

# The Darkness Abides

Volume 1

by L. Harcroft

Published February 2014  
Copyright Luke T. Harwath

Cover art adapted from the Public Domain engraving by Gustave Dore.

## Web Edition

This e-book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This e-book may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

---

---

*In the midway of this our mortal life,  
I found me in a gloomy wood, astray*

Inferno, Canto I., Lines 1, 2  
- Dante Alighieri

\*\*\*

Two men were adrift. There was barely a sound to be heard beyond the slow pulsing of the surface surrounding them. The sea was all but silent as it nudged the aged, wooden dingy across the open water. Finn scratched at a short bit of stubble around his jaw. As the itch traveled upward he then clawed at his greasy scalp, and the task began to demand both hands. A flea decided swimming would be more preferable than the treatment it was receiving aboard the vessel and took a dive into the sea. Finn left his fingers tangled in his short brown hair long after finding relief from the itching, continuing to massage his tender scalp and shield his eyes from the sun.

Merrick squinted as he looked to sea out the leeward side, or at least, what would have been had they a sail and more of a breeze. Merrick wanted for a sail. He had given up rowing for the time being, not certain if it was of any use anymore. He felt at home on the water, having inadvertently spent so much time on it, but he was not looking for home. He was in search of a something dear and would have it at any cost. The thought of the price he had paid thus far to accomplish his quest is what kept his eyes leeward. His eyes studied the distance. Frustration overtook him and he realized it did him no benefit to dwell, so he decidedly reversed himself in his seat to face Finn, who sat on the bow. Merrick gave him a glance and then looked to the sunset off the larboard side.

Finn pulled his hand from the pocket of his brown wool trousers and opened it. On his flat palm he balanced a pistachio. He studied it from every side. Merrick chose to be ignorant of Finn's actions mostly, choosing only to look to to the distance, searching the horizon.

Finn, noticing for the first time that Merrick was facing him, but that he hadn't yet taken notice of his treasure, decided to take action. With a quick flip, Finn tossed the pistachio into his mouth, shell and all, and rolled it around his on pallet for a long moment. Moments more passed, and he realized that Merrick hadn't taken notice of Finn's prize after all, so he very covertly spit it back into his hand. His hand feigned scratching his back, while his mouth feigned a yawn, which transformed into a true yawn. After delicately wiping off the pistachio on the his muslin shirt, he slowly returned it to his pocket, and breathed a sigh of relief for his secret that remained hidden.

Finn looked to Merrick, "We were never truly friends, were we?"

Merrick looked briefly at Finn out of the corner of his eye before returning his attention to the sea. "No," he said after some time, "not in truth."

The moment lasted. Merrick cast his eyes downward to the depths and breathed in deep. He lay back and closed his eyes.

Finn gritted his teeth. He tensed momentarily and then went limp with apathy and a sense of emptiness. He breathed in slowly and filled the emptiness with sadness and self-pity. He was hot, and the sweat had stopped. He was thirsty and, in general, not a bit comfortable. He sobbed inaudibly for a moment and caught his breath. He gave a sideways glance at Merrick and saw that he was indeed asleep. He withdrew a fairly long dagger from his worn leather boot. The blade had an odd glow of warm light. He shoved it back in his boot and considered.

\*\*\*\*\*

Merrick screamed. Not a cowardly scream, but the full-bellied howl of a man with a fight in him and in more than a bit of pain. He flung his curses wildly out to the open sea. Finn fell to what would be the deck of the small dingy and cowered in fear with the blade in-hand.

Finn muttered, "I'm... I'm sorry. It's merely, you see, It's just that I was so... thirsty."

Merrick took the dagger from Finn without any struggle and tossed it to sea as far as he could and gave Finn the devil of a stare. He sat down and inspected the source of his discomfort.

"My ankle?" was all he could direct toward Finn.

"Yes well, it's not as if..." He struggled to argue and then stopped abruptly. He looked to the last place he had seen Merrick throw the dagger, "Or rather, yes, I think I see what you mean. Clearly I was in the wrong."

