedom—or at least the relief of lifting the man’s oppressive shadow from his existence. But it wasn’t enough. Nix was still a piece of property, owned by the King.

So when the King asked Nix if fathers failed their sons, he wanted to say yes, wanted to scream, to resurrect his own father just to kill him again and again to avenge every one of his own murdered sons. And even that would never be enough. There was more vengeance to be paid.

To the King, to begin with. For it was the aging regent’s idea to take seriously the foul Oracle that set this tragedy in motion. It was the King’s order by which Nix was used so grotesquely.

The King had also asked if Nix thought the Harrower had come to kill him. It was a possibility

and could swiftly put an end to the war, ensure the Mother's reign. It would be some justice, Nix thought, but not enough. Nothing could ever be enough.

III. THE HARROWER NIX MEETS THE SON OF THE KING.

The Harrower was escorted to the south drawing room and Nix made his way there. The hallway was choked with soldiers and guards of the Keep who had spilled in from the courtyard, as well as curious nobles and servants. Among them were the advisors the King had presumably left Nix to meet.

Nix slipped between them, ears turned to the conversation, unnoticed and invisible. Most regarded him as an embarrassing pet and a little more.

"Is he alone?" asked one dignitary. They stood at what they felt was a safe distance from the chamber doors. "With no entourage?"

"None at all," replied the other. "Arrived at the gate and demanded entry or he'd reduce the bars to smelt."

"I heard he was escorted by the King's men," argued another. "Brought willingly!"

"And the King?"

"He's gone to meditate before he'll meet with the monster. Seems ill-advised. We should strike the beast down while we can."

"Can he be struck? I've heard *such* things."

The Harrower was alone in the chamber and Nix saw an opportunity he couldn't miss. He went boldly to the door flanked by sentries.

"Let me pass," he said irritably—as if they

should've parted at the sight of him.

One of them looked Nix up and down. "Where do you think you're going?"

Nix touched his bare collarbone suggestively – a coy mannerism he learned to gain advantage where needed. It was subtle: refined but enticing.

"I'm going where the King has ordered me," he answered. "Were you not instructed that our guest be granted every courtesy?" The first part was a lie, but married to the truth of the second, it carried the authority Nix needed. The sentries stepped aside.

It was dangerous. Nix had no idea what to expect, but was willing to take the risk.

Inside the chamber, the Harrower stood close to the yawning fireplace. It was winter and the vaulted rooms were always cold even when a fire was lit. Even so, Nix immediately felt the temperature change once the doors closed behind him.

The Harrower's nostrils glowed like hot embers. Nix remained by the door at first, angling. The Harrower was large and imposing, but somehow not the stuff of nightmares he'd been made out to be.

In fact, Nix detected the sensitive look of the now long dead Once Queen Consort, who Nix had seen growing up in the shadow of the Court. He'd celebrated her death out of spite. That she died giving birth to this monster served the King right, Nix thought.

"If you came with the intent to do the King harm, you would not be patiently awaiting an audience," Nix asserted after a moment.

"Who are you?" the Harrower asked. His voice was deep, but soft. "Are you...the King's..."

advisor?"

Nix snorted. "If I were, would you have a message for his *Royal Majesty*?"

"You're making fun of me," the Harrower said darkly. Again his nostrils flared. Though his posture was neutral like a soldier at attention, he was clearly tense.

"My name is Nix." He relaxed his own body language as he crossed deeper into the room. "I'm not an advisor. I'm a slave."

The Harrower looked surprised. "The King keeps...slaves?"

"Is it not part of the propaganda your mistress Mother feeds you on?"

"I'm here to make up my own mind...on the sort of man he is," the Harrower said.

Nix raised his brows in surprise. "And if you find him a bad man, what will you do?"

"Is that what you think—that he's a bad man?" The question sounded so earnest, so probing. And the Harrower sounded so young. He couldn't be but barely out of adolescence by Nix's calculations.

"I'm a slave," Nix answered. "What do you think my opinion should be?"

He could see consternation in the Harrower's expression in spite of the shag of hair that hid most of this face. Again his nostrils glowed and Nix suspected the heat of it was involuntary, an anxiety rather than a threat, though it was easy to find it threatening.

"Were you sent by the King's sister?" Nix then asked.

"No," the Harrower said. "I'm here of my own will...so I may know the truth."

