

**AFTERLANDS**

# BETWEEN TIMES

VOL. 2 } MONTHLY  
SERIES

Afterlands stories of the Continent, from the time After the  
Return, when our heroes are settling in.

OCTOBER  
2022

{ No. 1 of 1



"I was told one must be tried for a meal and a bed here.  
What sort of Courtesy is that if we are your guests?" Laria demanded.



**AFTERLANDS  
BETWEENTIMES**

**BY BOOTS**

Volume II

*Afterlands: Betweentimes*, Volume 2, “Crophaven” 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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*At the end of the war,  
everyone returned to their lands.*

*But not everyone found Home.*

## CROPHAVEN

Juba sat on a small outcrop of rocks, watching Hyrhyn dive for hallips, which could only be got below the shelf of the beach where the waters were too deep for his comfort. With the Bad Rains had come a warmer-than-usual season, and running hot as he did, Juba was uncomfortable most of the time, so he welcomed the strong breeze coming in off the water.

The weather wasn't the only thing that made him uncomfortable, though. There were many new people on the Shore, camping about Cliff House: Laria's former legionnaires. She and Nix had put them to work acquiring materials and setting the stage for building a ship, so they were busy enough with that not to bother, but he was wary of the proximity of strangers into what had become a tiny oasis for him and his Beloved.

Moments like this, he tried not to worry, watching Hyrhyn dive and resurface, each time seeming to take longer than the last. He tried not to allow the anxiety of that to disturb his peace. Hyrhyn was an excellent swimmer and she had been doing this for months.

He was so focused on her, he didn't notice Moth sidle up to him from the beach. It was Moth's fading red coat that caught his attention, and had him bolt to his feet. Moth saw that he had startled the Harrower, and stepped back and bowed, deeply at the waist, as he had done on the occasion

of their first meeting.

"Oh hello," Juba said, relaxing. He awkwardly bowed back because he didn't know what to do or how to behave, which made Moth bow even lower.

"No, please," Juba then said, holding out his hand. "Please don't."

Moth straightened and stared at him with his large dark eyes as if he had been summoned and was awaiting some kind of direction.

"I guess you're looking for Nix?" Juba asked, uncertain of what to say. "He's...not here. He and Laria went Inland...to look for his daughters. I...don't know if he...told you about that...." The longer he talked, the more uncomfortable Juba became.

Moth just tilted his head, inquiringly.

"I was...supposed to go," Juba went on. He didn't think Moth understood. He was a foreigner and Nix had said he was either mute or spoke in a way they couldn't comprehend. This actually made it easier for Juba to just say things. "Laria said it was too dangerous," he admitted with disappointment. "I'm not...I shouldn't show myself, she said. For all our sakes."

Moth hummed.

"I don't know when they'll be back," Juba then said, his eyes darting to the ocean as he hadn't seen Hyrhyn since Moth arrived. He paused a moment until she finally surfaced. His heart skipped with relief as he watched her spit a long stream of water like a fountain. She waved when she saw him. He wiggled his fingers back to her.

Moth pointed down the shore to where Laria's legionnaires were beginning to assemble for the day's work. The scaffolding for the ship's hull was

already constructed, like the overturned ribcage of some giant sea beast.

"Oh that," Juba said. "We're...building a ship. Don't know where we're going with it."

Again Moth hummed.

Hyrhyn climbed toward the beach, dragging a large net sack of hallips with her. Some of them were quite large and the whole was heavy.

"I have to help," Juba said to Moth by way of excusing himself. "Are you hungry? Do you want to have breakfast with us?"

Moth just waved his hand at the offer, bowed once more, and then strolled away, elbow bent elegantly, booted feet nimble in the sand.

Juba met Hyrhyn halfway up the beach.

"Was that Nix's friend?"

"Curious fellow," Juba said, taking the sagging net from Hyrhyn.

"Poor thing," Hyrhyn answered. "I suspect he's trapped here on the Shore since the shipwreck. Probably has no way home, though Nix says he's got pockets of gold."

"What's the good of gold if there's nothing to buy?" Juba asked. "It's shiny, but it can't get him back to wherever it was he came from."

"Could we?" Hyrhyn's expression brightened. "On the ship? Maybe he even knows how to sail."

"Maybe," Juba said thoughtfully.

"We're all looking for *something*," Hyrhyn added with excitement. "May as well look together."

The road beyond Thatch City was new territory for Laria. Though she had traveled much of the Continent, her focus had been the Northern theatre

of war. As a result, she recommended they head East and then work their way up to the Keep through the Forestlands to avoid the worst of the war-torn countryside—particularly the Grasslands where the Mother had ordered the Harrower’s most destructive efforts.

Her assumption that the lowlands on the approach to the Once King’s Stronghold had been less ravaged was unfortunately false. They were warned by several west-bound travelers that they were headed into Bad Lands and it was true: the forests were burning still and plumes of sickly brown smoke and ash drifted across the horizon like a noxious scrim. The air was thick with the taste of it and the further they went, the greater the heat intensified.

“Leaffall seems to have escaped the fate of much of the Once Forestlands,” Nix remarked, musing on the village where he had lost his putrid foot to the surgeon’s saw.

“Don’t say that. Don’t say ‘Once’ Forestlands. They’re not past,” Laria replied, though she didn’t sound very certain.

They were traveling by phaeton, Laria’s one remaining horse trudging along at a steady pace. The animal was so much bones that Laria had to grease its hide to keep the harness from cutting into its skin. She had serious concerns about it making this journey, but bringing Odo was not an option. He was needed back at the Shore to help haul and carry as the group gathered materials to build their ship.

The phaeton was only in slightly better order than the horse. Within a few miles the axle was warped and so the conveyance lurched as though it

had a limp. The wheels were good, however, and the seat comfortable otherwise. It was at least twice the speed of walking and Nix would have never been able to make the journey solely on his prosthetic foot; the path to Whiptail and back to the Cliff House was as much as he could manage comfortably in a day.

“Everything is past,” Nix said grimly in response to Laria’s remark.

When they left Whiptail, he had been high on the adrenaline of finally heading North to find Crophaven—and hopefully a lead on his missing daughters. But after an overnight camping outside of Thatch, his mood turned sour. It was the first he’d seen of a city since leaving the Once King’s stronghold the previous winter, and he was discouraged by the filth and the despair of the people—their hard, unfriendly faces, their poverty and misery, and everywhere the smell of questionable meat and the disturbing absence of Lostlings.

He had objected to leaving the Harrower behind, but now that he saw what Laria already knew of their fallen world, he understood better why Juba should not have come.

Juba didn’t understand—not fully, for he hadn’t seen the cities for himself either. He only knew he made a promise to Nix and was determined to keep it, regardless of the danger to himself.

But the danger was so much more. Yes, there were people who would likely wish him harm and do the party ill if given the opportunity, but for him to *see* this, to see what his work had brought down on the Continent: it would be too much for him to take.

Hyrhyn so guarded him from any sight or thought of their dying world and Laria thought it best to let her continue to do so: if the Harrower lost hope, what was to keep him from finishing the job? Laria believed the only solution was to send him away—as soon as possible and as far as could be managed. Then maybe the Continent could begin to heal.

Looking at the drift of smoke on the horizon growing closer by the moment, however, she wondered whether the land could ever be repaired. The forests continued to smolder, the Grasslands were mostly gone, and what, if anything, was left of the Mountain? As Mother's prime Imperator, Laria herself had sacked the stronghold while the armies were at Sandbottom. She knew they hadn't left much behind.

Laria drew a kerchief over her mouth and nose. Already the miasma was growing strong as the phaeton trundled toward the grade that would take them into the heart of the Forestlands.

Nix had been wearing a face covering almost since the start. They both agreed it was best that he too not be recognizable on the road. It was a hard disguise given literally no one else on the Continent looked like him. A hat covered his ears and a scarf covered his nose, but he could not have passed for a Grasslander with his piercing green eyes and red hair. Laria ordered him to stay settled back in the phaeton and be as inconspicuous as possible, and they avoided others as much they could.