By the time Merrick had fashioned a bandage from a ripped piece of shirt cloth and applied it, the sky was becoming dark. Merrick sighed with more than a little discontent, sat back and closed his eyes. He did all this with an appearance of calm, restrained violence.

When Finn was satisfied that Merrick had once again fallen to, he retrieved the pistachio from his pocket again. He inspected and poised to place it between his scaly, sun-dried lips, but then a glint caught his eye. He dropped the pistachio back into his pocket. With one more glance toward Merrick to be certain, he leaned over and quietly plunged his hand into the water. The dagger, its cool glow as subtle as ever it had been, managed to stay afloat in the water.

Finn quickly shoved it back in his boot and almost screamed. Not a full-bodied scream, but more akin to a childish, embarrassed shriek. He had missed the hidden scabbard and caught his own ankle with the blade. "Yes, well, clearly I was in the wrong," he breathed to himself. He returned the dagger to its rightful home and became still.

He looked to the sea, not quite understanding what it was that Merrick had been searching for on the surface of this glass expanse with his wakeful eyes. When the horizon had disappeared, Finn imagined he was floating with the stars, and pretended they were old friends. He even carried on silent conversations with them, and before he could decide if all this had been made real, he fell to sleep,

wherein he scarce knew the difference nor cared anyhow.

\*\*\*\*\*

Merrick opened his eyes to the sight of a grackle flying overhead. Blinking himself awake, he barely managed to track the bird's speedy progress toward a treeline. The dingy was still afloat not far from shore. Managing himself out of the boat, he was able to stand with water only up to his chest. As he walked, he splashed water to wake his fellow castaway.

Finn was none too pleased at the water, and it took some time for him to grasp the situation at hand. Some relief he was given at the sight of land, but anxiety coursed through his veins. Nonetheless, he jumped from the boat and helped bring in the boat the rest of the way to shore.

They hid the boat further inland among some boulders that looked as if they were high enough and inland enough to avoid a high tide. This also provided some cover from some trees which overhung the rock line.

As they walked inland, there was a line of hollyhock that stretched as far as they could see shore in each direction. As they passed through the line of hollyhock Finn plucked a flower, sniffed, and took out a kerchief from his breast pocket. He gently folded the flower into the kerchief and put it back in his pocket.

When he looked up, he noticed Merrick standing past the line of hollyhock and looking confused. Finn approached him, and as soon as both of his feet had passed the flowers, it was as if someone had snuffed out the last lamp wick of the evening. The sun was gone, and so were the stars. Luna was nowhere to be found, either, but there was a glow that came about as their eyes adjusted. It was still dark, but the light that emanated was as if the moon was shining on one of her fullest nights. The glow came from everywhere and nowhere all at once.

Slowly, they both backed away toward the hollyhock, and the lamp was lit again. They had to shield their eyes for a moment from the sun as they had let their eyes adjust to the darkness.

Merrick was silent.

"Hmmp," was all Finn could manage to say.

Merrick decidedly walked inland once again. Finn took a moment and then whispered loudly, as if someone might be listening, "Where are you going?"

Merrick turned around and replied by looking first to where they had left the dingy, then out to sea, and finally back to Finn.

Finn weighed conflicting thoughts in his mind. Merrick stood waiting. Finn passed into the strange twilight and walked on ahead of Merrick who then, himself, looked again to the vessel they had arrived in and back to the watery expanse, considering.

Finn spoke back, "It's only because I've such a thirst. I expect to return when I've satisfied the need."

Merrick overtook him on the walk and once again took the lead. Finn took notice of the shift and ground his teeth absently.

\*\*\*\*\*

For three quarters of an hour they walked with little sign of water. Once, they stopped abruptly at the sounds of sticks cracking underfoot from nearby, or so it seemed. Finn held a pose of quiet terror, but Merrick was gathered and vigilant. When nothing materialized, Merrick shrugged, and Finn took

this as a sign to relax. They resumed their trek.

"Where are we going?" asked Finn.

"Just walk," came Merrick's response.

"Are we seeking water? It's just that I'm so very thirsty, you see, and just, well, I'm very impossibly thirsty," said Finn.