Nix saw the unraveled thread of the Harrower's

fealty laid bare. He took hold, but gently. Tug too hard and the seam could burst open wide.

"The truth is they're all monsters," Nix said softly, conspiratorial. "Are you?"

"I am," the Harrower said.

Again a flare. Now Nix knew it pained him to admit it. "The King is your father, yet he means to destroy you," he said, seizing the moment. "My sole purpose is to fulfill a prophecy that ends with your destruction. Do you know of this? The prophecy?"

The Harrower's eyes burned, his mouth pressed tight. He didn't want to answer, but he spoke. "If he means to destroy me, why now? Why not...when I was a child?"

"To make use of you?"

"The Mother has made use of me," he then said and his voice was tinged with distress. He seemed deeply confused.

"Yes she has," Nix murmured.

Nix sat, sensing that his hovering contributed to the Harrower's nervousness. The Harrower exhaled a cloud of smoke, which Nix interpreted as a good sign.

"You are powerful, Harrower," Nix then said cautiously, "but the Mother has power over you. That's power given away. Are you generous or just lacking imagination?"

"I've no desire to be King," the Harrower said, startled at the implication. "I am not wise enough to rule."

"Are *they*?"

He looked uncertain. He pivoted, almost as if he wanted to come to the table, but ultimately remained where he was by the fireplace.

"Are they?" Nix pressed. "Do you honestly think you could do a worse job than two people who've spent twenty years at war, destroying the people, the land...."

"That's...talking treason," the Harrower cut him off, growing agitated again.

"I told you already: I'm a slave. I owe no one my fealty," Nix answered more hotly than he intended. "They can all burn for all I care."

The Harrower regarded him warily.

"Harrower," Nix then said more calmly. "You need not desire to rule to change the future of our world. You have the power."

"To do what?" The Harrower seemed curious, willing.

"End the war."

The Harrower leaned forward, suddenly eager, breathless. "How?"

"Cut off the heads of the serpent," Nix said, likewise leaping in recklessly.

"Speak plain: I...don't know what that means," the Harrower replied.

"The snake with two heads: King and Mother. Kill them both and we can end the war, build a new world. Put life above death. Create rather than destroy. You don't need wisdom, Harrower, you only need the will and the right people to lead you."

The Harrower snorted another cloud of smoke, nostrils bright like flickering lamplight. "Kill my own father?" he asked, stunned. It was clear he'd heard nothing else.

"What father has he been to you? The man you do too much honor to call father, is plotting your death, building an army of *my* daughters against

you. Not one but one hundred if I could produce them fast enough."

The Harrower's voice staggered as though he'd been struck. "It's...."

"It's monstrous!" Nix finished the sentence for him. "But you can stop it. With a mere breath. If you have the Spark, you have the responsibility to set things right."

Nix dared not tarry. At any moment the King might arrive. Having now met him and taken his measure, Nix realized the monster that so terrorized the armies of *both* sides of the war was just a boy caught on the hook of his family's personal pettiness, a victim of ignorance and the treachery of others.

He almost felt sorry for the lumbering fool. But for now, he thought it best to leave the Harrower with his conflicted thoughts, confident that good damage had been done.

IV. THE ARRANGEMENT NIX MAKES DEMANDS OF THE KING.

To Nix's great disappointment, the Harrower did not kill the King. He left without incident on a wave of whispers and fresh rumors. The King spoke of the meeting to no one.

Nix was watchful, absorbing the speculation with skepticism. Many believed the Harrower had come to broker the terms of the King's surrender. It was an open secret that the army was played out and there was little Kingdom left to defend.

The armies were gathering at a place called Sandbottom Valley, which many believed would be the last stand. The King's forces would be

destroyed or would surrender to spare one final bloody battle. Many believed there would be no compromise and no end to it. Regardless of the outcome, the people would fight until every loyalist was dead.

Nix was maybe a week away—two at the most—from giving birth. No one knew he was pregnant because he never looked it and saw no advantage in making it known, though he was furiously nesting if anyone cared to take note. If the army was defeated, he'd be put to death for bearing the King's prophesied daughters, possibly tortured beforehand to reveal the whereabouts of his children. If they were found, they'd be killed as well.