"Don't mind my companion," she said to one couple on the road as they were leaving Thatch City. "He's got a fever and the doctor gave him

something to make him sleep.”

Nix was not asleep but pretended to be any time they crossed paths with anyone.

“It’s not plague, is it?” the woman asked with horror. “We’ve heard stories of plague in the city.”

“I don’t know anything about that,” Laria said.

“Horrible, that,” the man added. “Festering open sores and high fever, they say. Comes from the waste trenches they’ve dug on the perimeter for those dirty Grasslander refugees. They’re the ones that brought it.”

“We haven’t seen it,” Laria shrugged.

But the couple gave her a look like she must be a liar and then skittered away with nervous backward glances.

“There you have it,” Nix told her when they were on their way again. “Tell everyone I’ve got the plague and they’ll keep their distance.”

“Might not be the worst idea,” Laria agreed.

But the deeper they went into the Forestlands, the fewer people they encountered, and the less interested those individuals were to have any kind of interactions. Forestlanders were typically disinterested in others to begin with, but the film of ash that now blanketed their home and their constant battle to keep back the fires made them sullen and more aloof than usual. Passing a group of firefighters on the road, none stopped to inquire of the traveling couple, warn them of dangers ahead, or molest them in any way.

Laria felt like they were phantoms as they traversed these lands and hesitated even to stop and ask where best to overnight or find water. Forestlanders did not build cities on the main road, so finding one of their enclaves would have taken

them off the path and they weren't likely to be welcomed anywhere either, even if they knew Nix was one of them.

Finally they pulled slightly off the road to where they saw a sunken brook. The water was poison, but they had the luxury of sprue root with which to purify it, and Nix set up a kettle to boil while Laria made their tent. It was dusk but the overhang of smoke made it difficult to see the descent of the milky sun beyond all that haze.

"Another day out of the Forest and hopefully we'll have cleaner air to breathe," Laria said when she finally dropped herself down to sit with Nix by their campfire. In addition to the kettle, he had a pot on to boil mash and dried silverings—small fish the size of a finger, which Hyrhyn caught by the hundreds and Juba smoked on the patio to make them last for the journey.

Nix snorted. He kept a wet cloth nearby to hold over his nose now and then as the drifting ash bothered his sinuses. Laria was less inconvenienced as of yet, though she washed once they had water to do so, and wasn't surprised to find black smears on her handkerchief when she wiped her nose and mouth.

"I'm not a cook," Nix warned her as he served her a plate. "I do believe Juba seasoned the fish ahead of time, however."

"Do you have any idea of the kind of bland, awful food I've eaten in the Mother's army?" she muttered, digging in with a hunger she hadn't realized she'd been suffering on the road.

"Well I was accustomed to much better fare at Court. I supposed that sort of eating is past as well," he replied, stirring his own plate. He hadn't

served himself much. He found most of what they ate disgusting, so limited his own exposure to it.

"Do you think about it? About the world and all that's past and what is left for your children if you should find them?"

"I *will* find them," he corrected with some annoyance, "and yes of course, I can't help but wonder. Though it's not the worst on the Shore. There's a chance there."

"For now," she agreed darkly.

"It won't last either, you think?"

Laria chewed thoughtfully for a moment, grinding the salty fish between her teeth. They were *too* salty, and gritty to boot, though she wasn't sure there was anything Juba could have done to improve on them.

"Nothing does," she finally replied.

It was several more days before they began their approach to the Once King's former stronghold. The incline slowed them considerably. The horse staggered and struggled to draw the conveyance, so Nix rode and Laria walked, carrying a pack and leading the horse by the reins. Nix quibbled that he too could walk if they were going this slow a pace, but Laria insisted he stay in the phaeton.

"You have never let that wound heal properly," she argued, "and if you cripple yourself you'll be even more of a burden."

"Implying that I already *am*?" he snapped.

"Stop putting words into my mouth; you know I didn't mean it that way."

He huffed. She huffed. The more they struggled, the more they quarreled, but they were both good problem solvers and practical thinkers, and so

always found a way to get things done. It was only their feelings that were prone to chafe, and Nix much more so than Laria. She wasn't accustomed to caring about how people felt: war did not have room for the luxury of accommodating people's feelings.

And as much as Nix would have denied it, he was nothing but raw exposed nerves all the time. Laria knew already it was possible to be both fragile and strong, and Nix exemplified this. Even his pettiest complaints were often a distraction from the source of deeper pain.

As the stronghold came into view, built as it was in the cradle between two peaks, walls of stone rising up as though it were a natural extension of the mountains itself, Laria paused in the road to allow the horse to catch its breath. They were all breathing a little harder as the altitude took its toll, but Laria's heart was not just pounding from exertion. It had been less than a year since she had been up this road, chasing the Once King's few remaining foreguards back to the stronghold before the final pitched battle that took the Mother's forces over those formidable walls and gained them access to the Keep.

It hadn't been much of a battle, though her army had congratulated themselves for the prize. The Once King's army here was but a few detachments left to make a stand – the Once King himself and all his remaining ragged soldiers were at Sandbottom Valley, at the final encounter on the eve of The Harrowing that would see them all into the After.

"Why am I surprised to see it's still standing?" Nix wondered aloud.

"It would take more than fire to bring that castle

down," Laria replied.

"No bombardment? I'm almost disappointed."

She glanced back at him, flipping her hair out her eyes. "In *my* army?" she asked, amused. "Or that we were able to take it without destroying it?"

"The latter of course. But I suppose the Harrower was in the Valley."

"Have never seen the Harrower melt stone."

"It can be done, of course," Nix told her. "Everything has a melting point. But even the gate looks to be still intact. Not much of a battle."

"You know incendiaries are still outlawed," she reminded him.

"So long as they are not attached to the Harrower, you mean."

Laria pressed her mouth in a thin, disapproving line. She knew Nix thought the law against fire-based weapons was ridiculous, knew he had designed percussion cannons and ranged firearms when he was studying at the academy. But she didn't know how she felt about all of that. Long-range war with no face seemed likewise to have no honor.

Since leaving the treeline, the only smoke rising here was from campfires or chimneys within the Keep: pale drifting white lines ascended from beyond the stone walls. They had seen more travelers on the road and gotten both indifferent and judging looks from Mountain people along the way. Laria stood out with her tanned skin, and the more Nix retreated into the overhang of the phaeton and covered his face, the more suspicious others became of him.

Twice on their final ascent to the yawning portcullis of the Keep, they passed funeral

processions for which they had to make way on the narrow road. Small bands of mourners conveyed linen-wrapped corpses on simple biers, their eyes blackened with ash. One of the corpses appeared to be a child probably no older than ten. The mourners had haggard and pale faces, but there were no tears.

“Do you think it’s whatever plague we heard of from before?” Nix asked.

“Don’t know what to think,” Laria said. “We’ll find out once we’re within the walls.”

“Are we sure we want to go within?” Nix hedged. “We could make camp outside.”

“We’ll leave if we don’t like what we find,” she assured him. “I’d like something more substantial than scrub for the horse to eat, if it’s possible. For us as well. I can only eat so much salted fish before my eyeballs start to go dry.”

“Fair enough, I could use some other fare as well,” he agreed.

She knew he didn’t want to go into the Keep. This place had been like a prison to him and she appreciated that it must hold bad memories. But if Nix wasn’t going to make any stronger objection, she wanted to proceed—the better to glean more information. Not only about the alleged “plague” but about any stirrings of a seat of government. Until now she had been surprised to find no power rushing in to fill the vacuum left by the Once King and the Mother.

The gate was open and people came and went freely, though a man peeling root vegetables and feeding the peels to a scrawny-looking capra asked them where they hailed from.

“Thatch City,” Laria lied, though she wasn’t

quite sure why.

“What news?” the man asked, swiping a dirty sleeve under his nose.