Merrick continued onward, moving farther inland with each stride. Finn did not fail to follow. Another hour passed without word between them. The forest they were walking through never seemed to really change: trees, a hill here, a rock there. The trees seemed to gain more knots and boles as they infiltrated deeper among the woods. The roots grew outward more, reaching for each other, and would occasionally create cause for hazard while walking. The trunks grew wider. Some of them bore markings that Finn felt resembled scars. The darkness was oppressive, but not impenetrable.

"It's just that I'm so very thirsty, you see..."

"Yes, I heard you," Merrick retorted.

"I'd like to find some water, and I'm not certain that you..."

Merrick cut him off once again, "See here, we need to keep walk..."

It was Finn's turn, "Wait, shh. I see a..." he trailed off. Finn pointed. Merrick saw nothing. "I'm sure that... no... just..."

Merrick was only annoyed, "Let's just keep walking."

Before Merrick had finished his sentence, however, Finn had taken off at dead sprint. Merrick looked in the direction Finn was headed and saw a light; a sort of will o' the wisp it seemed. Merrick yelled after him once he'd seen it, "Stop! What're you...?"

Realizing it was futile to yell after him at this point, he decided to forego the rest of his plea for Finn to halt, and he followed after. It seemed no use, however, as Finn had passed well beyond the reach of Merrick, and the path he had taken was mostly obscured.

Finn became lost and frightened, but he continued to catch glimpses of the wisp. He continued his pursuit, not thinking about losing Merrick, only the light and his fear. Perhaps the light would comfort him once he'd found it. Perhaps it would befriend him and welcome him to this place and show him that there was nothing truly for which he should be afraid.

His foot slipped on a wet rock and his head hit the ground with a singularly loud thump. Two wisps seemed to appear before his eyes and then merged into one just as it passed away into the trees. It was then that he realized that he had tripped and fallen. While dizzy, he began to thank his lucky stars that he hadn't lost consciousness from such a fall, but then he remembered that the stars were not there, and so his thanks would go unheard. His heart sank and he looked in a more earthwardly direction. His eyes settled on water that was coursing through a stream. He began to thank the stars again, and was doubly disappointed of the reminder of their absence once again.

Nonetheless, he moved toward the water's edge, grateful for a drink. As he scooped up a mouthful of water, he saw beneath the surface and began to scream. Not the scream of a child or a sailor, but the scream of death losing its rook in a game of chess. The pallid, dead face of a woman lied just beneath the surface of the stream.

Finn shrieked once again, no less earnestly, and stood up to back away. He bumped into something and turned around, nearly falling back again into the water he had just retreated. It was Merrick, grabbing him by the shoulders to prevent him from falling. They both looked again to the water, and there was no more to be seen beneath the surface of the water. She was gone.

Finn looked to Merrick once again, "What is this place?"

\*\*\*\*\*

Breath and sweat. Chest heaving and arms pumping. Blood pulsed forcefully through his veins, navy and deprived of oxygen. Merrick hurdled over the large outgrowths of fallen logs and tree roots and another pair of feet followed his own. Branches reached out to lash at his face. Briars latched onto his long jacket. He filled his lungs with oxygen.

"What did you do?" He yelled back angrily while dodging a swoop from a very large pair of claws grasping for him from above, "Forget it. Just run."

They turned and ran for an especially tight copse of trees, and tried to lose sight of their pursuer, of whom he had yet to get a clear look. Twice, Merrick spotted black feathers and a monstrous pair of wings from behind neighboring trees and they were forced to resume the retreat. Finally, though, he hid behind a tree and threw a rock at a well-timed moment and waited while it threw the predator off their trail. The trick worked. Merrick grabbed the hand of the woman who he was fleeing with and whispered, "Hurry, this way," he turned back again, "and be silent," as he led her quickly in the opposite direction.

She snapped back, "I wasn't making any noise. And beside the point is that it was your boy who made such a fuss when he saw my friend."

"Silence."

They paused and indeed silence did follow. They continued on and away. When they had passed a little farther, Merle continued, "In any event, how was it that you came upon me?"

"Pardon."

"How did you find me? That is, I mean to say, it couldn't have been easy."

