

CHAPTER 27

NICOLAS THE BETRAYER

In a small bookcase in a corner of Nicolas' attic bedroom, among a dozen or so tattered books which Nicolas always pretended were the equivalent of his father's downstairs study, rests a slim hardback with a dark blue spine and a cover picture of a ghostly white man atop a horse with a young girl in a red raincoat slumped in front of him. Its title is simply, "Storm," and when he was younger, Nicolas loved to say the author's last name, "Crossley-Holland."

On a late Sunday afternoon, hardly a year before, Nicolas' father, Mr. Bennett, had been sitting in his study, reading a wrinkled copy of *The Daily Telegraph*, while Nicolas was spread out on the floor, thumbing through a comic book. "Right-o!" Mr. Bennett suddenly exclaimed, loudly thumping the newspaper with his finger. "That chap, Crossley-Holland, has it square to rights!"

"What?" asked Nicolas, startled by his father's sudden outburst, but interested because he instantly recognized the name.

Mr. Bennett peered over the lip of the newspaper at his son. "Some writer named Crossley-Holland says *you*, and all the rest of England's schoolchildren, ought to be taught Greek mythology, and I most certainly agree."

"Why?" Nicolas asked, now propping himself up on an elbow.

"Because," Mr. Bennett said in a tone he always used when he considered the matter already settled, "Greek mythology teaches you 'what it is to be civilized humans.'"

"Oh," said Nicolas, no longer very interested. Shrugging his shoulders, he again picked up his comic book.

It wouldn't be for quite some time before Nicolas would read about things such as Mount Olympus, nymphs, dryads, satyrs, and the dark agony of the Greek underworld, ruled by a god named Hades. But when he finally did read about them, icy shivers would run up his spine, and Nicolas would wonder if anyone else noticed the strain of guilt haunting his face. Nicolas, in a very personal and painful way, would understand the meaning of the five rivers encircling the hellish agony of the Greek underworld. He would understand why, in a well-known, medieval poem, the River Kokytos, the "River of Wailing," was described as a frozen lake reserved for *traitors*. Where three of the most contemptible sinners in all history—three men who'd betrayed a person they were supposed to love—spent eternity being gnawed and chewed to death.

Nicolas understood this because *he* knew what it was like—that hollow, sickening feeling inside. He knew what it was like to hurt someone who was good. To turn his back on someone who had protected him, who'd trusted him. To sacrifice someone else, while he still lived.

Nicolas understood this because he had done those things. Nicolas had been a betrayer.

With his head still bowed, Remiel slowly turned his back to Nicolas and faced the cave beneath the great stones of slanted rock. Nicolas watched his wide shoulders rise and fall as if the Wisp was taking deep breaths.

A dreadful voice roared out from the cave's darkness. "*Watcher!*" it thundered, sounding like heavy stone scraping across stone.

Remiel, with his head still bowed, let go of the wicket-keeper dragon's other wing, and slowly raised his arms until they were spread out, the sleeves of his cloak snapping in the cold wind like a pair of great wings. Nicolas waited for the Wisp's fury—the violent rage he'd seen tear apart the wicket-keeper—to manifest itself, to swell into a noble wrath, and to crash head-long into the center of the blackened cave, forever silencing the dreadful, thundering voice.

But nothing happened.

Remiel just stood there, arms held out, head bowed, and silent.

Nicolas felt sick inside. He'd hoped, he'd ached, he'd *prayed* for this moment to not come. After the death of the wicket-keeper, he'd been *sure* there would be another way, another choice. But now—*now* he felt it, he *saw* it, slipping away. He felt sick.

"*Watcher!*" Again came the hoarse, other-worldly accusation, and the sliver of violet-green eyes grew larger, lurching wildly toward the cave's black mouth. Nicolas, having forgotten about the three friends standing by his side, now watched in dreaded fascination as *Árnyék Tolvaj*, the fourth generation of overlord dragons—a demon come from the endless heavens—crawled out of its prison. As it rose from its once-intended tomb.