“Was about to ask the same of you,” she replied, nimbly evading his inquiry.

“We don’t see people coming in much,” the man said, and he seemed harmless. “Bad Rain killed our gardens. More people have left than arrived, though we have good walls and no fire. Cursed be the names of all the Harrowers for that.” He spat to seal his curse.

“Cursed be,” Laria agreed. Perhaps too easily.

They passed into the courtyard which was packed tight with people who seemed largely idle. There were market stalls, but not much to market. A butcher was sharpening his knives for lack of meat to cleave and a laundress was offering to bleach people’s whites for what seemed an excessively modest coin or food in trade.

Men sat at tables gambling with dice and drinking cloudy liquor of dubious distillation. A sign on the fountain read: Bad Water and sported a simple drawing of a skull for people who couldn’t read.

The castle balconies, once brightly white-washed and gilded were hung with dirty carpets, strung animal bones, and other oddities. When Laria had taken the stronghold, they had not ransacked the place (her soldiers were honorable), though they had taken all the livestock and the stores of meal and beans. Now the place looked well-overrun. Even the furniture on which the gamblers sat was finely carved and upholstered in now-matted and filthy velvet, which must have

come from within the palace.

People streamed in and out of the palace itself: the doors wide open and an old woman with a begging bowl squatting on the stoop. Black handprints defaced the exterior walls in a long line: marks of remembrance for the dead. There appeared to be hundreds of them.

"I want to go inside," Laria told Nix.

"I'll keep the horse. Leave me your bow," Nix told her. He had no interest in visiting the place he had run from what seemed now ages ago.

Laria turned to object to being relieved of her weapon when a boy of about twelve approached them.

"Stable your horse?" he offered. "Twenty coin overnight; food and water included."

The boy had an earnest look. There was no mischief about him. Like so many of the others within the stronghold, he looked pale and underfed, but he was otherwise clean and had a decent pair of shoes.

"My Da is a stabler," he said, gesturing to the Once King's mews. "He was a stabler for the Court and knows the business well," he added. "No allegiances now, honest-to-Spark. Will look after your horse like it was his own."

"Will look after *eating* it?" Laria challenged him nonetheless.

"No ma'am or sir," the boy answered quick. "Come see for yourself how well it's kept—the stable. I mean. We've ten others. Much fitter than yours, pardon my saying. He looks like he could use a good meal of oat and hay."

"Real oat and hay?"

"Only the best!"

"Only the best that can be got up the mountain, I think," Laria mused. She liked the kid—he wasn't trying too hard to sell her because he was confident in what he had to offer.

"All right, I'll take a look. Twenty coin is mighty steep though."

"You get what you pay for," he assured her and bowed with his hand open as was the Courtesy for one leading the way of dignitaries. That especially impressed the former Emperor who hadn't seen much Courtesy since the end of the war.

The boy hadn't lied about how well-kept the stable was, nor the presence of other very fit-looking horses within. Laria had not seen such healthy, well-fed animals since the start of the war. Their coats were shiny, and they were properly shod.

"All right, twenty coin," Laria agreed after a brief look around. No one would eat her poor bony thing when there were plump steeds to be had. Still, she asked: "Are they watched through the night?"

"Of course, Sir," the boy replied, accepting the coin from her with his head bowed. "At all times."

"And where's best to spend the night?"

"Within," the boy gestured back to the palace. "The Briar Knights are hospitallers."

"Briar Knights?" she inquired, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes Sir, they are the Law of the Keep."

"Are they fair?" she asked.

"Yes Sir," the boy replied, but on this note she couldn't tell whether he was speaking from honesty or obedience. He didn't seem fearful, however, so that was a good sign.

Satisfied, Laria left the horse and phaeton in the boy's care, taking with her from the back only a traveling satchel with a handful of things to see them through the night. She noticed that people were starting to stare at Nix, so offered her arm to him as though he was an infirm old man.

"Best play into being lame," she suggested.

He didn't like that, but saw the sense of it, and accepted her arm as he bent to his cane, tucking his chin down to hide well beneath his hat.

They went to the palace door, flung wide open so that even dust and leaf debris was scattered well into the entry hall. The old woman with the begging bowl sat cross-legged, weaving straw into various totems of mostly animal shapes. She didn't look up when Nix and Laria came in, and they went past her into the grand entry where other people were loitering, talking business, seated at furniture that had never been there before. A prostitute entertained a man and woman drinking from a tall bottle on a couch better suited for a parlor, and two children were drawing with chalk on the floor. From upstairs came the muffled sound of chatter and music.

It was chaotic and there was extensive damage: torn carpets, gouges in the walls, broken sconces leading up the grand stairway. But the people seemed perfectly ordinary and everything was somehow more orderly than either of the visitors expected.

"Been well-plundered, no doubt," Laria mused.

"I barely recognize the place," Nix replied.

"There was such austerity here, back before...."

He didn't need to finish the sentence.

"Are you here for a meal or a room?" someone

called over from nearby the staircase.

Among assorted clutter Laria then noticed what appeared to be a rudimentary service station. A young man with clamps for hands sat on a high stool. He wore a blunted tall hat that had been fashionable in times before the war, and out of it jutted a card with an abbreviation written on it in a nice script. It stood for "conductor", which was the gentry assignment of doormen in Great Houses when such things were common.

"Both," Laria said and crossed over to his station, leaving Nix in the center of the hall where he tried not to look awkward standing alone and shielding his face.

"You'll need to be tried," answered the fellow. "We don't know you here."

"Tried how?" Laria asked.

He jerked a thumb toward the stairs. "Upstairs, on the right. Follow the sound of the music."

He clearly wasn't going to explain further and Laria considered leaving in search of other options, but she was also curious about the "Briar Knights" and curiosity got the best of her. "Stay here," he said back to Nix, making a move for the stairs.

"You'll have to *both* go up," the man interjected. "You'll both be tried."

"My companion is not able-bodied, as you can well see," Laria argued.

The conductor shrugged. "Neither am I, but that's the Rule of the House."

Nix huffed. But he could, these days, navigate the shale steps from Cliff House to the beach without the assistance of so much as a rail, so the ascent might be slow, but not impossible. Laria knew better than to offer her arm, but she took each

step with him at his pace.

At the top of the stairs they turned down the corridor toward where the music thrummed. It was a stringed instrument of some kind, accompanied by pipes. The tune was cheerful and melodic. It did not rollick in the way that tavern or bawdy house music inclined—less music to dance to and more for its own sake as entertainment, something also unseen outside of manors and courts.

They entered a drawing room with dim lights, atmospheric candelabras suffusing the space with a warm, soft glow. A fire burned steady in an enormous fireplace guarded by now-extinct marble stags that seemed to leap from the mantle. All of the furniture seemed to have been cut down to lay low on the floor, and a crowd of people were gathered on cushions around a feast of mostly ale, thick loaves of rustic bread, wheels of cheese, and, as a centerpiece, a whole roasted capra which had been portioned out across plates, though there was plenty left to be had.

“Enter, guests!” called the man at the head of the table. He and several others wore strange helms fashioned to look like Grasslander skulls, replete with thorned horns. The Briar Knights, Laria presumed.

She felt wary about crossing the threshold, but she did not want to betray her uncertainties so she strode confidently into the room. Nix skulked in the doorway.

“I was told one must be tried for a meal and a bed here. What sort of Courtesy is that if we are your guests?” Laria demanded.

The stranger laughed, but gently. “It’s not a judgment,” he said. “Come warm yourselves and

have a drink. You have traveled far to get here."

"What do you know about it?" she parried.

"We have eyes everywhere," he answered. "It's how we keep the Law."

Laria came closer. Everyone else around the table, men, women, and even several children, were staring at her or looking at Nix. There was nothing tense or worried in their features. They seemed only curious.

Laria noted that those among them who wore armor looked fit for battle. The armor shone in the firelight. Though it too was stamped with entwined briars, the metal was carbonized steel where she had expected copper. Thorns were the Mother's emblem.