Merrick stopped in his tracks, "See here, madam--"

"My name is Merle, and you will address me as such. Answer me, how did you find me and how long have you been here?"

Merrick attempted to tense his muscles and discovered they already were, "And as it pleases, Merle, I haven't the slightest idea who you might be and I am not inclined to care. I'm as gentleman-like as the next, but I take a risk by bringing you with me, so if you take me from the tinder box and into the stove because you don't know how to hush, then I may as well throw you to that thing out there and not lose an ounce of sleep about it."

Before continuing his retreat, he reconsidered the direction he had been traveling and decided on a new course. Before the soles of his thick leather boots had made four or five prints in the soft earth, he turned back to Merle, "Now, are you coming, or are you not?"

She hesitated. She tied up her skirts. She followed.

\*\*\*\*\*

Breath and tears. Chest heaving and arms flailing. Blood pulsed sporadically, navy and deprived of oxygen. Finn tripped over the fallen logs and large outgrowths of tree roots as he ran. Branches reached out like fingers to capture and devour him. He fell to the soft earth and lay motionless in fear. Slowly he lifted his eyes from the mossy undergrowth to see that the coast was indeed clear. He rolled over and discovered that his ankle was tender. He filled his lungs with oxygen and counted three times in long, steady rhythm. After settling his stomach for a moment, he looked to his feet and then to the trees, "When am I going to get the hang of these things?"

A voice, gentle responds from behind, "I be catching your drift there. I've a bit of a clumsy side myself."

Finn made a run for it, but his ankle decided it was going to stay put. His face decided the same when it plunged to the soft earth again after Finn's ankle betrayed him.

She pleaded with him, "Wait. It weren't my intention to hurt you," and with that she continued

to approach him slowly, like one would approach a rabbit caught in a snare, or, at least, the way a vegetarian might approach a rabbit caught in a snare, "There now, dearie, let me have a look-see at your ankle."

Finn's thoughts were dubious, more or less in either sense of the phrase. The woman knelt next to him gently, and reached tentatively for his ankle. Finn jerked and hissed in the anticipation of pain; his eyes squinting. She waited for Finn and he opened one eye to see her sitting patiently, not making the slightest move to attack him. Slowly, he proffered the leg to her. When the woman reached again, he flinched, but let her examine the ankle. She hiked up the hem of his wool trousers and removed his boot to look closer.

"You'll be right as a raindrop. Put your boot back on and stand up. It might be a bit twisty-like, but I've certainty you can walk it," she informed him.

Finn was still trying to sort things out in his head, "Are... you going to kill me?"

"Now, why would I be about killing you if I just done seeing about your well-being?"

Finn pondered that for a moment before crafting his response, "I don't rightly know as I'm of a mind to say that I've never met a person that's wanted to kill me before," he added with a touch of despair, "at least, not as I recollect.

"Well, I am Meredith. Pleased am I to be making your acquaintanence and in truth I'll not be killing you today, nor have I intentions of the sort for any other days past the present."

Finn snapped back quickly, "And my soul, are you looking to take that?"

"Be it that dear to you?"

Finn had a sheepish look when he replied, "I've grown to like it, in most part, for what little time I've known it."

Meredith smiled and responded in time, "I'm not looking to take that either from you, but there're those that would. You'll not be with safety on your own here," she sighed and looked out among the twilit forest, "and neither will I be."

"I need to find Merrick."

Meredith reached out to help him up.

\*\*\*\*\*

Merle grasped Merrick's hand and he pulled her to her feet. Merle brushed herself off and muttered, "I'm learning that this is more difficult than it looks, what with tripping over tree roots and the rest. I suppose I'm just not entirely accustomed to this."

"With what is that you're not accustomed to, Merle, walking?"

"What are you doing here, Merrick?"

Merrick sighed, "I've been here only a day and am having a bit of difficulty of my own."

"Such as?" Merle continued to preen her blouse as she conversed, but she maintained her full attention.

Merrick kept on with his train of thought, "What I mean is, perhaps a day it's been since I arrived, but it's quite difficult to ascertain as there isn't any true day. I've utter certainty there is a sun above us, but the evidence is to the contrary and obscures my ability to measure the passage of time.