The great dragon's jawbones emerged first into the grey light. They were like a crow's beak, curved and pointed at their tip with enormous teeth rising straight out of the jaw bones. And, to Nicolas' everlasting horror, its incredible jaws were like a crow's beak in another, more bizarre, way—there wasn't any *skin* on them. In fact, as the immense dragon came out of the blackened hole, Nicolas realized it had very little, if any, skin on its entire body. The Shadow Thief was made of hard, cruel-looking, and razor-sharp bones—or some kind of terrible, counterfeit stone—and grainy ropes of muscle, tendons, and ligaments. Its eyes burned out of lidless, carved sockets. Its legs and enormous claws flexed inside powerful joints. Even its wings—incredibly vast and thin and sharp on all sides—appeared to somehow be shaped from a devilish mixture of strained, black muscle and polished flecks of rock. As the dragon moved, its body screeched and shrieked, like a thousand blades striking together against thousands of shards of flint. Its spine, a deadly row of glass-rock daggers each as tall as Nicolas, piercing through ligament webs, arched and bent together in sprays of dull sparks. The overlord dragon was elemental iron, and Nicolas could see a hellish glow of blue flame burning and flaring between visible gaps in its enormous rib bones.

Remiel, unmoved by the horror surging out of the cave, remained where he was in the middle of the lonely meadow. The hem of his cloak was now discolored, soaked in the wicket-keeper's, and the bull's, dark blood. The grey light of the winter sky shone dully on his bowed head. And then, as if he were standing peacefully next to Nicolas, Remiel whispered, "*Now!*"

Nicolas, sick but reaching for strength from a place deep inside his soul—a place which he'd never known, which he'd never used before—abruptly ran forward. He felt his boots thud into the grass and pound on the thin soil underneath. He heard the winter wind whistling mournfully in his ears, and he *ran*. He ran like he was being chased by Mr. Wolf. He ran like he did the day the ogre took Adelaide. He ran like his life hung in the balance.

And it did.

Within moments, Nicolas had reached the motionless Wisp, the soles of his boots slipping and wheeling about in the miry sludge of slaughtered meat, torn flesh, and blood-jellied grass. His small dagger, quickly ripped from the leather cord hanging around his neck, was gripped in his right hand, and—and with a loud cry of pain and anger and fear, Nicolas *stabbed* it as hard as he could through the Wisp's cloak and deep into his upright back. Nicolas felt Remiel flinch violently and grunt as the narrow blade sank inside his body, glancing off rib bone and driving as deeply as Nicolas could force it.

Remiel, still standing but now taunt with the suffering of white-hot pain, slightly turned his bowed head toward Nicolas. "Finish it," he said gently.

So Nicolas stabbed him again. And again.

The ancient Wisp, with his long cloak now drenched in his own blood, finally sank to his knees. He gasped and put his arms out in front of him as he fell forward. Nicolas stood over him, his knife glistening with dark murder, and he choked back a sob and quietly—so softly even the wind at his lips couldn't hear it—Nicolas said, "*I'm sorry.*" Through sheer will, Nicolas kept the tears that filled his eyes from falling down his face, and without another word, he watched Remiel collapse into the blood-filled grass. For a brief second, the Wisp's skin glowed a soft yellow, then gradually darkened into a lifeless, pale grey. He stopped breathing.

The Clokkemaker was dead.

Doing his utmost to compose himself, Nicolas lifted the knife over his head. "Come look!" he screamed miserably into the cold wind. "The filthy Watcher is *dead!*" Faintly, from far away, Nicolas could hear Adelaide's cries of fear and grief.

The Shadow Thief—only a moment before, having been an oncoming force of revenge, punishment, and furious death—came to an abrupt halt. The great dragon, suspicious and dark-minded, crouched, unfurling its enormous wings, expecting some trick of treachery and deceit.

