

AFTERLANDS

BETWEENTIMES

VOL. I}

MONTHLY
SERIES

Afterlands stories of the Continent, from the time After the Harrowing, when our heroes have retired to the Shore.

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{No. 3 of 4}

HEARTH & HOME

WORDS AND ILLUS. BY BOOTS



"We can't help you," Laria told them emphatically.
"We're hungry ourselves. Move on while you have light."



Volume I

Afterlands: Betweentimes, Volume I, “Hearth & Home” is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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CONTENTS

[CONTENTS](#)

[HEARTH & HOME](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

*The People of the Mountain
and the Grasslands went to war.*

No one won.

HEARTH & HOME

There was a break in the Bad Rain for several days, but it circled back to blacken the Linden rain gauge once again. Juba helped Laria affix a tarpaulin awning on the back patio of Cliff House even as it started to come down. The awning was Hyrhyn's idea; she was tired of being indoors all the time due to the weather. She handed nails to Juba so that he could tack the edges down tight on the narrow overhang above the kitchen window.

Nix stood in the doorway and watched over the operation with a cup of tea in his hand, prepared to offer advice, which he knew already that Laria would not ask for.

From her perch on a stool, Laria spotted a group of two men and one woman approaching the house from the side path leading up from town. They carried canvas sacks, their clothing was well-worn and dirty, and judging by their dark hair they were Mountain people who had traveled a very long way. They had umbrellas made of tarred canvas, but looked soaked in spite of them.

"Can I help you?" Laria called to them.

Nix stepped out under the awning and Hyrhyn turned to get a better look. Juba stepped back into concealment offered by the side of the house. Hyrhyn grabbed hold to prevent him from going too far.

"A place to dry ourselves," the man at the head of the group called out.

"We've no room here, move on," Laria replied abruptly.

Hyrhyn started to object, but Juba squeezed her hand and she remained silent.

"We can work. Trade for shelter, a little food," said the other man. The three stopped on the path, clearly sensing Laria's hostility. The one who first spoke gestured to the house.

"It looks like you could have some work done," he suggested.

Laria put herself directly between them and the others. "Not necessary," she said. "And we have no food to share." She added afterwards, trying to soften her tone: "I'm sorry. Go back to town—the Drinkery will give you shelter."

"We don't need much. A bowl of broth? Just to get us to the next town over?"

Now Laria was certain they had been turned out of Whiptail. She didn't know why and didn't want to find out. "We can't help you," she told them more emphatically. "We're hungry ourselves. Move on while you have light."

The first man looked frustrated, bordering on angry, but the woman pulled his arm.

"Leave it," she said. "There's no charity here, and no *Courtesy*."

She spat the insult at Laria directly and Laria felt the full force of it. Though the trio slunk away without further argument, their canvas sloughing water down their backs, her pride was wounded.

"We should put a sign out: no solicitation," Nix sniffed.

"I feel bad for them," Hyrhyn said, because of course she would.

"What's the good of a sign?" Laria asked as she

climbed up the ladder again to finish the job as the rain began to pitter down harder. "No one can read anymore anyway."

"Write 'Harrower' on it," Nix then said. "Everyone knows that word well enough."

Juba's nose was hot, but he said nothing, still holding Hyrhyn's hand.

A few more nails and the final stint was in place.

"Will it meet your approval?" Laria inquired of the others in a sardonic tone.

"It suits just fine," Hyrhyn said, not picking up on Laria's tone—or at least not responding in a way that would acknowledge it. "So much better out here than all of us cramped into the tiny kitchen."

"Wouldn't be so cramped if some of us didn't take up so much room," Laria muttered. Juba winced because he knew she was referring to him and no matter how small he tried to make himself, there was no denying he took up more space than anyone else.

"I just want a nice space for all of us," Hyrhyn went on. "If this weather insists on staying, we need somewhere to gather that we're not all in each other's laps."