"Like magic?" She interjected.

"I've no other explanation."

She concluded her preening and looked at him directly, "I asked you an entirely different question."

"Pardon?"

Without hesitation, "You must learn to listen more closely. I asked you an entirely different

question earlier. You avoided. The question was, 'What are you doing here?' and you responded with the time you have been here, so again, what is it that you are doing here, Merrick?"

"I'm trying to find my friend."

"You know the question as it was intended."

He mulled the direct inquiry before responding with great suspicion, "How long have you been here, Merle?"

"I asked first."

"I've answered you one already. How long have you been here, Merle?" Merle pursed her lips, "Does it matter?"

Merrick smiled, "It certainly does now, what are you hiding?"

"What would I have to hide?" she responded rhetorically.

"That's precisely what I am asking."

"So which is it, are you asking how long I've been here or what I've got to hide?"

"Your choice."

"A while and a lot. There's the answers to both. Now answer mine, if it pleases," she said with a smirk.

Merrick readjusted his bleached muslin shirt, now a bit tan from use and dirt, "Very well, then. Treasure. I'm looking for treasure."

Merle lost her smile, "You lie. No one would come to a place such as this seeking treasure."

"Not here, as you say, but my friend and I have been adrift for some time, but what I've been searching for, I've been seeking for a long, long time," he added belatedly, "I assure you."

"You're not very specific in your answer."

"Ambiguity has its safety, as you are obviously very aware."

"Quite," a long moment passed as they considered each other, eyes locked in mutual study. The moment passed, but their gazes remained steady, "Fair enough, then. Do we have a trust?"

Merrick took only the slightest time in hesitation, "We do," he kept his gaze steady as their hands shook, "for now."

Merle echoed, "For now."

As they were about to discuss a plan of action, a sound from nearby interrupted their conversation, as both turned to look.

\*\*\*\*\*

Meredith kept pace on a faint trail with Finn closely following. Meredith insisted that they must find a place of safety, but kept a comfortable pace. Finn scratched a bit and occasionally patted his pocket to be certain it still contained his pistachio. Meredith attempted to keep him at ease with smiles and gentle gestures. Between the smiles, the way she brushed her red hair from her face, and the delicate way she spoke to him, Finn was becoming slightly more at ease with her presence.

"A farthing for your thoughts?" she inquired.

They carried on with their walking without stopping, but Finn scratched the nape of his neck, "I'm not sure you want to hear what's on my mind."

"Forgiveness, I didn't mean to be prying."

Finn was clearly distressed. Time went by and he grew more agitated, "No, it's not that I thought you meant to pry, and I don't mean to be hiding anything. Perhaps it would be alright," but he offered up no more as the minutes passed until finally, "if you'd really like to know, I suppose I could tell, but you may not like it."

"Well, it's not a guessing game, so you can make your mind known or you can keep your

thoughts your own," said Meredith, not unkindly.

"Well, I'm thinking... that is, I'm wondering why your skin has so much color. I'm wondering if it's warm," Finn bit his lip.

Meredith halted abruptly, "Excuse me, but... what?"

"It's just, dead people don't usually seem to have so much color in their faces. They're cold, too, and... something else is different about them too... just the general sense of death about them, I suppose it must be."

Meredith took another moment, "Now who would you be saying is dead, dearie?"

"Well, aren't you?"

Meredith didn't have to examine herself in order to respond, "Not as I can tell."

Finn looked perplexed, "Ahh, well then. My apologies for thinking you were." They continued their walk at a much slower pace. After some minutes, Finn blurted, "It's just that you looked so very dead when I saw you before."

Meredith stopped again, "You've seen my face before? When could that have been?"

"Earlier, in the stream. Do you not remember? You stared right up at me from beneath the water, dead as can be. Dead as the dead rat-plagued sailors aboard our last vessel, only you looked a sore sight worse, and more dead than them, although they were dead. They were very, very dead."

"But I'm not dead," said Meredith with a look of futility.

"Well not now, no... at least if I am to posit that the truth lies in what you tell me."