If the army prevailed, it would only be a few short months before they parted him from this child too. And if it was a boy, it would perish at their hands. One way or another Nix had to get his children to freedom.

Three days later, Nix was summoned by the King once again.

He entered the chamber on edge, knowing this might be his last chance. If the Harrower had told him of their talk, how Nix had urged him to kill them all, the penalty for high treason was also death. They wouldn't spare him even for the sake of his unborn child.

The King sat at a well-appointed table near the warmth of the hearth. There was wine and plates with bread, butter, dried fruits, and nuts.

"Please sit," said the King with a casual gesture toward the chair opposite. He poured wine into a small cup as the custom went, now that wine was all but extinct from the world.

Nix slid into the chair but didn't take the offering—many unkind years had made him suspicious of kindness.

The King looked so haggard and wrung out that Nix wondered at the toll of the Harrower's visit. "Nix," he said, wrapping his fingers around his own cup and staring at the crimson liquid within. "I have made inquiries since last we spoke."

Then, as if to steel his courage for this next part, he sipped the wine. Swallowing, he made a face as if he found it bitter.

"I am the King," he said sorrowfully. "And what happens in my Kingdom, even to the least of my subjects, is my responsibility. That was the burden I accepted with the crown and the difference between myself and my sister who wants only power for herself."

He looked into Nix's eyes and Nix could see the shattered shadow of a once proud man. "You've been grievously wronged," the King then said. "And it's not enough for me to say I didn't know to what extent your father exploited you. It's no excuse that I understood that you consented, as if it were a reasonable sacrifice, even for one's King."

Nix's ears, laid-back at his most submissive, slowly turned upright as he listened to this unexpected acknowledgement of the rotten arrangement under which he had suffered his whole adult life.

The King sighed. "My sister wanted my son so that she could lie to him and raise him against me, tell him such things as to make me a villain. I was too naïve to believe such malice was possible, when all along the evidence of such capacity to abuse one's own child was right under my nose. Nix, I am

sorry –”

“What do you intend to do about it, Sire?” Nix asked abruptly. He didn’t want an apology. He was far beyond apologies. He wanted action. He wanted restitution.

“Where to begin?” The man before him sounded more like a plaintive dotard at wits’ end than a King.

“I want my freedom,” Nix demanded. “And freedom for my children. Transport to retrieve them from where they’re held. Wages and severance for fourteen years of service at the paygrade of...Chancellor. And compensation in gold for every one of my children who was *murdered* because of the stupidity of your belief in that *faexish* Oracle.”

The King absorbed this rage with a pained but passive countenance. “They’re safe,” he assured Nix. “I’m told they’re at a house called Crophaven and have been raised well.”

“Not by me,” Nix snapped. “Not by their mother. And only the daughters. Not one of the sons.”

“All that you ask will be done.” He made no argument against the demands, but added a stipulation. “But you cannot go to Crophaven in winter – the road up is impassible.”

“Do you think I care?” Nix shouted back.

The King raised a hand gently. “Please. Come with us on the campaign to Sandbottom Valley,” he offered. “My sister’s army descends on the Keep even now and we haven’t the force to defend it any longer – we must go. Afterward I can discharge the resources to take you to Crophaven. For now, wait. They’re safe and hidden. Best they remain so until the outcome of this battle is determined.”

Waiting until spring ensured the roads would be navigable and that Nix's newborn child could weather the difficult journey. But there was the uncertainty of the outcome at Sandbottom to consider.

"I want it in writing," Nix said. "A writ of freedom and immunity from any future obligation of service or persecution—for me and my children. You can do that much now."

"It will be done," said the King. "I will see the papers are drafted this very night."

But no papers were drafted.

The following morning, when Nix attempted to call on the King, he was met with the stern and lugubrious eye of the aged Chamberlain who was draped in jewels and hastily packing court records.

"The King has been called away," the Chamberlain said dismissively.

"Called where?" Nix demanded. Gone were all the courtesies; Nix was too close to freedom to bother playing at being a slave. It was all he could do to restrain himself, clenching his fists and driving his nails into his palms.

"What business is it of yours?" came the answer. "Who do you presume to be?"

"The King said he would leave me papers. Manumission for myself and my children. Has he left me nothing?"

"There are no papers for you."

Nix and the Chamberlain exchanged looks as if each suspected the other was lying.

"I must speak to the King. It's urgent," Nix then said.