"I don't mind you in my lap," Juba offered quickly.

She smiled, blushing furiously. "I don't mind being in your lap either," she started.

"You've plenty of room in the boathouse, what're you talking about?" Laria barked at them. Her skin crawled at their gratuitous affection and she was determined to cut it off at first whiff.

"Aw, there's hardly room at all! Up here the kitchen is tiny. Down there the loft is tiny. Why is

“everything so tiny when there’s so much space?”

“You’d have more space if you cleaned it out,” Laria told Hyrhyn. “I told you everything in there could go to the rubbish pile.”

“Hryhyn still asks a great question,” Nix finally interjected. “Why *are* we cramming ourselves into such tiny spaces where there’s a whole house right behind us?”

Laria leaped down from the chair she was using to boost her sufficiently for the task. “We’re done here,” she snapped at all of them. Shoving past Nix, she went directly into the house and through the kitchen, to the deep interior that was both forbidden to them and conveniently beyond their reach.

Hyrhyn liked to be surrounded by things, buried under blankets and hemmed in on all sides as if she were in a deep, safe den.

Juba, on the other hand, needed space. Not only because he was so tall and broad, but he was also accustomed to spartan living. Clutter made him anxious; it all seemed so delicate and flammable and he still wasn’t sure he felt sufficiently in control of the Aestus to be safe in their shared space.

As a compromise, Hyrhyn agreed to clear out everything in the loft that didn’t belong to them. There were trunks, crates, and boxes of items that had been stored here as overflow from Cliff House. Most of it was odds and ends that were broken or well used, not quite ready to be discarded, but of questionable value: old boots, cracked dishes, rotting curtains that had gone out of style, and the like.

Laria had told Hyrhyn when she first moved

into the boathouse, that Hyrhyn could do with it as she pleased. Hyrhyn had explored some of it, appropriated bits here and there, but the stacks were dense and she hadn't seen the end of it.

Until now.

As she and Juba removed it box by box, to make the loft more comfortable, Hyrhyn made an interesting discovery. Packed away with some thin paper booklets and a pair of battered girls' slippers was a figurine made of fine glazed ceramic, with painted cheeks, delicate little hands and feet, and dressed in a tiny frock of patterned cloth.

Hyrhyn wiped the dust from its face and stared at the thing in wonder. She had never seen a fancy doll before and wasn't sure what to make of it.

"What is it?" she asked Juba, holding it up so that he could see it from the opposite side of the room where he was also working to move some crates.

He tilted his head. "I think it's a poppet," he said, though he wasn't entirely confident. "A child's toy."

Hyrhyn sat with it in her lap and traced its simple painted features. The skin tone and eyes suggested it belonged to someone in Laria's family – maybe even Laria herself.

"It's like a real little dress on a real little person," Hyrhyn said as she explored the details of the tiny lace on the tiny cuffs.

"One of the kitchen girls had one," Juba said. "She carried it everywhere. And even talked to it."

"I can't decide if that's wonderful or horrible," Hyrhyn replied. "How lonely it must be to have only this for company." She sounded very sad.

"May be," Juba answered. "Or...comforting."

Hyrhyn remembered then how lonely Juba had been. Maybe he would have liked a poppet of his own to talk to and hug when he was most afraid.

"I'll give it to Nix," Hyrhyn then suggested; Juba certainly didn't need it now. "Maybe he'll feel less lonely with it until he can find his children. What do you think?"

"I think you should ask Laria," he answered.

Hyrhyn felt she'd already been given sufficient permission, but agreed, so carried the poppet out to Laria, who was mucking stalls in the barn. She couldn't stop staring at its painted face, uncertain whether she should love it or find its lack of emotion horrifying. Either way, it unsettled her; she wanted to love it but couldn't understand the point of something that didn't love back—not only didn't, but couldn't.

"What have you got there?" Laria asked, seeing the thing in her hands.

Hyrhyn held it up. "It's a poppet. I came to ask if it belonged to you."