"But I have utter certainty of being alive. You can look and feel for yourself," Meredith seemed much the same as if she were trying to convince a kitten that it was not, in fact, a rhinoceros.

Finn gaped at the thought of feeling Meredith to check for life, but recovered shortly, "Well if you're not dead, then there's not use in getting upset about it now, is there? I should think you'd be grateful, if anything. I, for one, am happy not to be dead myself," and Finn took on a sobering expression, "although I'm not yet sure why."

"Aye, I think I follow you," Although it was clear from her expression that she was not sure she did.

Finn assumed look of surprise which melted into relief, "Truly? That lifts my heart to hear you say so."

The sound of broken branches echoed from a distance. Meredith took the lead once again, "I have a feeling upon me that we should commence our walking," and they picked up a faster pace than before, "Anyway, I think it best if we keep abreast so as to find your friend."

"Friend?"

"The man you be accompanying when I first saw you," she said, but Finn held a blank stare. Meredith took more patience with him, "Finn, not when you saw me under the water, but the next time."

"Ahh yes, yes, no. No, he's not my friend."

"Oh, brother, then?"

Finn considered for a moment, "No, I think he'd have told me if he was. No, I'm not sure. I just go with him."

"You go with him... where?"

"Where he goes. He's looking for something," said Finn matter-of-factly.

"What does he seek?" Meredith inquired further.

"I don't know. Probably a woman."

"Probably?"

"What else would make a man so determined?"

Meredith mused, "Well, if you be not friends, and you be not brothers, why follow the man?"

"He says he can fix me," said Finn.

"Then we'd better be finding him," and they continued their trek in silence.

\*\*\*\*\*

Merrick and Merle were staring in the direction they had first heard the sounds. Merle ventured, "Do you know what it could have been?"

Merrick shook his head, "I couldn't see anything anything at all. Did you?" It was Merle's turn to shake her head and Merrick asked, "Should we investigate?"

"I'll take a stroll-- you stay here. I'll be but a moment," and she walked in the direction of the sound.

"As it pleases," he remarked and sat against a tree. When Merle had left sight, Merrick pulled a worn, leather-bound book from his jacket pocket and assumed a look of study, flipping back and forth between pages. After a short time, a voice with the sound of a razor on a strop spoke from behind Merrick. The was close enough to Merrick that he could feel heat and moist breath on his nape.

"She's very pretty."

Merrick looked grave, but unsurprised at the sound of the voice, "What is your need on this occasion?"

A wraithly smile appeared in front of Merrick, just the smile. It licked its lips and the rest of the face and body materialized as if from black steam conjured from the air, "Very pretty indeed. Of course, you're aware she wants you dead much more than she wants you alive?"

"I've little time for you."

The familiar face dropped its jesterly smile, "You will make time, as you always have," and as quick as it had left, the smile was back.

Merrick avoided eye contact with the wraith, "Enough of your tricks, what is it you demand?"

The wraith swiftly pulled a dagger from his sleeve, a dagger with an odd way of glowing, as if it exuded darkness. He flicked it over and threw it toward Merrick. Not an inch from Merrick's face did the blade stop; caught by a disembodied hand, though the body soon materialized. Merrick didn't flinch at the knife, nor when the wraith's face appeared directly next to the knife. The face was identical to that of Finn, and so it had always been. The wraith, Finn's doppelganger, plastered the smile to his face, "Not a flinch. You truly are tiring of my tricks. Well, so be it. How would it please you to be rid of them entirely?"

Merrick's interest was piqued, "Now how would that be?"

"You already know what can be done."

Merrick looked stilted, "You know I won't. My obligation is not to you, anyhow."

The wraith dropped its smile again, "Your obligation is to no one."

"My obligation is to repair what was broken," defied Merrick.

"He doesn't remember anymore who he is, let alone what was done. Set me free. Give me the life that is being squandered by a mere shell of a man," pleaded the wraith angrily.

"I won't aid you in this."

The wraith backed away, "You realize you have the opportunity to save a man, to free a man by giving me what I need."

"Not the man I would choose to save."