"Come *look!*" Nicolas shouted again and pointed down at the Wisp's silent shape. He felt dizzy, and his head felt light, almost unattached to his body. Nicolas the Wren stared blankly at the dragon, into the face of timeless Death, and no longer cared. In fact, his thoughts drifted away from the torment wracking his chest and went back to the Saturday morning when he saw the crow. He remembered throwing back his quilt, walking to his frosted, bedroom window, and coming face to face with the shadowy bird. He thought of it striking the icy glass, and he thought of the coppery leaf it left behind. And, in that small moment, he knew—he *knew*—he had truly become a *Wren*. The king of birds.

The colossal dragon of star-iron and hellish blue flame poked its sharp head forward. Its hollow nostrils snorted and drew in a deep breath, sparking the glowing flame in its iron belly. It smelled the pleasant smell of death. It smelled cold blood and useless tissue. The Wisp was dead. And the small, strange boy had killed it.

The sound of stone grated across stone, and the winged demon said, "Who *are* you?"

"I'm the Wren," said Nicolas, as steadily as if he was ordering a meal at the Four and Twenty eatery at 42 King Street.

"The *Wren?*" repeated the Shadow Thief suspiciously.

"Yes," Nicolas said, "and I've come to make a *deal.*"

The Shadow Thief lifted its great iron head. It looked past Nicolas, coldly staring at his friends, huddled together, horror-struck and afraid. The dragon disgorged a thunderous clout of white hot flame from its throat and

spewed it into the grey air, screeching like a lamb being butchered.

Nicolas stood there. He still gripped the wet knife in his hand, but it trembled, yet his face remained the same, empty and emotionless. “I’ve come to show you a *door!*” he shouted. And the world around him instantly fell quiet.

The Shadow Thief lowered its skinless face, its violet-green eyes flickering like the jets of an old gas heater. “What door?” it demanded.

“An *iron* door,” Nicolas said. He took a deep breath and dug into the center of his soul. “I care *nothing* for this world. I care nothing for my own either. The ancients prophesied your doom, but I want your *power!* I am not here to destroy you. I’m here to make a deal.”

The dragon, seductively—trying to entice Nicolas into a trap—replied, “And your friends? Those sniveling, frightened *things* over there?”

“Eat them!” shouted Nicolas belligerently. “They’re stupid *fools*. Fools and food,” he exclaimed, tossing his head arrogantly. “Eat them. They mean nothing to me. Test my truthfulness.”

The dragon looked from Nicolas to Adelaide, Ranulf, and Benjamin. The smallish boy-thief was weeping and Adelaide was holding him close, sobbing with him. Ranulf, ever the protector but as pale as a ghost, held out his arm as if he could somehow ward off the dragon’s dark teeth.

“Iron,” the Shadow Thief said sternly with a starving look in its cold eyes. “I want *iron* as proof. Then I’ll eat your pitiful friends, little one.”

Nicolas slowly nodded and, dropping the knife, dug desperately into his pocket. He fumbled past the coins and past his grandmother’s thimble. His fingers found the soft stone Obasi had given to him, and just as Remiel previously told him he would, he also felt the chalky ashes of the coppery leaf. Still staring into the dragon’s burning eyes, Nicolas withdrew his hand and held out the soap-like stone. It felt light in his hand and was now colored black by the coppery leaf’s ashes. “Here,” he said, lifting it up. “A token of what is to come. My world has more iron than even you could consume in *two* lifetimes.”

The Shadow Thief lowered its mammoth head and glared at the little, black rock. “Star iron?” it asked greedily.

“*Star* iron,” Nicolas replied proudly, and suddenly, as hard as he could, he hurled the stone straight at the dragon’s black-boned jaws.

Jerking in reaction, the Shadow Thief hungrily snapped at the flying stone, crashing its teeth together with an ear-splitting shudder of bone cracking against bone. Immediately, it swallowed, and dark blue flames spouted from its thick ribs in explosions of appetite and desire.