"What would I do with a poppet?" Laria asked. She looked at it and her expression was pinched with something like disgust. "No, that's not mine," she said. "Where did you find that old thing?"

"We were cleaning in the loft, Juba and I, and it was in a box. Did you never play with puppets, then?" Hyrhyn wondered. Perhaps the question was silly. One look from Laria was a clear enough answer without her even speaking a single word.

"Throw it out," Laria said, though her eyes lingered on the doll and her expression seemed to soften. "Never had any use for dolls and certainly have no use for them now."

"May I give it to Nix?"

"What would Nix want with it?"

Hyrhyn shrugged. "Seems a shame to just toss it. Maybe his girls could play with it—when we find them."

Laria looked like she had a lot on her mind on the subject of Nix's girls, but she wasn't about to share any of it. "Do whatever you like," she said instead, "but don't be surprised if he tells you to cast it into the rubbish."

Hyrhyn went into Cliff House looking for Nix, but didn't find him in the kitchen nor in the washroom, nor in the servants' quarters off the pantry where he slept.

It was far too early for him to have gone into town, and he was always so slow about that trek on his makeshift foot that she and Juba never failed to see him on his way.

Hyrhyn stood in the kitchen, perplexed, until she heard the creak of a floorboard overhead that told her someone was moving around in one of the rooms upstairs.

This was as far as Laria had ever permitted anyone into the house and only ever through the back kitchen door. None of them had ever seen any of the other rooms on the large property, though now Hyrhyn suspected Nix had decided it was time.

She didn't hesitate to cross out of the kitchen and into the forbidden hallway, but she did so slowly, eyes wide to all of the wallpapering and decorations and doorways she had never seen.

Through one pair of large open doors was a yawning room with an enormous table in the center and more chairs than Hyrhyn could count. Hanging over it was a fixture full of what looked at

her like glass cut so that it caught the light from what little could penetrate the levered shutters.

She wanted to explore more closely, but knew she should hurry. There was no telling when Laria would return from her chores in the barn. So she scuttled farther down the hall, noting only that there was so much more to see than her eyes could grasp, until she came to a long staircase at the front of the house, leading up into darkness.

Everything was dim and dusty. But Hyrhyn boldly went on, padding up the steps in her bare feet and enjoying the feel of threadbare carpet under her toes.

She kept alert for any movement and, perceiving the sound of shuffling, followed it to another doorway down another hall from the top of the stairs. The door was open and she peered inside carefully, even knowing what she would find.

Sure enough, Nix hunched over a large piece of furniture, rifling through stacks and stacks of papers. Hyrhyn had never seen so much paper in one place before. Shelves all around were filled with it: books the likes of which the Continent as a whole had long forgotten.

"What *is* all of this?" Hyrhyn asked aloud suddenly and without guarding her volume—startling Nix so that he gasped.

"Don't sneak up like that!" he snapped at her.
"Are you trying to stop my heart?"

He recovered quickly as she came into the room, still agog—less at the books now, which were not of much interest to her, and more at the many strange objects accompanying them on the shelves. There were mechanical devices, tools, curious rocks, carved boxes, and statuettes of all shapes and sizes.

The grate in a large, tiled fireplace had been cold for many years, but was a focal point of the room, and above the mantle was a large portrait in an oval frame so limed with dust that the figures within were difficult to make out.

"Do you suppose that's Laria's family?" Hyrhyn asked. She set the poppet on the desk Nix was currently plundering, and drew a chair close so she could climb on top of it.

Nix resumed his shuffling and had little interest in what Hyrhyn was about. "Yes, I suppose so," he said.

Once she was on the chair, Hyrhyn could reach the picture and wipe at the years of dust and decay. There was no scouring the filth completely clear, but with the top layer removed the figures were distinguishable

"Oh look!" Hyrhyn said, excited. "It *is* Laria's family! This must be a picture of when she was still a girl with her mother and father and... oh, Nix, look: there's someone else!"