"You are the Briar Knights?" she asked, just to be certain.

"We are," said the man. "Come, sit. Your companion too, unless they have the plague that they hide their face."

"Are you adherents to the Mother?" she pressed.

The man saw that she would not settle in until she was satisfied by their answers. "You came to be tried, but I see it is *we* who are on trial here," he chortled.

Others laughed. One woman spoke up. "We're adherents to Order," she said. "The Mother is dead. We welcome all to the feast, but if there's plague, you must take your meal outside."

"We're ally to all," another insisted, offering a glass.

"Then what is this trial?" Laria asked.

"We only like to know who shares our house," the man at the head of the table said. "My name is Allectius. I was a guard here before the Fall."

"Then you were here at the siege."

"I was."

"Then you know me," she said pointedly.

"I do," he answered simply.

Laria was taken aback. At first she didn't know how to respond. Her army had taken the stronghold by force. It had not been a difficult battle, but men were killed and maimed, prisoners were taken. The victory had been absolute. When they had left the place, they had left it in the hands of local civilians.

"You do and yet you welcome me here today?"

"The war is over," said another of the knights. This one was a veteran with an empty sleeve. "It's only hunger and the plague we fight now."

That wasn't very reassuring. Laria turned to Nix. "Come and show yourself," she said to him.

Nix didn't want to come in and show his face. He wanted to leave the place. Every detail of it brought back horrors from his past. He knew this room as he knew all the rooms in the palace. How many times had he sat like a decoration at the edge of a chair while his father entertained powerful men he wished to breed him with.

Nevertheless, he took a deep breath and drew up alongside her. He removed his hat and the scarf that concealed his face.

One of the children gasped aloud. A woman sitting next to the one-armed veteran stood and pointed. "I know you!" she said. "You killed the Once King's Chamberlain."

Laria tensed. Nix pivoted back a step.

"Slit his throat, he did," she went on describing with excitement to the others. "Just before The Harrowing, days before the siege."

Laria turned to look at Nix; she didn't know this was true but wasn't inclined to disbelieve it.

"You're...Nix," Allectius leaned back and smiled, amused. "You sent peregrines looking for your daughters."

"I don't want any trouble," he eyed them all defensively.

"No trouble," Allectius shrugged. "The Law grants you Amnesty and we obey the Law." He looked again at Laria. "The Law grants you *all* Amnesty."

Some of the others chuffed their agreement. One of them invited the two to join them again. "Sit, have supper!" he called.

"What's the cost of a plate?" Laria asked.

"No cost," Allectius said. "You have passed the trial."

Laria wasn't sure what to think of these strange people. They had passed the trial by proving to be enemies of the Once King and yet these knights upheld the Law he stood for. Had there been books, Amnesty would have been written into it before all wars. The Harrowers had decreed it from the time they had landed on the Continent: let there be no war, but should such calamity pass, let there always be Amnesty.

"It's very generous of you," Laria said.

"Sit, sit," said another woman. "The meat is warmed for you."

So they sat and were given plates piled with as much as they could eat, and served large tumblers of ale. They were hungry and tucked in, even Nix who was usually so particular about his meals.

"Have you found them then?" Allectius asked Nix directly.

The whole journey up they had been cagey about telling people where they were going and what they were doing. They had asked after young girls with red hair and perhaps the look of Lostlings, and had received discouragingly little information.

“Just following a lead,” he said, determined not to give any details.

“You would think it wouldn’t be so difficult: seventeen girls between the ages of four months and fourteen years.”

It made Nix uncomfortable that he knew so much. “We’ll find them,” he said casually, and resumed eating to avoid saying more.

“You’ll not be the only ones looking,” said the woman next to the one-sleeved veteran.

“Others have inquired?” Laria asked, though it sounded like a demand.

“They’re tied to a Prophecy aren’t they? There’s value in that.”

“It’s a lot of bunkum,” said one of the other men. “Wasn’t any of them children who ended the Harrower. Was himself at Sandbottom Valley. The way I heard it, The Harrowing took him right out. Detonated like an incendiary and killed everyone along with him.”

“Maybe. We hear rumors the Harrower is alive,” Allectius then said. He swished the last of his ale around his glass, then drank it down. “You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you, Emperor?”

“Whether he’s alive or dead makes no difference to me,” Laria answered.

“Doesn’t it?” he pressed.

“How so?”

He poured himself another drink without answering the question. Laria knew then he must know more than he let on.

"If the Harrower *is* alive, someone will want those children," said the woman. "Whether it's bunkum or not."

"They're not things to be passed around," Nix started in hotly.

Laria steadied him with a hand on his sleeve.

"They're just children," he added more cautiously. "And I intend to bring them home."

"Where is home?" Allectius asked.

"Very far," Laria interjected quickly. "And we are tired from the travel. We're happy to pay for a room."

"Your coin is no good here," Allectius then said. "And by that I mean, you may stay without charge. Perhaps a good night's rest will allow you to enjoy breakfast in a better frame of mind."

"Perhaps," Laria said, offering a strained smile.

"Dodinus, will you show them to the Blood Suite? Oh—don't mind the name. We only call it that because of a large painting of bloodfruit on one wall."

"Delicious," Nix said, sounding surly.

"It *was*—when we had it in the day. The court trees are all dead now on account of the Bad Rain. You must remember them."

Nix ignored the direct address. He wished to remember nothing.

The knight called Dodnius rose and waited for Laria and Nix to follow.

"Sleep well for the Spark of Day," Allectius said, toasting them with his glass.

"Good night to you," Laria replied. For a

moment they seemed locked in a competition as to who would turn their eyes first. Then Allectius laughed, raised his glass high, and took a deep drink.

“This way,” Dodinus said.

At last Laria turned and followed him out, Nix silent on her heels.

They lay awake in the Blood room, bathed in ambient light from the courtyard, staring at the large painting of the bloodfruit on a canvas equally cluttered with other typical still-life subjects: a bowl, a glass of wine, a bottle. One of the fruits was cut in half, spilling its juice onto the table linen, staining it deeply. In lamplight the colors had been bold jewel-like tones, but in the dark the ruby fruit was muted purple and the stain on the cloth looked black.

“We should go,” Laria said, though they had only been settled for less than a quarter of an hour.

Nix was bone-tired and didn’t want to move a muscle, but he knew she was right.

“Something very strange is going on here.”

“Maybe they don’t eat horses. Maybe they just eat people,” Nix suggested. They had bolted the door, but the balcony was open.

“The captain of the knights—or whatever they fancy themselves—he knew exactly who we were and I would wager he knows exactly where we’re going.”

“He may have responded to my peregrine himself if he’s the Lord of the Manor here.”

“I don’t sense any fear, so they’re all in on it—whatever *it* is,” Laria went on.

“Clever of you,” Nix then complimented her, “to

avoid giving anything away."

"They're looking for the Harrower; they've heard he lives."

"But not his whereabouts."

"You know how rumors spread," she answered. "Any little distortion can set the whole story into question. I did not expect it would have got this far so quickly. That ship must sail as soon as it can float."

"It'll be months," Nix said. "There's too much work still."

"Then we'll work around the clock," Laria said.

Nix sat up. "You still think they want to do him harm? What about Amnesty? They made quite a business of throwing that around."

"Too much business, I think," Laria also sat up. "To lull us into a sense of safety. For all we know they still plan to slit our throats if they can't get more information out of us."

Nix peeled back his side of the bedsheet. The bed was so comfortable and the heavy blanket on top of them was so warm, but he was suddenly alarmed.

"Information about the *children*," he said suddenly. "They're looking for them *too*."

"Maybe," Laria agreed. She pulled off the covers as well and got out of bed, immediately going for her boots. "There's no middle here; they either want to cause the Harrower harm and mean to use the children, or they want to restore the Harrower to power and mean to harm the children."