The cold wind picked up and threw great waves of chilled air across the soiled meadow. “How does it taste?!” screamed Nicolas in an uncontrolled burst of anger and frustration. “How does *death* taste?!”

The dragon, unfamiliar with the feeling of confusion, paused. Suddenly,

one of its black ribs cracked loudly. One of its giant legs tremored, stiffened like a corpse, and in a violent rupture of splintered stone, burst away from its enormous body.

*“Betrayer!”* the demon roared in instant rage and anguish. With a fearsome beat of its flinty, skeletal wings, the Shadow Thief reared back convulsively as the poisonous soap-stone began consuming its guts. The dragon inhaled so hard, Nicolas rocked forward in the violent vacuum of air and fought to keep his balance. Now screaming and writhing, the dragon dug its remaining claws into soil and rock, wildly grasping for control of its mortally diseased body. It thrashed and stabbed and beat its hard bones against the earth, biting and tearing at the air and ground in a blind, maddened frenzy. And suddenly, as if the Shadow Thief had gained a split second of terrible, helpless clarity, it stretched out its long, spiny neck and glared malevolently down at Nicolas, its violet-green eyes flashing bright red embers of molten fire. *“My doom,”* it rasped, like the faint scratching of stone on stone, and in thunderous waves of sun-burst explosions, its stony body shattered into millions of pieces, then collapsing back together as if they were all sucked at once back inside the dark cave.

The high meadow fell silent.

Soundlessly, the deep blue clouds moved overhead. A light rain began to fall.

Nicolas the Wren—Nicolas the Dragon Nightfall—dropped heavily to his knees. With a shaking hand, he reached out and weakly clutched a fistful of Remiel’s cold, wet cloak. And he wept.

He wept while the early winter’s rain kept falling.

CHAPTER 28

UNCERTAIN PROMISES

The way back down the Timekeeper's Finger was cold and wet, and for Nicolas, it felt numbing and lonely. Ranulf led the way, keeping his thoughts to himself. Adelaide wrapped a steadying arm around Nicolas' waist and walked with him, sometimes resting her head on his shoulder but staying quiet, while Benjamin came along behind them several strides back.

As Nicolas had kneeled next to Remiel, he'd wept all the tears that would come, and he now felt exhausted as they made their way back to their small campsite. His eyes were tired and bleary, his muscles felt weak, and his boots were too heavy to keep lifting for much longer. Adelaide said nothing, and occasionally, he could hear a snuffle coming from Benjamin, trudging along behind them. His three friends still surrounded him, but Nicolas could sense their doubts, their mistrust, and their worry.

He'd turned his back on them. Offered them as unsuspecting victims. *Fools and food*, he'd said to the dragon. *They mean nothing*, he'd said. When, in truth, they meant *everything*.

Before racing after Nicolas earlier that day, Ranulf had the foresight to quickly roll up each of their bedrolls and toss them under a cape of oiled sheepskin. The rolls were still dry, and Adelaide put Nicolas' bear skin around his shoulders and motioned for him to remove his boots and pants. She gathered them up, and without a word, walked off to a nearby, exposed boulder where a rivulet of rain water ran down a crack in the coarse rock face, providing a quick way to wash the blood from his clothes.

Ranulf busied himself with building another fire, and in spite of the wet

weather, he soon had brightly crackling flames flickering up between stout sticks of Hornbeam wood. Benjamin, with an uncharacteristic lack of enthusiasm, rustled together a handful of chopped turnips, an onion, some thyme, and a few dried, meaty mutton bones to put into a pot and hang over the fire on a black hook he'd jammed into the ground. For his own part, Nicolas just stood there, watching his friends and anxiously, desperately, wanting to find the right words to say—a way to explain what he'd done, what *had* to have been done.

“Pass me that, would you?” Ranulf asked, pointing to a larger piece of wooden deadfall lying in the grass behind Nicolas. Nicolas quickly handed it to Ranulf. The older boy gave a brief nod but didn't say anything else to him. Nicolas tried to think of something to say but couldn't. He felt so lonely and so terribly, awfully sorry.