Nix wasn't interested, but glanced up anyway. When he saw the picture for himself he stopped what he was doing and came to take a closer look. Laria was unmistakable, imperious even in her youth; the artist had captured something of her independence and defiance in the set of her eyes and chin. She resembled, it seemed, her mother. On the lap of this mother with a similarly piercing look was a child of two or three years, rosy-cheeked and placid.

"Laria has a sister," Hyrhyn said, smiling bright at the revelation.

"Perhaps *had*," Nix corrected. "Isn't her family all dead?"

"Just because she might be dead doesn't mean she stops being her sister," Hyrhyn then said. "Why do you suppose she's never mentioned her?"

"Because like everything else in this room, she is none of your business!" came a sudden angry voice from the doorway.

Nix and Hyrhyn turned. Hyrhyn eased down from the chair when she saw Laria standing, hands on her hips, looking like she might be about to flay them both alive.

Nix was not intimidated. "Just what is it that you're hiding from us in here?" he demanded.

"I have a right to my privacy!" Laria replied, entering the room more fully. "What makes you think it's okay to pry?"

"We didn't mean to," Hyrhyn began.

"I was looking for a map and you said you had none," Nix set in with equal fire. "But what diplomat doesn't have maps in his study? And so here we are: maps by the dozens!"

"Those are, as you said, my *father's* papers. I didn't lie! I have little knowledge of what's in this room because it's been closed up for many years and I would like for it to remain so."

Nix was not hearing any of it. Not Laria's anger nor the grief underlying it. He began gathering things from the desk with little concern for her wishes.

"Yes, well, your father is dead and I need these maps," he told her without apology.

Laria charged over and seized one end of the large parchment maps that Nix was collecting. But Nix refused to relinquish the other end.

"Let go!" Laria ordered.

"Did you know these maps mark the location of

the Tidelands? Far Western islands from which your father apparently came? There are others here with charted places I've never heard of!"

"The Afterlands?" Hyrhyn injected, her interest suddenly piqued.

"I said *let go!*" Laria shouted.

"Not until I've had time to look these over!" Nix replied, growing more desperate to hold on. "I may be able to find the location of Crophaven within them!"

Laria yanked. Nix yanked back. Other piles of paper were knocked over and cascaded to the floor in scattering sheaves. The poppet, which Hyrhyn had placed on the edge of the desk, was carried away in a small avalanche of envelopes, dropping over the side and striking her head on a chair leg on her way down. Hyrhyn shrieked as she attempted to catch her, as though she were a real, living thing. But she was too late.

Laria let go of the maps and Nix quickly drew them all up close to his chest so that she couldn't grab them again, but they were both looking down at Hyrhyn and the poor poppet.

Hyrhyn bent to retrieve it and now rose slowly, cradling its head. A significant piece of it had cracked off. It was a clean break through the forehead and down across the nose, separating one eye from the rest of its face.

"Oh dear," Hyrhyn lamented. "See what you've done? She's broken."

Laria was torn between her anger at Nix and her regret about the doll. "It was meant for the rubbish pile anyway," she tried to say dismissively. "It wouldn't have happened if you hadn't been where you don't belong. Just leave it."

Hyrhyn didn't argue. She placed the doll back on the desk as if laying it out for a funeral, and left looking as sullen as either of the other two had ever seen her. Then Laria turned to Nix expectantly.

"*May I borrow these maps?*" he asked, nose in the air, lip twitching. His politeness was as close to admitting his wrongness as he was capable. "If I can find Crophaven, I can...maybe...find my children." He even added: "please," though it was a statement rather than a question.

Laria sighed, her chest feeling tight. She was mad, but there was no arguing against his need. She waved him out, likewise conceding.