Nix had only one shoe to pull over his heel and he was in it before Laria stepped into her second boot. "Wait wait wait," he hissed, holding out a hand. "How do we know they don't know more

than they've let on? They only asked if we'd found the children, which doesn't preclude them from having already found them themselves."

It took a moment for that to sink in for Laria. "We have to get to Crophaven," she said, and pulled on her second boot.

"They see everything. We won't be able to sneak out."

"Let them question us then. We have a right to leave. We're not prisoners. And better we go now before we find ourselves as such."

Nix gathered his things, pulled on his jacket. "You're right," he said. "There's no middle ground. They're either with the Once King or they're with the Mother. They can say differently, but that strikes me as crazy at best, and more probably a lie."

They encountered no difficulty sneaking from their room, down the hall, and to the staircase, but even at this late hour there were still people in the entry hall, including the conductor, still at his post.

But Nix knew the stronghold, had resided here for years, walked its halls, knew its secrets. There were servant entrances and exits out of the palace and no way all of them could be guarded.

In the open air, they snuck along the shadows against the palace wall.

"Once we get the horse, there's no chance someone won't raise an alarm."

"Depends on who's in the stable," Nix said, unsheathing the stiletto he kept up his sleeve. "Quick work if it's just the boy."

Laria knocked his wrist down, horrified. "Not that!" she hissed at him.

At the mews they were met by an older man, possibly the boy's father. He was balding and jovial and in no way seemed a threat as he played a solitaire game of cards atop a stool that matched the one he sat upon.

"My horse and phaeton: quickly," Laria said to him.

"Absolutely," he said, and was about to launch into some colorful banter when Laria cut him off.

"We've a schedule to keep," she barked, leaving no room for niceties.

"I'll have to haul up the carriage," he explained.

"I'll go with you," she said, not willing to let him out of her sight for even a moment, even as her eyes skirted around the stables and the court outside, keen to observe whether they were being watched. "My partner will fetch the horse."

Nix resented being ordered, but did not object to getting out of there as fast as they could, so he immediately proceeded down the aisle to retrieve the horse and harness. The stableman looked momentarily uncomfortable at being addressed so roughly, but gestured for Laria to follow him to where the phaeton was parked. "We can bring it around front," he said. "Easier to hitch that way."

It took far too long, in Laria's estimation, to get the phaeton around and the horse in the harness, and though no one in the courtyard seemed to be particular about what they were doing, she knew word must have gotten back to the Briar Knights by now of their abrupt departure.

"No alarm seems to have been raised," Nix noted when Laria finally took the reins and started them for the portcullis. Then they both held their breath as they passed under the massive gate as if it

were a set of jaws ready to snap down on them. They were at least a mile from the Keep at a steady trot before Laria relaxed and let the horse slow to a march.

"We're not being followed that I can tell," Nix said. "Though it's too dark to see for sure."

Laria had been backwards glancing the whole time and agreed with his conclusions. "We've done nothing wrong," she said. "They've no cause to come for us."

"We rejected their hospitality. That might cause offense."

"Nonsense. We ate supper, we rested, and now we are on our way. We have a schedule to keep."

"And now we cannot stop here on the return," he reminded her.

"We're a day's ride from Crophaven," she shrugged it off. "When we return, we'll pass in the night if there is no other path."

Nix yawned, jaws wide, sharp teeth flashing in the moonlight. "Perhaps some new lead will take us in another direction," he said.

"Why don't you sleep," she told him. "We'll keep up this road for some miles, and rest after we clear that pass up ahead."

He squinted but could perceive no pass in the dark and was too exhausted to argue. He hunkered down, rested his cheek on her shoulder, and was softly snoring within minutes.

In the morning they woke on the side of the trail up the mountain just before the pass as Laria had said. Sleeping in the phaeton had not been comfortable but they were too tired to care. Laria had unhitched and unharnessed the horse, tying it off to the side

so it could also doze until dawn.

The higher they had gone up into the mountain, the colder it became and there was actual frost on the metal fittings of the phaeton when Laria stepped out to stretch. She had been too tired to even make a fire the night before and chastised herself for her foolishness. Not that there was much to make a fire with; the mountain was granite with very little vegetation—there wasn't much to burn and what little scrub grew was needed to feed the horse. She lit the lamp and used it to heat water for tea. That would at least get them started.

Nix crawled down soon after, stiff and shivering, wrapped tight in the blanket they had shared during the night, regretting the soft warm bed they had fled from.

"The road won't take the carriage," Laria told him. "We'll have to go with the horse on foot."

"The Once King did say the road was impassable in the winter. Now I understand why," Nix remarked, looking at the narrow trail through the pass. One side was a sheet of rock. The other was a plummet of at least a hundred feet. There was just enough room for the two of them to walk abreast if they had to; clearly single file would be preferred.

"You'll be okay to walk?" Laria asked. "I don't trust the horse to be sure-footed enough to carry you."

"I can walk," Nix said, crouching to sit before the meek glow of the open lamp flame over which the kettle hung. "It's no more than a few leagues at most? Should take us but a few hours."

"Multiplied by your lame foot," Laria said.

"I'm not *lame*," he said, irritated.

She didn't argue with him; he was splitting hairs with her words as always, and she had learned to ignore these minor provocations. Between her nature to fight and his nature to needle it took very little for them to find themselves quarreling.

By way of an apology, she gave him the first cup of tea.

"Better," he said after a slow long sip. "But we should get moving soon as it's done. The walk will help keep us warm."

"What about breakfast?" she asked.

"I'm fine to nibble on the way."

On this point they agreed and as soon as Laria finished her tea, they sorted their pack onto the horse.

"With luck it will be here when we return," Laria said of the phaeton. She didn't like the idea of abandoning it for now, but there really wasn't any choice.

"Haven't seen anyone passing this way." Nix replied. "No one should bother it unless those so-called knights are behind us and intend to cause mischief."

"If they were following, they would have come up on us by now. I think we're safe. Maybe we needn't have run – were we too rash?"

"Never distrust your instincts," Nix answered. That made her feel better.

The climb through the pass was brutal and took them far longer than expected. The horse did, indeed, stumble a lot and at one point refused to turn a corner around a jutting rock that obscured the road. Laria led the way, drawing the reluctant animal, and Nix brought up the rear, lagging as

much as fifty feet behind sometimes, and needing to rest more frequently than even *he* expected.

But at long last the path opened up again and wended its way into a slight valley where there were green stands of pine, a lake of still water, and, there, on the edge, a manor house two stories tall, neither particularly concealed nor ostentatious, the difficulty of the pass alone being sufficient to make it largely inaccessible.

As they approached, however, they could plainly see it had not been spared the ravages of the conflict. Like the Keep, it appeared to have been plundered: several windows were broken and boarded-over, and the metal gate which normally would have closed the final path to the door was off its hinges and cast aside on a lawn cluttered with refuse.

Laria and Nix stood at the gate and stared at the peeling paint and rotting wood of the casements. There was a white wisp of smoke slinking from one of the chimneys, so they did not assume the place was entirely abandoned.

Laria fetched her bow off the horse and tethered the animal in the yard on a long line so it could easily graze. She wasn't keen to leave it unattended, but they hadn't seen a single person this whole stretch of the journey.

The two mounted the stairs and Nix rapped on the door with a corroded iron knocker in the shape of two joined hands.

They waited a long time, and Nix was about to knock again when they heard footsteps creaking across the floorboard of the interior. Laria moved to the nearest window and peered inside. A man and a woman stood in the entry hall whispering

furiously and gesturing. Laria motioned for Nix to knock again, which he did. The couple looked startled and froze, staring at the door.

Laria tapped on the window glass. "Open the door," she called. "We just want to talk to you."

The man appeared to shoo the woman away, and once she was out of sight, he came to the front door and opened it, just wide enough to show his face.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Information," Laria said. "How many of you are in the house?"

The man looked warily at her bow and then back to her face. "Just myself and the wife," he answered. "We don't want any trouble."