By this time, Adelaide had come back and was in the process of putting together a crude loom over which she could drape Nicolas' wet clothes next to the fire. The cold rain thankfully stopped, and each of them put on dry changes of clothes from out of their rolls. Soon, they were all sitting around the fire, sipping an herbal tonic tea Adelaide had made, and quietly watching the thin stew begin to bubble and quiver in the little black pot.

Benjamin poked his finger at a small rock sitting in front of him. “The first memory I have is of my mother,” the smallish boy-thief quietly said, breaking the long silence. “It's the best memory I have. I don't even remember her face really well, but in my mind she is a beautiful woman. I at least remember that she had dark hair and slender fingers. Her voice was merry and soft, and she smelled like warm goat's milk. She was laughing, and I think I was trying to dance some stupid little dance or something like that. I was acting up, and I think she found it funny.” Benjamin didn't look up. He just kept staring at the little rock. “But the second memory I have is my very worst one. It's also of my mother. I remember her crying and saying my name over and over again. ‘Benny,’ she called me. She was hugging me tightly, but I wanted to play, so I remember squirming and trying to get away. I remember her finally setting me down and pulling my favorite blanket around me, pinning it together under my chin like a cape. She took my hand in hers, and we walked for what seemed like a long time. Eventually, we went through one of the gatekeeps and over one of the arched bridges to a City gate. I remember being amazed and a little afraid at how big they were. I remember her saying to not ever be afraid of big things.” Benjamin paused and picked up the little rock, rolling it slowly between his fingers. “My mother had me sit near one of the guards and told me to stay there. She said she'd be back in a bit, so I waited.” He closed his hand over the little stone and looked up at Nicolas. “My mother never came back for me,” he said quietly. “She left me there, and I never saw her again. For a long time, I hated the thought of that day. I wanted her to pick

me up and to hold me again. I wanted to hear her laugh and to see her face. I felt miserable and alone and abandoned by the one person who was supposed to love me and care for me.” Nicolas looked at Benjamin’s clear, young face. Tears muddled the lower lids of Nicolas’ eyes, and he wanted to grab the smallish boy and hold him close, but he sat there, waiting for Benjamin to finish.

“But then one day, about a year ago,” Benjamin said, “I happened to see a brown-headed Cowbird in one of the small trees growing next to the ditch of stone which carries the water from the King’s Spring. The Cowbird was sitting on a limb near a thrush’s nest and seemed to be waiting for something. When the thrush flew away, I watched as the Cowbird hopped into the nest, where I could see it lay a single, small egg, then fly off to a higher branch in the same tree.” Benjamin opened his hand and looked down at the little rock in his palm. “After a little while, the thrush returned. It looked like it rolled the Cowbird’s egg around a little, but soon it settled down and nestled on top of it, treating it like one of its own eggs.” Suddenly, the smallish boy-thief smiled. “I think the Cowbird cared enough to make sure its egg would be raised safely by the thrush. I think it gave away its egg because it hoped its chick would have a better life, a life it couldn’t give to it.” Benjamin looked around at Nicolas, Ranulf, and Adelaide. “My mother leaving me is my worst memory, but I understand it now. I think she loved me enough to bring me to the City, to try to find a better life, one she couldn’t give me, *and*,” the smallish boy-thief said, “I think I understand why *you* did what you did, Nicolas.” He tossed the little rock across the fire for Nicolas to catch. “You gave up something, too, because you knew that was the *only* way to make everything better. Giving us up, giving up the Clokkemaker, was the only way to save us.”