Nix carefully rearranged the large bundle he'd been clutching, so as to handle the charts with more care, and stepped out from behind the desk. He paused a moment to take one last look at the grimy family portrait through the swipe of Hyrhyn's hand: a household that one day would be forgotten, a family line on the verge of being extinguished.

"Were we really ever so young?" he asked, reflecting on his own imperiled line, without even a portrait to record that he had ever existed.

"In another lifetime," Laria answered. She sounded as bitter as he felt.

Then the two wondered in isolation about the same thing, felt the same powerlessness and pointlessness about it all.

Finally Nix broke the spell with a huff and went out the door.

Back at the boathouse. Hyrhyn climbed up on yet another chair before yet another fireplace mantle—this time to retrieve Juba's hunk of ominous black

“volcano glass” which enjoyed a place of honor there.

“Did you give the poppet to Nix?” Juba asked, coming in with a pail full of Odo patties, which they’d resorted to using for fuel.

“Nix and Laria broke it in a fight,” she answered simply without offering further explanation and expecting no further probing on her husband’s part. “Nix found a map in Laria’s father’s room. He says maybe it shows the location of the Afterlands.”

Juba inhaled a long breath the way he always did when something excited him.

“Do you think it’s real?” Hyrhyn asked.

“The map?”

Juba put down the pail and stood close. Even with the boost of the chair, Hyrhyn was shorter than him, but she didn’t have to tilt her head too far to meet his eyes.

“No...I mean—yes that too, but: the *place*. Laria thinks it’s just old stories. Or long destroyed”

“Yes, I think it’s real,” Juba answered without hesitating. “The nomad who gave me that rock...gave it to me for a reason. I think...it was to call me home.”

“Couldn’t this be home?”

He could see the distress in her expression, and it made him cast his eyes downward, but she reached up and gently lifted his chin again so that he had to face her question.

“You always say...everything means something,” he offered.

She nodded, reswelling with certainty. “It does. If the Afterlands is out there, we’ll find it.” Then she kissed him softly and he wrapped his arms

around her.

That night, Laria was awakened by a sound of splintering wood. She had always been a light sleeper and her impromptu retirement from the military life had not changed her hyper-alert habits. She swung her legs out of bed and was on her feet in an instant.

From the top of the dark stairway landing, she saw the open front door first, then the dark shadow of a figure in the foyer. She made sure the click of prepping her crossbow was loud and ominous. The intruder turned to look up into the stairwell at once.

"Get out if you value your life," Laria said sharply. Though there was very little light she could plainly see the figure was a man, a stranger with a beard, who now drew a long knife from under his tattered rain jacket.

"You won't make it up three steps before I put a bolt through your skull," Laria warned him.

"Give me something to eat!" the man demanded.

"There's nothing here for you. I won't say it again: get out."

He moved toward the stairs. Laria could sense his desperation and knew she was going to have to shoot him. Maybe twice. She aimed low, thinking to take him out by his thighs.

But before she could pull the trigger, a second dark blur appeared behind the man, swinging hard. The sickening sound of cast iron cracking the man's skull resonated up the stairs and the intruder fell over.

Nix sprawled on top of him, having lost his

balance in the momentum of the heavy swing. The pan he'd used as a weapon clattered noisily despite the carpet. He propped himself up on his arms, fingers splayed on either side of the man's head.

"Got him!" he announced with triumph.

Laria rushed down the steps and, after checking to make sure the man had no confederates outside, secured the door best she could now that the bolt was broken. She set her bow aside and quickly lit one of the lamps in the hall, bringing it close to see the intruder's face.

"Is he dead?" she asked, noticing the torrent of blood that soaked into the carpet. She put a hand under Nix's arm to help him back up.

"Not yet," Nix replied as he got back to his feet. Laria handed him his walking stick and both of them looked down on the mess.

"You pulverized his skull," Laria said flatly, though there was a tinge of disapproval.

"Didn't mean to," Nix admitted. "But good riddance either way."

"Have some respect. He's a person."

"An intruder. Just as likely to kill us in our sleep."