"Who are you to this place?" Nix asked. "Is this not property of the King?"

"The Once King is dead," the man argued and seemed to stiffen at the challenge. "We live here now, and we mind our business and you should as well."

Nix pushed the door open on him and stepped across the threshold. "This *is* my business," he said without getting too hot about it. The man did not put up a fight. He backed away from the door with his hands up.

"We haven't got anything to steal. They cleaned the place out months ago. We've barely food to put on the table."

Laria followed inside as well and she shut the door against the chill. "We're not here to hurt you," she said, though her hand so close to the trigger of the bow did not engender any confidence in the man.

Looking around the front room, it appeared that

what he said was true: the house looked stripped. There was very little furniture, the walls were bare, and the place was dirty and in serious disrepair. Amidst debris on the floor were a torn and stained mattress, a broken picture frame, heaps of what looked like dirty curtains torn from their rods, empty bottles, and a large ashy scorch mark on the floor where it looked as though someone had made a fire more suitable to a campsite than a drawing room despite the fact that there was a hearth close by.

“Are you telling the truth that it’s just you and your wife here?”

“Spark’s honor,” said the man, affronted at being called a liar.

He looked older than her father, Laria thought, and not especially in the best of health: his eyes were red-ringed and watery, his nose and cheeks full of broken veins. He was paunchy and waddled a bit in his walk. Laria decided he wasn’t enough of a threat to lean on so hard and she slung the bow over her shoulder to make him less nervous.

“What happened to the past residents? Where are the house servants?”

“We don’t know anything about that,” the man claimed. “The house was empty when we got here.”

“So you just took it?” she asked.

“Others have come and gone,” he answered. “Some lunatics gone straight over the mountain, no doubt to their ends. Nobody comes here except to cross – or die trying.”

“What’s on the other side?” Laria asked.

“The Lost Cities of the Ancients,” Nix answered this time. “But as the old fellow says, more likely a

path to the After – scaling the mountains would be a death sentence even outside of winter.”

“True that,” the man agreed. “But people try it. Anything to get away from the Continent and its Bad Rain – and whatever’s coming next.”

That sense of foreboding, even as deep into the mountain as this, so cut off from the rest of the world, was pervasive in all of their interactions for the whole of the journey and it was beginning to unsettle Laria.

“You know nothing of the former residents then?”

“Nothing at all,” he claimed. “Though we knew it was the Once King’s house. It’s how we’ve done all right ‘til now: the larder still had stores when we arrived, tired off our feet from the climb.”

“Why did *you* come?” Nix then asked, still suspicious. “Were you too looking for the Lost Cities?”

“Just running from the war is all. We were at the Keep when the siege came. The road back was blocked by the Mother’s army. So we bolted in the only direction open to us.”

Nix was pacing around the room at this point, poking at things with his walking stick, growing impatient.

“We’ll have a look around then,” Laria said. “And won’t be bothered.” The man opened his mouth to object, but she cut him off, adamant. “Nor will we bother you if you leave us to our investigation.”

“Have it your own way then,” the man said, retreating back down the hall as Laria advanced on him toward the staircase. Then he slunk off to what was likely the kitchen where the stove or another

fireplace was heating the house.

"It's as was described in the letters," Nix told Laria when the man was gone. "There will be four or five rooms upstairs, one of which, a large one, was used as a dormitory."

"Were there no clues in these letters of their minds?" Laria asked as they started up. There was broken plaster from a cracked ceiling and other trash that made climbing the steps a hazard. Nix dragged his prosthetic foot up one step at a time, holding tight to the railing.

"Some," he told her. "But the last letter I got from my eldest was a month, maybe even as much as six weeks before the siege."

"The old man says they were gone before that." At the top of the stairs, Laria waited for him to catch up. "So which is true? They were moved at the time of The Harrowing or they were moved before the siege."

"Both could be true," Nix said after thinking about it for a second. "The siege happened after The Harrowing and a peregrine from Sandbottom could have traveled faster than your army."

"Unlikely," Laria disagreed. "The stronghold had been more or less abandoned. Why send a peregrine? And who would have sent it? There were only a few civilians on the ledge of the valley who saw The Harrowing. We were already advancing on the Keep while the armies were gathering. It was in the plan to take the Keep and defeat the Once King in a coordinated strike."

"I don't have an answer," Nix shrugged. "We're relying on strangers to tell us the truth. Any of the people who have passed information to us could be lying."

They both sighed and started down the hall. It didn't take them long to find the dormitory—or what was left of it.

The room was long and the walls lined with eight metal bed frames from which the mattresses had been stripped. Here, the ceiling was also in disrepair and large chunks had fallen, exposing the attic framing above. Melting snow from the winter had stained the walls and caused the wallpaper to buckle, peel, and curl.

At the far end of the room was a large window that provided a picturesque overlook of the lake. Set in front of it were bits of broken furniture: a smashed drawer, a broken chair, but no sign of the desk which had so obviously once been arranged in that space. There were bookshelves but they were empty. One crooked picture still hanging on the wall showed an image of a child herding capras with a crozier decorated with sunflowers.

Laria held back while Nix walked through the room, absorbing these details. He didn't touch anything but treated the space with the reverence of a tomb.

When at last he came to the window and the broken pieces of furniture there, he crouched down, leaning heavily on his cane for balance, and observed the pieces more closely.

"She hid my letters in a desk. Here," he said, though he wasn't directly addressing Laria, more muttering to himself. "She said she hid them to keep them safe. In a panel under one of the drawers."

"Them children are gone," said a sudden cranky voice.

Both Nix and Laria whipped around to see the

old woman standing pensively in the doorway.

"Why don't you leave us be?" she asked. She was nowhere near as affable at the man they had encountered downstairs—her anger was obvious; she'd come with all her courage intact. "We've nothing here for you."

"What do you know about the children?" Laria asked.

Nix rose back to his full height, though he remained at the far side of the room to avoid presenting any further intimidation.

"What...the children? Nothing! I don't know nothing. Just they ain't here no more. They've been gone a long time."

"You know something," Nix called her out. "Why are you lying?"

The woman stumbled over a few false starts, and then, shuddering, tried to make her escape. Laria pounced and caught her under one arm.

"Not so fast," she said, pulling her back into the room. "Tell us what you know. Tell us and we'll leave. All we want is information."

The woman's eyes ratcheted from Laria to Nix and back again. She wrung her hands and pulled on the straps of her apron. "You won't find them. That's what I know. They're gone. Gone for good."

"Gone for good how?" Nix demanded, finally limping through the debris to confront her. "Confound it, woman, just say what you know!"

The woman made a sound as if she was being strangled.

"Where is the desk that sat there?" Nix then asked.

"Desk?" she sputtered. "We...burned the furniture—for firewood."

"You burned it?" Nix asked.

She nodded. "We burned it all."

"Someone told you to do that?" he asked.

"No, it was winter. It was so bitterly cold this winter. So, so cold."

"What else?" Laria asked. "What happened to the children? You saw them?"

"I didn't!" she protested, backed against the wall. "I..." She pointed to the window. "The lake," she said.

"What about it?" Nix asked.

"That's where they went. Into the lake."

Nix's brow knit tight. He leaned in close. "Explain," he said, almost growling.

"When the house got word of the Fall of the Keep, they marched those children out to the lake. They drowned them all there. They're gone."

Nix shouldered past Laria out of the room, heading as fast as he could stalk toward the staircase. Laria called after him, but she knew exactly where he was headed.

"Where are the minders?" she turned and asked the woman. "Did you see it happen?"

"I didn't see it. I was told," the woman said. "There was a maid here and she said it before fleeing the house. She was in a terror to get out. Told us the place was cursed for what they'd done. I don't know anything about her or where she went. I swear! That's all I know!"

Laria believed her and left the room. There was nothing more to be said.