Nicolas couldn’t say anything. He was too stunned. He tried, but the words lumped together in his throat, and instead, a tight sob puffed out. The well of tears in his weary eyes finally rolled down his cheeks. He looked at Ranulf, who was also wiping tears out of his eyes. Ranulf nodded at him and reached over to give his arm a good, firm grasp. Adelaide, whose pretty face was also wet with the warm relief of tears, quickly hopped up and kissed Benjamin in his messy, curly hair. Everyone cried except Benjamin. He’d already shed his tears on the walk back down the Timekeeper’s Finger. Instead, the smallest of them all just smiled and looked at each of his friends with a wonderful, big grin on his face. Soon, Adelaide laughed and Ranulf laughed and Nicolas, with the redemptive feeling of a huge, monstrous weight lifting off his shoulders, rocked back in his bear skin and laughed until he was out of breath, out of tears, and free of the dark regret which had plagued his heart.

The next day, the cold wind hurried a school of heavy clouds across the

grey sky and kept the rain at bay until late in the day when the four friends arrived back at Obasi's home, the Caledonii's *Mabali Salama*, under the eaves of the Black Forest's dark trees. Obasi, his wife, Ayomide, and all the other Moss People greeted Nicolas and his friends warmly with welcoming hugs, happy chatter, and, to Benjamin's personal delight, a great feast, which was spread out on a soft, mossy dais surrounded by three, large fire pits. There were flaky filets of trout and sturgeon cooked in vinegar and parsley, roasted haunches of tender venison, an aromatic stew of rabbit, rosemary, carrots, and nutmeg, bowls of pickled cauliflowers and toy onions, trays of barley cakes with raisins, sugared plums, and tart seeds of pomegranate, deep mugs of sweet cream and huge strawberries, boiled yolks of egg sprinkled with spices, figs with cinnamon, and an entire wild boar, with crisply fired skin glistening in a thick glaze of cherry sauce. Everyone laughed, talked, ate, rested and then ate some more.

Giggling Caledonii girls played with Adelaide's long hair, while she held Cornelia on her lap, popping sticks of celery and sprigs of parsley into the happy little goat's mouth. Ranulf sat with some of the Caledonii's "mid-men"—what Nicolas thought of as adults but not yet elders—examining their sets of simple arrow heads and sharpened throwing sticks and wood axes, and, like some old, time-worn blacksmith, he commented on how best to keep their edges sharp and how a simple forge might be set up to make some better-crafted weapons and tools. Benjamin, almost too busy eating to talk to anyone, reclined next to the same old-looking Caledonii man he'd been cooking with two days before, whose large nose and mustache ends were now dressed in stains of shiny grease and globs of brown gravy.

Obasi sat next to Nicolas off to the side of most of the hub-bub, kindly observing how little Nicolas seemed to be eating.

"Et 'urts, doesn't it?" Obasi said to Nicolas softly, while sucking a bit of sugar from his finger.

"What hurts?" Nicolas asked.

"Yer heart," Obasi replied matter-of-factly.

"Oh," said Nicolas quietly. "Yes, I suppose it does."

Obasi reached for another sugared plum and unceremoniously licked some of the caked sugar from its deep purple skin. He then popped the whole plum in his mouth and chewed it in silence.

Nicolas looked down at the half-eaten barley cake he held in his hand. He felt happy and greatly relieved, but deeper down—deep in a place where Nicolas thought he could hold his pain like a forgotten penny in his pocket—Obasi was right. His heart still hurt. Nicolas didn't want to, but he thought of the high meadow, of how the deep blue clouds almost touched the earth, and of how the simple weave of Remiel's cloak had looked after it'd been soaked in dark blood.

The air seemed to leave his lungs, and his shoulders slumped down.

Nicolas slowly put the uneaten barley cake back on the tray in front of them. “Will it always hurt?” he asked hesitantly. Nicolas wondered what had caused Obasi to guess at how he still felt deep inside. Since returning, no one had asked what had happened, and neither Nicolas nor his friends had volunteered to tell anyone. It didn’t seem like a secret, but it felt like an unhealed wound. Something still too tender to touch.