The Chamberlain relented out of a desire to be rid of him so that he could resume plundering the

Court documents. "He's gone to attend the gathering armies at Sandbottom Valley," he said with irritation.

"Is the Keep to be evacuated? Will the armies engage? Does he mean to surrender?"

"*That* is privileged information. Not for your long ears, pouch rat."

"Then you are no further use in this world," Nix growled, leaping at the man's throat.

With lightning swiftness, he produced a stiletto from under his sleeve and severed the Chamberlain's jugular. As the man collapsed, choking on his own geyser of blood, his elaborate jeweled necklace came off in Nix's grip.

V. SANDBOTTOM VALLEY

NIX'S QUITE LITERAL HAND IN THE END OF ALL THINGS.

If the King had gone to Sandbottom, Nix would find him there. He would not rest until he had the location of Crophaven and the King's written assurances. He had precious moments before the Chamberlain's murder would be discovered and knew he had to flee.

At the gate, the guards stopped him.

"You cannot go without a pass," said the one who blocked his way.

Behind them, an alarm began to ring.

"Here's my pass!" Nix hissed and buried the still-bloody knife in his chest. As the guard staggered and dropped, Nix gathered the length of his garments, swung onto the man's horse, and bolted for the road. Another guard tried to call for assistance, but the garrison had been deployed

along with the King, and the rest of the Keep had been thrown into confusion.

Nix did not stop the horse from running for at least a mile down the road, but no one pursued him. Had it always been so easy to escape? Perhaps not—though he knew the guards had been the least of what had held him.

It was more than a day's ride to Sandbottom Valley and for the first time Nix really looked at the ragged and ravaged landscape left in the wake of the battling forces. Once, there had been a frontier rife with resources worth fighting for. Now, much of it was dead and dying, full of briars and poisoned water, the sky screened with smoke from fires that many believed would never burn out.

Within leagues of the valley, Nix came upon a picket. They were not the King's men in their twice-mended uniforms and cobbled munitions. He turned to escape, but his steed was foaming exhausted and the Mother's fresh horses could not be outmatched. He was quickly run down and surrounded. A soldier grabbed his horse's halter and it scarcely put up a fight, though Nix urged it to rear.

"You've no right to detain me!" Nix lashed out. Another sentry dragged him from the saddle and pushed him down onto the dirt road.

"Look what we've got here," he said, grinning with amusement.

"I'm a civilian," Nix spat back, nursing his aching knees which had struck rocks.

"Civilian—ha!" laughed the first sentry, hands on her hips. "You think we don't know who—and more importantly *what* you are—pouch rat? As if we haven't been searching for you for *years*."

“Call me that again and I will take your tongue with my bare hands,” Nix growled.

The Captain of the Guard appeared on his own horse to assess the situation. He looked at Nix dubiously.

“Sir, it’s the King’s Broodthrall,” the first sentry explained. “What should be done with it?”

Nix started to object, but was whacked in the back of the head with an open hand.

“The Mother’s orders are clear,” the Captain said with tired disgust.

“Kill it, you mean?” verified the sentry.

He reconsidered. “Take it to the Harrower,” he answered. “Let *him* deal with it.”

Even as he was dragged to his feet, Nix felt a strange relief at the Captain’s words, though they had been intended ominously. Perhaps he had a fighting chance to talk his way out of an execution given what he knew of the Harrower’s temperament.

He was escorted into the valley where all the Mother’s soldiers turned to stare. He straightened his spine, walked tall, and held his ears up so no one could reasonably say he was anything but courageous going to his death.

As word spread ahead of his march, conspiratorial glances and the tone of the crowd shifted with unease.

“If it’s who they say it is, then why take it to the Harrower? Is it not a risk?” said one enlisted man to his sergeant.

“Stand in the path of destiny and it will find a way around you,” came the grim reply.

Nix realized that the Mother’s army was ambivalent about the Harrower, maybe even

welcomed the possibility of removing him from the field. He couldn't help smirking at the ridiculous irony that they thought he was here to fulfill the prophecy.

At last he was brought to the Harrower, behind the standing army at the rear, where ordnance lay in wait.

"I expect you didn't think you would see me again, Harrower," Nix said.