Nix paced back and forth on the bank of the lake before settling in to stare into the clear shallows on a long, pebbled grade that dropped off suddenly

into darkness beyond the first fifteen feet. The wind was bitter here and Nix's nose was well-reddened, though Laria was tempted to believe it wasn't just the temperature. Bushes flanking the bank were speckled with frost and a crust of ice ringed the shallowest part of the water.



Nix poked the ice with his walking stick. It took a second much sturdier stab to crack it. A chunk of frozen water, thick as a cutting board, slunk and bobbed before drifting back to knock against the place where it had been separated.

Laria waited a moment, standing on the weedy grass, to allow Nix this space to process this new information. Like the rest of the property, there was debris scattered all over the back yard and dragged into the lake including some boxes of random household goods and linens. Among them Laria saw something that looked like it might have been a dress with a pale blue ribbon tied in a wilted bow, but she had no desire to call attention to it.

“Nix,” she said softly at last.

He didn’t turn. He remained staring at the water as though he was deciding whether to throw himself into it. Or perhaps he was staring at the mountain that lay beyond. Were it not for the tragedy of it, the view would have been beautiful and breathtaking.

“They’re not drowned,” Nix finally said and there was nothing but certainty in his tone.

“Nix,” Laria said again, this time more pleading. She was *not* keen to argue the point. In her mind, the evidence seemed pretty strongly against them having survived.

“They’re *not* drowned,” Nix repeated, glaring back at her. His look dared her to speak, but she held her tongue. He climbed the bank with some degree of struggle, and marched by her. “We’re wasting our time here. Let’s go,” he said.

Laria followed silently, glancing back at the house as they came around the side. She checked the windows to see if they were being watched, but saw no shadows in the ones that weren’t boarded over.

They collected the horse, and as they went through the gate, Laria wondered if Nix intended to suggest they head North or East, if he thought

beyond all reason that the children had been somehow spirited away to the Lost Cities of the Ancients. As if they could survive such a journey that grown adults routinely failed.

But Nix didn't say anything. He didn't speak a single word. And there was only one road out of the valley, heading back to the stronghold. He said nothing the long trudge back to the pass, nor when Laria suggested they camp for a rest before attempting the crossing again.

"We should pass the Keep at night, or early before dawn," she explained. "Less worry of the Briar Knights catching sight of us. We'll go south on the other side of the pass if we can—to avoid being seen."

She took his silence for consent and allowed him to wallow in his inscrutable thoughts—were they grief? He didn't seem to be grieving, just pensive. She turned it all over in her thoughts as she set up their small propped tent and he collected kindling for a fire. They got everything ready in complete silence and Laria ate dinner alone as he refused and went into the tent to get under the cover. They would be cold tonight but for their own body heat. Laria hoped the contact might loosen his tongue.

When she had tidied away the dinner supplies and crawled in to lay beside him, she saw that he wasn't sleeping. He was just curled tightly into himself the way he usually did when he was chilled at night. Something about his dead stare told her his mind was searching to solve an unsolvable problem.

She settled in and wrapped herself around him as best she could, hoping to offer him comfort, but his shoulders tensed in a way that warned her he

was not interested in being touched. She'd learned his body language the hard way since he couldn't see to find his voice when at his most agitated or vulnerable.

She propped herself on one hand. "Nix, I know —"

"What do you know?" he snapped at her the instant the words came off her tongue, as though he had only been waiting for her to speak so that he could strike out.

She weathered this with patience, given the circumstances.

"I'm asking," he prompted, turning to her and sitting up abruptly. "What do *you* know, Laria, that you want to tell *me*?"

"You don't have to talk to me like that," she said evenly. She wanted to avoid a fight at all costs, but he was clearly spoiling for one. "As if I know nothing about grief."

"You have no children! You have *no* idea!" he answered back. "Rather than trying to placate me with mewling condescension, you could have just offered to suck me off."

Laria did not dignify *that* with a response other than to give him a look that was so withering he actually recoiled from her.

"Sorry," he said bluntly, though he still sounded more angry than apologetic.

She tilted her head at him, expectant.

He exhaled, long and loud through his nose as if letting off the pressure. "That was unforgivably crass," he admitted. "I wouldn't blame you if you hit me."

"I'm not going to hit you," she answered, letting out a heavy breath of her own.

"I deserve it."

"Nix, stop. Just: stop."

Outside, the last of the sunlight died, but with ambient firelight warming the walls of the lean-to, there remained plenty of light to see, and Laria observed the storm of emotions playing out in the glisten of Nix's angry eyes.

"I *don't* know, you're right," Laria said after the air between them felt like it had sufficiently cooled. "And you don't tell me. This whole trip, your single-mindedness about finding your daughters: you're like one of your machines set in motion—plowing a path ahead without any thought to anything around you."

"You mean *you*?" he asked. He was still defensive, but his tone was softer.

"I mean *anything*," Laria said. She knew she was no better at this. Feelings were wiggly and soft like grubs, better left in the ground unseen. "Nix, I don't blame you at all for not wanting to give in, but—"

"My children are *not* dead," he said firmly, as immovable in every way as Laria had just suggested.

She sighed, but very softly, knowing her sense of defeat would just set him off again.

"First of all," he then continued, "They said they burned everything for firewood, but they left the chair—easiest of all to chuck into a fireplace. And so much other busted furniture strewn about. Second: she didn't *see* it happen. She was told as much by a maid who wanted to put fear into her and likely succeeded. Third, there was ice on the lake. Midsummer it's still cold enough here to hold ice on *that* lake. It would have been frozen in winter

during the siege, thick enough to walk on and probably unbreakable.”

“But possibly —,” Laria began again.

“Do you *want* them to be dead?” Nix then chafed.

“No!” Laria finally lost her temper and shouted at him. “I want *you* to consider the very very real possibility that you *will not find them*. If they aren’t dead, and no, of course I do not wish it were so, but if they *aren’t* dead then they are most certainly gone from here. From anywhere close. You heard the Knights. They would be considered threats or prizes to anyone who has them.”

“All the more reason to find them!”

“Nix: you have to consider whether to move on. You’re not living if it’s only to search the Continent to your death.”

“I’m not living without them,” he replied.

She reached for his hand, carefully, and clasped it when he didn’t pull away. “Wounds leave scars, but they *do* heal,” she said. “You survived The Harrowing.”

“To come back — to find — .”

“Maybe yourself?” she offered gently.

He looked dazed. He had listened. He had heard her words. But the effects of her reasoning were only temporary.

“They’re *not* dead and we *will* be reunited,” he repeated, more determined than ever to hold this position. “Juba will help me if you won’t.”

Laria’s heart broke a little. He would get them both killed.

“I’m not giving up,” she told him. Though she meant him, not the search. She allowed he would interpret it whatever way suited him.

"We'll finish the ship," he said, encouraged as she expected. "We'll go up and down the coast. We'll stop at every town, every lighthouse. Ask everyone we see."

"All right," Laria said. "For now, let's sleep. We've a long way back to the Shore."

They had just curled up, less tense, and more willing to share warmth and comfort, when Nix's ears twitched at the sound of the horse chuffing and its hooves shifting nervously. Beyond that, he could hear approaching feet. Laria was the first to sit bolt-upright, however, and she cursed as her arms splayed, searching through the length of the lean-to.

"My bow," she hissed. "I left it with the supplies. So foolish!"

But there was no time for further recriminations because shadows had fallen on the canvas of the lean-to and the rap of a stick against the closing flap got Nix up and alarmed as well. He sat up, blade in hand, for he always kept it in his sleeve, even when sleeping.

"Come on out of there!" said a stern male voice. "On the double!"

"Put it away," Laria whispered to Nix about the knife. "Let's not get killed in an instant."

Nix narrowed his eyes at her skeptically, but did as she instructed.

Emerging from the tent, Laria expected to find them surrounded by Briar Knights, as she suspected they had been tracked. She was cursing herself for not preparing for the possibility of an ambush when she was surprised instead to find the trembling old man from Crophaven and his callow

disdainful wife.