“Aye,” the little man nodded gravely. He swallowed the last bit of plum, wiped his mouth, and stared at the gaggle of girls, who were now all eagerly showing Adelaide their collection of grass and twig dolls. The young Healer was laughing and laying them all out in front of her, like little babes in a nursery.

“Aye,” Obasi repeated with a sigh. “It’ll always ‘urt. Yer heart’ll always be a bit ‘avy w’th grēēf.” The ancient Caledonii elder folded his hands across his round, tattooed belly and leaned back against the gentle, mossy slope. He looked at Nicolas with kind eyes and softly said, “A king’s heart always ‘urts a bit. Dat es part o’ bein’ a king, ma boy.”

They spent the next day and night with the Moss People, sleeping, eating, and laughing, but on the second day, they knew it was time to go. Their little pack pony contentedly stood still while its wooden cross-frame was again loaded with their bags, bed rolls, carrots for Cornelia, and sacks stuffed with generous gifts of food and flasks of cold water and spiced mead. One of the “mid-men,” with a braided moustache hanging down to his knees, had been charged to escort them safely out of the Black Forest.

They waved their goodbyes, buckled their weather cloaks against the chilly winter drafts, and set off toward the mists of the Hollow Fen.

“Agathon!” shouted Benjamin. The smallish boy-thief rushed ahead of everyone with Cornelia keeping close at his heels, and dropped to his knees in the spongy moss to greet the smiling earth-gnome. Cornelia licked at the little man’s fingers and nibbled at the oats he pulled out of his tiny pockets as he and Benjamin laughed and then spoke in serious tones about the benefits of mushrooms, mushroom soup, stuffed mushrooms, sautéed mushrooms, and “mushroom bits,” something Benjamin said he’d invented which involved smoking mushrooms with hickory wood, drizzling them with a syrupy vinegar, and drying them out in the sun.

They camped for the night on the edge of the Hollow Fen after saying goodbye to the brave, Caledonii “mid-man,” who trundled quickly back into the Black Forest amid a brief flurry of large snowflakes. Ranulf kept their campfire hot, and after a substantial dinner and a fitful night’s rest, bundled deep in the warmth of their heavy bear skins, it was especially hard to wake up and continue on. Adelaide mothered over each of them, brewing some hot, black tea with mint and serving toasted oat cakes for

breakfast with a bit of cherry jam she said one of the Caledonii women had given to her the day before.

“What’s a little fog among friends?” Ranulf joked as he’d strapped their luggage back atop the pack pony. “But this time, let’s see if we can avoid becoming bog worm burps.” He laughed and winked at Nicolas.

Agathon shepherded them carefully through the Hollow Fen, and they were glad for the little fellow’s company. Most of the day was spent hedged in by dense fogbanks, which ebbed, then rose up as if they were in competition with each other, with minds and dark purposes of their own. The chilly wind did its clever best to push back the fog, but as soon as it cleared the mists a little, another would creep in behind, and leave them all in an endless haze of gauzy white. The little earth-gnome, however, seemed unbothered by any of it, as if his rounded feet, stepping lightly across the sphagnum moss, could find their way just by the touch of earth underfoot. By the time fallow fell, they were on the far side of the Fen with the Woodcutter’s Forest in sight. Exhausted from the day’s travel, they made camp and built a peat fire, and Benjamin and Agathon made a thick stew of fat mushrooms, parsnips, onions, and roasted eels, which Agathon proudly pulled out of a scuffed leather pouch looped over his shoulder. In truth, the stew was wonderful and warmed Nicolas to his bones, but he did his very best not to think of the fat eels as baby bog worms.

The next day dawned clear. A few gloomy snow clouds conspired together in the western sky, but in the east, the sun stretched its rays up into clear blue.

“Maybe the Lonely Road won’t be such a mucked-up mess!” Benjamin said hopefully.

“*You’re* a mucked-up mess, Benjamin Rush,” joked Adelaide, which made all of them laugh, as Benjamin, playing the ham, scampered around like an organ-grinder monkey, throwing bits of wavy hair grass and moss beads into the air and scratching at his armpits.