The knife materialized at Merrick's neck, accompanied by a grinding pair of teeth which opened to demand, "Free me," and with that he disappeared.

All evidence of the wraith had dissipated at the sound of Merle speaking from a short distance, "There was nothing."

Merrick stowed his book and was to his feet and ready to go when Merle approached him, "Let's be heading out. Although, I'm hardly even sure which direction to go anymore. I've lost track of

the path they left. How large is this place?"

"I'm not surprised that you would have lost their tracks as it's not so much the size of where we are, and more in the fact that it is in all ways a labyrinth in this forest," she said, looking out into the darkness. "I'm a decent enough navigator at the worst of times, and even a decent tracker, but without a star to go by, well..." Merrick scratched his dark brown stubble.

Merle responded, "No, you don't understand my meaning. It truly is a labyrinth. This entire place that you've come to is a place of death, a trap designed to keep whatever comes in, and let nothing out. I'm afraid you've caught yourself in a snare by coming to this place."

"A place of death?"

"And darkness."

"Well, that is a bit morbid to say aloud."

"Look around you."

Merrick, "Well, yes, I mean to say, clearly it's a very dark place, but well... dammit. A snare, you say?"

"A snare."

"Quite. Can't but say as I'm surprised, after looking around, but who would set such a snare, this trap, this... labyrinth as you describe it?" It was unclear to Merle how far he believed her, but if he was skeptical at first, he was leaning a bit further toward agnostic.

"A predator. This is her home, her... nest. This place is of her own design."

"A predator. What kind of predator, you said 'nest?'" and Merrick remembered the creature chasing them earlier and the talons that had almost pierced his own flesh.

"A harpy," Merle said, matter-of-factly.

Merrick hesitated, then contemplated, "So we are caught in a trap then."

Merle could sense the feeling of anticipation from Merrick, "You don't seem surprised."

Merrick deflected, "So then, how does it work, this snare? Do the trees encroach while we look away and snatch us in our sleep or something of the like?" he looked around curiously.

"No, no. We move in unintended directions, or rather, the land shifts constantly, though imperceptibly, changing the landscape and our path with it. We become lost, and there are not a few hazards from which to defend yourself."

Merrick responded, "I don't understand. This area certainly is the same as it was when we arrived."

Merle explained, "It's a matter of perception; you perceive it to be the same. It must be similar in your case to when you stare up at the stars. They occupy different places between dusk and dawn, but if you were to keep your eyes on them throughout the night, you wouldn't notice the shift at any given point in time. I'm afraid we're going to have a difficult time getting you away from this place, in any event."

"Magic again," Merrick mused.

"Or something like it," affirmed Merle.

Merrick took note of something strange about what she had said, saving it for later, "I see. Well, all things being equal, I still need to find my friend. How do we go about tracking him, then, with this new obstacle? It seems like the path he and your friend have taken would be now different than the one we're trying to follow, or at least that it would change as we go along."

Merle hesitated, "Just like you must have a trained eye and experience to aid you in anticipating the changes in the stars, easily enough to steer a ship by anyway, I have some little skill to perceive some of the changes of the land. Not quite the same as seeing the shift, but enough experience to set a course by."

"Well enough, and how would it be that you came about this ability?"

Merle furrowed her brow, "I have told you that I had been here some time and have secrets I intend to keep. Anyhow, I'm not as skilled as the harpy, which is why we need to keep moving-- even if

I have, for the moment, lost their trail. What you need to know is to stay close to me, and that we must always keep moving when possible. I should be able to pick up the trail."

Merrick shook his head, "Then what are we waiting for? Lead on."

#####

If you would like to get an automatic email when the author releases the next book, [sign up here \(http://eepurl.com/O2fz9\)](http://eepurl.com/O2fz9). Your email address will never be shared and you may unsubscribe at any time.

Also, word-of-mouth is integral for an author's success. If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review where you purchased it. Reviews may be as short or long as you like, and they help other readers find books they may also like. Your time and effort would contribute directly to the author's success, and would be much appreciated.

Lastly, if you would like to discover news from L. Harcroft, feel free to connect on Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/lharcroft>