The Harrower was more guarded now than he had been in the south chamber. His eyes cast around. No one stood close. Even the sentry who flung Nix into place had faded a safe distance back. Provided they speak in low tones, they could be candid.

"You spoke of the Oracle...when last we met. Are you here...to fulfill it?" the Harrower asked.

Nix scoffed. "I was not born of pouchfolk, nor am I anyone's daughter," he said.

"Are prophecies really taken at face value?" the Harrower asked. "You are *descended* from pouchfolk and you do have ...well...." He shuffled awkwardly.

"A womb?" Nix supplied with annoyance. "Two to be precise, so I suppose someone could call me daughter if they chose to, couldn't they?" Then he quirked one eyebrow with something like revelatory surprise. Maybe it was not so ridiculous after all.

The Harrower inhaled and Nix could feel the heat stirring around him. Otherwise he seemed calm and his eyes did not glow. It was bitter cold and it seemed to Nix he ought to have been steaming.

"If I have two wombs, does it make me twice the

threat?" Nix joked.

The Harrower seemed to consider the question seriously. For someone who understood the potential nuance of an Oracle, he appeared to have no sense of humor.

"What happens now?" Nix asked. "Do you have orders to kill me?"

"I am tired of orders," the Harrower answered.

"Good, so am I," Nix responded. He turned in the direction the Legions were facing to assess the situation. "What is the Mother's plan?" he asked.

"Same as it has always been," said the Harrower with displeasure.

Though he was tall, Nix climbed on an ordnance box to see over the heads of the soldiers in formation. The Mother's army filled more than half the valley—with more pouring in—while the King's army held ground equal to about a quarter. The King was hopelessly outmatched. Any call to fight would result in a slaughter.

The Mother stood at the head, splendidly decked in full regalia. Her crown and pauldrons bristled with briars, thorns standing sharp in cast copper. In contrast, even with a luxurious coat of plush winter fur, the King looked shabby: a tired old man full of sorrows, bearing a dull circlet inlaid with uncut jewels upon his crumpled brow.

"What does the King intend to do?" Nix then asked.

"My father? He's just a man. Who deeply feels he's wronged his people."

"Including, I expect, his son," Nix guessed. His eyes burned with emotion he didn't want to feel.

"He said as much," the Harrower admitted.

"Then he'll surrender?" Nix asked. "Leave us at

the mercy of an evil woman?"

"She was wronged too," came the soft response.

"Where does it end?" Nix wondered. "When does someone do *right*?"

From where they stood, they could see it play out. The Mother advanced alone, carrying a polished spear. The King met her in the middle, holding the pommel of his sword in both hands, the blade pointed to the hard frost that crusted the field.

Even as far back as they were, the dead silence of the armies and the natural acoustics of the valley basin made every crunching step audible to the gathered crowd.

Then an icy wind picked up and Nix pulled his velvet more tightly around himself. Steam wavered off of the Harrower. The Mother and the King exchanged words, but the gale carried them away so that no one could hear.

"It ends now. There can be peace," the Harrower said with great hope in the tremor of his voice. "We'll have peace...at last."

For a moment it was possible.

The King held out his hand and his sister moved to embrace him. They stood together between the hushed armies in one another's arms—until the King dropped hard to his knees and the Mother stepped back to reveal a rapier that extended from her slim pale hand to pierce the King's breast.

The Harrower staggered forward in disbelief.

With the last of his strength, the King thrust his own blade up, catching his sister by surprise, and running her through to the hilt.

She too crumpled to her knees. Brother and sister slumped against one another as the Spark

died in their eyes and they exhaled final Breath.

One of the Mother's imperators broke the shock and stillness that followed with a battle cry. A similar crescendo of voices echoed back from the opposition.

Nix stepped down from the ordnance box, his expression a mask of horror.

"No...no more," the Harrower whispered. The heat from his body intensified, fire erupting from his eyes and nose.

As the armies crushed forward, he threw out a hand, channeling all of his rage and grief and everything once held back.

Nix sprang forward on impulse. This couldn't be the end. There had to be a world for his children to inherit. Even a broken one was better than none at all. He seized the Harrower by the wrist and felt his flesh melt at the contact, but the pain was overtaken by the deafening blast that followed, that consumed everything on the field in a blinding flash that seemed like it would never end.

Then the ground trembled and cracked—and gave way to darkness beneath them.

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 of my own, 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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