Almost tearfully, the smallish boy-thief soon bid a touching goodbye to Agathon, who in return, as is the traditional way of earth-gnomes, bowed so low, the little fellow’s beard brushed the ground for several seconds. And, as their small troupe headed toward the dark line of trees of the Woodcutter’s Forest, Cornelia, not wanting to leave behind her benevolent source of oats, anxiously stood there with Agathon, stubbornly bleating loudly at Adelaide, until, finally convinced the young Healer was going to keep going anyway, it scampered after her as fast as its little legs would carry it.

Nicolas and his friends, blessed with a window of dry weather, determined to move quickly through the forest, only stopping to eat a hasty lunch in the same glade which Grief, the jamba-bear, had led them to, but

then hurrying on, passing silently by the trail to the woodcutter's cottage, with each of them keeping to their own thoughts about the twisted tinker and the murderous spirits of the *Dyn Glas*. With much effort, and occasional tugging at the pack pony's lead rope, they were able to reach the split Rowan Tree before nightfall and joyfully clapped each other on the back, happy to be out of the dense copses of oak trees and onto the final leg of their journey back to St. Wulf's-Without-Aldersgate. It seemed an eternity had passed since they'd last stood at those same crossroads.

Late that evening, with bellies full of a special treat of pan-fried bacon, grease-fried onions, and grease-griddled loaves of flat barley bannock bread, Adelaide, who was lying close to Nicolas, whispered, "What will you do?"

Nicolas didn't answer, but instead, propped himself up on an elbow and, for a moment, just stared at her. The memory of her, dressed in her thin white smock, singing the Healer's lament in the doorway of Remiel's simple peat home, came to his mind with a refreshing sense of joy. The joy that she was alive—the joy that they were *all* alive—and it filled his heart. "What do you mean?" he asked quietly.

"Well, what now?" she asked. "Now that the Shadow Thief is dead. What will you *do*?" Adelaide looked up at him. The cold clarity of the moonlight made her eyes appear bright grey and blue, like the surface of a midnight ocean.

"Well," he said, unsure of how to answer her. "We'll go back to the gatekeep, and I'll speak to Aldus, I guess."

"I know that, silly. But *after* that. What will you do?" she asked again.

Nicolas stayed silent for a moment, then laid back down, pulling his bear skin up to his chin and crossing his hands underneath his head. He stared up at the cold, clear night sky. The star clusters were especially bright, and for several minutes, the Wren and the young Healer watched the constellations navigate soundlessly across the endless heavens.

"You said you cared nothing for your own world," Adelaide said gently.

Nicolas winced at the memory. The echo of his own terrible words, shouted in anger and in a moment of necessary betrayal, crowded his thoughts, and he was glad for the dark. "I did," he answered.

"What did you mean, 'your *own* world'?"

Nicolas let out a peaceful sigh. And suddenly, he had a vision of his mum, sitting quietly on the edge of his bed at night, tucking him in, and gently asking him how his day at school had been. It was shortly after he'd moved from the North Lakes School to Hunter Hall. She'd asked him how he was doing, but he'd hesitated to answer. He didn't want to tell her how out of place he'd felt, how lonely he was without his old friends. Sensing this, she'd said, "The nighttime keeps all secrets, Nicolas." So he told her, and Sarah Bennett had hugged him tight, kissed his forehead, and told him it would get better. And it did.

*The nighttime keeps all secrets*, Nicolas thought to himself. “I—I come from somewhere else, another world,” he whispered to Adelaide. “I guess I’ll go home soon... but—but I’ll return, I think.”

After a long pause, the young Healer softly replied, “Okay.” She reached over and found his hand, squeezed it, and held it tight. “Okay,” she said again.

And with that, the young boy and girl said nothing else and kept watching the constellations sail high above and across the vastness of the endless heavens.