Only neither was trembling or callow now. They couple stood straight and strong, no hint of their former hunched weakness, no fearful ratcheting eyes or fidgeting fingers. They both wielded short swords and Laria recognized them as of a falx-style carried only by the Electi Custodia, special guards who served special duties for the Once King.

“By the Laws of the King,” the woman said, stepping forth to separate the two, “you have trespassed on royal ground, have disturbed and disrupted the peace of the King’s business, and you are judged accordingly.”

“What nonsense is this?” Laria demanded, puffing herself up to compensate for the lack of having a weapon of her own. “We’re traveling on business of our own affairs and it brought us here.”

“We know what business you’re traveling on,” the man then said. “And you should not have made it known. Now we must kill you.”

“Wait one Sparking minute,” Nix interrupted. “What purpose could it serve to kill us unless you are hiding something? We left satisfied there was no further cause to investigate.”

“Seems we were premature,” Laria muttered.

“No one who comes through the pass leaves this place alive,” the woman answered. “Those are our orders.”

“Are you guarding an empty house or not?” Laria asked.

“Whether it is empty is no concern of yours,” said the man.

“They’re barmy,” Nix then said to Laria. He addressed the man and woman directly. “You do know the war is over, right? The Once King is dead.

So is the Mother. There is nothing left to guard. Unless you are liars." He narrowed his eyes at them.

The woman punched Nix in the sternum, knocking him breathless and sending him crashing down on his knees. Laria moved to engage, but the man grabbed her suddenly by her hair and had the blade at her throat before she could deflect him.

The woman raised her falx, poised to strike Nix.

"We know our orders," she said again more forcefully. "Save your breath to make peace before you meet the After."

She was about to bring the blow down when yet another voice thundered from the darkness.

"HOLD!"

The woman turned sharply. "Who dares?" she demanded.

Into the nimbus of the dying campfire light strode Allectius, captain of the Briar Knights, flanked by no less than six others. They all wore helms with branched horns and thorns, casting them in a ghostly aspect. They wielded weapons, polished and glinting, in the light.

"We've no quarrel with you, Knights," the man of the Electi Custodia called out. He was angry and on edge. They were well out-numbered now.

"Then consider them part of our tribe and let them pass out," Allectius stated firmly.

"They should not have passed in," spat the woman.

"And we're not leaving now," Nix growled, "until we've seen every inch of the house at Crophaven."

"You'll suffer their fate if you do not stand down," the woman said to the captain. "There is

still time for you to turn back.”

Laria took advantage of their distraction to kick the man holding her in the shin and wrest his sword from his hand. The woman lunged for her, but she parried the blow deftly. The Briar Knights charged and in a moment of chaotic melee, disarmed and restrained the two women. Laria struggled against them the hardest.

“Let me go! Don’t you see they mean to kill us?”

“Peace, sister,” Allectius said gently, even amused. “We’ll settle this with reason, not steel.”

The woman of the Electi Custodia was more calm, but no less angry. “You are impeding the Law!”

“And you are hiding the truth about my children!” Nix went for her. He was quickly prevented, however, by another one of the knights.

“We keep no secrets. What I told you was true!”

“Liar!” Nix snarled.

“Again, peace,” Allectius said, hands raised. His patience seemed boundless.

“If what you said was true, then why not let us leave?” Laria asked. “If you have nothing to hide we have nothing to tell.”

“It is the Law,” the man said.

“Again with the Law,” Nix grumbled. “There *is* no Law!”

“No, it is right: we must keep the Law,” Allectius then said. “But what Law is this, brother? A Law cannot be Law unless it is Just.”

The woman barked a laugh. “Nonsense riddles,” she said.

“Orders are *not* the Law,” Allectius answered.

“Orders from the King—”

“The *Once* King,” Laria interjected. “And even

so, an order does not make a Law."

"Spoken just like a brain-soaked adherent to the Mother," snapped the woman.

Laria started to lunge again, but was blocked quickly. She relented and stepped back, hands up to indicate she'd keep her distance without any need for their interference. She moved to support Nix, who was weaving a bit on his bruised knees.

Allectius then inched close to the woman's face, pinning her with his intense eyes. "Where are the children?" he asked quietly.

"They are dead," she replied without flinching. "Drowned in the Lake of Nivis. Mercifully so, if you ask me."

Laria surreptitiously took Nix's hand and squeezed it. She could practically feel the thud of his heart beating in his veins.

"I didn't ask," Allectius said. Then he turned and looked at the couple, from the woman back to the man to make sure their attention was on him alone. "*We* are the Law on the Mountain now," he asserted, his tone suddenly stentorian, his posture threatening. "For months now we have allowed your delusion of defending Crophaven as few even know of the pass to risk it. But this...this is a crime that cannot be ignored."

He turned to Laria. "Take your horse and go," he said.

"What about—" Nix started.

"Your children are not here. Though we do not know what has become of them, we have kept careful watch over Crophaven. These two birds have lived alone in their fantasy since the Fall of the Keep. We believed them harmless, but clearly the isolation has driven them mad."

“Mad!” screeched the woman. “How dare you! We’re no more mad than ice is hot!”

The captain’s voice was placating. “All right, all right,” he said.

“We want to search the house,” Laria demanded.

“There’s nothing for you here,” Allectius assured her.

Nix rounded on him. “Who’s side are you on? What do you want with my children?”

“Only to see them safe. Peace, mother....”

“You can shove your peace up your fundament and rearrange your guts with it,” Nix snapped back.

Allectius laughed, but then quickly reasserted a more serious tone. “Very well,” he said. “Come, let’s all go together and settle this matter for good.”

“You’re not to trespass!” the woman started once again, but everyone ignored her.

A squire brought the knights’ horses—stout beasts with shaggy hoofs as large as dinner platters that must’ve been sure-footed enough to make the pass. Putting the man and woman together upon one, the party started back into the valley to return to Crophaven.

But there was nothing there.

They walked every inch of the house, of the several small out houses, of the cellar, and of the attic. Toward the end Nix was impatient. He knew the children were not here, but the thoroughness of the search was satisfactory for Laria who was beginning to doubt everything—from her miscalculating judgments to the usefulness of this excursion in its entirety.

On the safe side of the pass, when the Briar

Knights made their farewells, Laria asked what would become of the Lost Electi. Allectius shrugged one shoulder.

"We'll leave them to their madness," he replied. "It's not so uncommon on the Continent these days."

That much was true. The war had driven so many to despair, to rage, and to delusion. The people were as sick as the land itself: poisoned by the water, the air, and the anger they harbored.

"Absolutely...uneventful," Juba answered when Laria asked how things had been while she and Nix were away.

"Absolutely," Hyrhyn echoed.

Somehow Laria doubted it.

"How is Nix?" Juba then asked.

Nix had gone into the house once he peeled Hyrhyn off of him when she'd pounced to welcome them home. He was miffish and distracted and clearly wanted to be left alone.

"Regrouping," Laria said. "I don't know what he's planning to do next, but I honestly wish he would allow himself to let go..."

"But they're his children," Hyrhyn said. "I could *never*."

"Sometimes you have to," Laria replied with a sad smile. "But grief is maybe the hardest thing to reconcile. Especially without closure. People hold on. But they can crush everything in their fists as a result."

"Feels like it's coming to that: crush or *be* crushed," Hyrhyn lamented.

"Sooner than we know."

"The ship is also coming," Juba replied, to insert

some bit of brighter news into the discourse.

Laria gave him a peculiarly withering look. "Good," she said bluntly. "At least that."

Then she went to retire the sagging and lame horse to the barn. Its hips rocked as they plodded away, looking like slow-moving pistons gradually running out of steam. The horse had made the journey. It had served well, and Laria was only too happy to put it into retirement, sheltered and fed as best they could manage, as it lived out the rest of its days.

Laria envied that a little, despite all the hardships that had led to this point. One day maybe they could rest too. Nix swore he never would, but neither would she in her pursuit of convincing him otherwise.

## 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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