"He was just hungry."

"And now he's not."

Laria shouldn't have been surprised at how perfunctory Nix was about it. No one had ever respected his personhood so it made sense he had no such regard for others.

"I guess there's nothing to be done about it now," she sighed.

"He's not one of the malingerers from before, is?" Nix then asked, tilting his head to get a better look. The man's eyes were open, but he seemed to be

staring through them. His breath was ragged in his throat.

Laria looked more closely. "No he's not," she agreed. "Makes me doubt he'll be the last. This lousy weather has put the whole population on the move."

"Still don't want to stake signs on the path?" Nix challenged.

Laria sighed, irritated. "I wish you hadn't killed him."

"I said it was an accident. Besides, he's not dead...well...no, wait. I think he's dead."

They leaned in to listen for Breath.

"He's dead," Laria confirmed.

Nix prodded him just to be doubly sure. "Skin and bones. Maybe it's a mercy."

"Is that what you'll say when we've nothing to feed ourselves and end up the same?"

"I might. But we won't."

Laria found this unusually optimistic, but rather than challenge him, she accepted the hope, to keep as a comfort.

"We'll have to bury the body tonight," she then said.

"It is a shame—ruined what was probably a very fine carpet once," Nix replied. "The Harrower could incinerate him. That would make for easy cleanup."

Laria shook her head. "No. Best he's not involved. And we need to keep the fires low around here, keep the Harrower out of people's thoughts."

"Look at you, protecting him—can it be Imperator Laria has a heart?" Nix teased.

"For Hyrhyn's sake," Laria stressed. "She would

be upset to know this happened and I see no reason for her or anyone else to know."

"If you say so," he shrugged.

"We'll drag him and the carpet both out together and spare ourselves cleaning the floor," Laria then added pragmatically.

Nix's shoulders slumped at the thought of the manual labor ahead of them. "Well, I guess it's good fortune we've had all this rain—easier to dig a suitable hole."

As they both reached down to collect an end of the carpet they knocked heads. Laria jerked back with a hand to her brow.

"Ow!" she said with surprise.

Nix just bit his tongue, also nursing his temple. "Now *that* wouldn't have happened if I hadn't been where I don't belong," he said to her snottily.

Laria almost laughed.

Hyrhyn was the one who invented the idea of the "family meeting" and she was always the one who called them, so when Laria announced that one should take place before supper the following day, everyone was very surprised.

Even more surprising, Laria insisted that the meeting take place in the dining room of Cliff House because it was raining again and they may as well sit comfortably.

Nix and Hyrhyn had no problem bringing the tea and saucers through the once forbidden kitchen door and carrying them into the room with the long table and the many chairs. Juba was more reluctant and had to be coaxed by Hyrhyn. But being extra mindful of his horns clearing the doorways. They all eventually found themselves

seated with Laria at the head.

Laria had brought the poppet with her to the table and now plopped it down on top, facing them all, even if it was broken and had only one eye.

"Last night someone tried to break in," Laria addressed the others once they were settled. "They smashed the bolt on the front door. Fortunately Nix was there to chase the intruder off...."

She paused because she was uncomfortable lying, and as she looked at their faces she knew how much trust they put in her.

"Anyway, it got me thinking about...all of this," she went on. "Closing up the house and...just.... Well, if Nix ever obeyed anything I said and stayed where he was told to, we don't know what might have happened."

That much was true. Nix was surprised to hear her say it, but also...pleased.

"Oh Laria! That's scary!" Hyrhyn said, literally on the edge of her seat listening. "Well done Nixie."

He lounged back on his own chair feeling smug but also strangely embarrassed by the attention.

"This belonged to my sister," Laria then said, redirecting their attention to the poppet on the table. "She was eight when I left to join the Mother's army. She liked pretty dresses and pressing flowers from the garden. After Father died, she wrote and asked me to come home, but I was on the cusp of being made one of the Mother's youngest generals at the height of the war. Didn't want to jeopardize that."

"I told her I would not come. Told her to...find a husband if she thought she couldn't make it on her own. Some months later I received a reply. Only two lines: I have decided to live a consecrated life.

No longer are we sisters."

Laria paused, reflecting on the wound of those words.

"What does it mean? Consecrated?" Hyrhyn asked, certain based on Laria's solemnity that it must be bad.

"Did she join a cult?" Nix asked.

"Some order of the Spark," Laria said dismissively. "I don't even know which. Nor where she went, nor whether she lives. By the time I received the message I had several days leave and was in Thatch City so I came straight to the Shore to find the house abandoned. Elder Tauring said he'd intended to write and ask what to do with the property. I told him to board it up. If the war ever ended I'd return, even if only to dispose of it. I paid him in gold, which was less rare and of more value then, to ensure I'd see it standing. More than a decade later, here we are."

Everyone stared at her at as full attention as they had ever given, and now Laria was pretty sure she didn't want it.

"Anyway," she said with finality on that particular topic, "yes, my father was a foreign-born diplomat from a place called the Tidelands of which I know absolutely nothing about. I don't know where it is or how to get there, and perhaps those maps that Nix found in my office could point the way."

"There's lands beyond the Continent?" Juba asked, quick to grasp her meaning. "The Afterlands?"

"I don't know of any Afterlands," she answered, sounding somewhat irritated. "Presumably yes, of course. We all know the story: the Harrower's

ancestors came from that blighted place to live here in the promise of never again calling on the power of the Aestus. The Once King—”

Here she cut herself and made the correction that was so bitter to her tongue.

“—the Mother broke that promise and just as likely the Continent may perish for it. If there was an Afterlands, we also know it too was destroyed. But these other places; the Tidelands, maybe the homeland of the nomads....”

“The keepers of the silk trade,” Nix interrupted. When the others looked at him, he explained: “there’s a stranger in town by-the-by. Met him at the Drinkery. Undoubtedly from the Far West.”

“If you want to find these places,” Laria directed to Juba, “you’ll need a long-hauler sailing ship and the skill to steer her.”

“It can be done. The charts can be used for navigation. We just need the resources to build,” Nix told them. His mind was already turning to how it could be accomplished.

Hyrhyn took Juba’s hand and he kissed her knuckles with tiny nibbles.

“We’ll build the boat. We’ll figure it out,” she said. “And even if we don’t find the Afterlands, maybe we’ll find something else. Maybe something even better.”

“Your father may have other books that could prove useful,” Nix said, eager for access to the upstairs study again.

Laria pressed her lips. “You have leave to search his library,” she said.

“Excellent!” Nix said, rising.

But Hyrhyn reached over as if to catch him by the sleeve, though she couldn’t reach. “No wait,”

she said. Then she turned to Laria. "Thank you," she offered. "Thank you for letting us in."

"It's just bricks and memories," Laria answered, disinclined to accept gratitude.

"Oh it's more," Hyrhyn said. "The memories especially."

"I don't know why you should care about people you'll never know," Laria said.

"We'll know them through you," Hyrhyn said simply, grinning big.

Laria looked at the young woman, brow arched at her most skeptical.

"We all have sorrows," Hyrhyn said by way of explanation. "You have sorrows too. But you also have happy memories of this place, of your family, of the girl you were before the Mother and all that followed. You remember the garden when there were flowers and the plum trees when their fruit was sweet. You remember a sky that was blue and a life without war. There's comfort in that for all of us."

Then she rose and pulled Juba along with her.

"Let's go make something for supper," she said without losing a beat.

"Okay," Juba agreed, following.

They were out of the room before Nix turned to Laria again.

"And what will you do?" he asked.

"I guess I'll set the table," she said with resignation.

"In here?" he asked.

She allowed him a small smile.

"In here," she agreed. "Where we all belong."

~ * ~



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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