

Title: Nix

Exposition

My hand clenches around the hilt of my sword, fingernails leaving marks on the soft leather. The wind blows back my impossibly blonde hair, my ice blue eyes searching the empty gray horizon. There's something more here; I can feel it. I can *taste* it.

I shake my head, turn away from the cliff and ocean, and start toward the forest. The boys are probably burning dinner, but I'm not as worried about it as I should be, as I usually am. There's a churning in my stomach that won't go away, an extra heavy feeling in my heart. And in the woods, in the *woods*...

I try to shake the feelings off, but they cling to my soul like glue. Ice crawls down my spine, and I swear the wind whispers, "*You'll have to give up or die trying.*"

Glancing around, I hurry faster toward camp.

As I suspected, the smell of burning potato stew fills the air. I prepare myself to yell at Jabber, but when I enter the camp, neither boy is present. My brow furrows. *What...*

"BOO!"

I scream as icy cold hands grab me, but I suddenly realize that the evil cackling is just Jabber, laughing his head off while I freak out. Prying his hands from my waist, I elbow him hard in the gut, dropping him. "*Not* funny," I say, glaring.

Still wheezing and laughing, he says, "You know you love me."

I fight a smile. "You burned my soup."

He shrugs. "It's an occupational hazard."

I roll my eyes and let the grin I've been fighting show through. "Whatever. Where's Rune?"

"Dunno," he tells me, hauling himself up and dusting off his trousers. "Thought he was with you."

"Uh-huh."

"Seriously! I did!"

I ignore him and make my way to the soup pot. The smell is gag-worthy, and when the spoon scrapes the bottom, it hits what can only be gross, cooked-on, burnt soup. I groan, resist the urge to whack Jabber with the ladle, and douse the fire. "Wash the pot," I order. "We're not eating tonight."

He whines. "You're so mean!"

"It's not MY fault!"

"You left me in charge, Kajsa." He mirrors my image—hands on hips, eyebrows up, stern. It almost makes me laugh.

"You still burnt it," I argue, chucking the spoon. "Get scrubbing."

He catches it, and, protesting dramatically, starts toward the river with the pot of my burnt potato soup.

Inciting Incident

Later that night, Rune returns. He'd been out scouting or something, as he'd been feeling uneasy.

At least it's not just me.

If Jabber is on edge, too, he doesn't show it.

"Where's dinner?" Rune inquires.

"Jabber burnt it," I respond promptly, cutting Jabber off before he can lie.

"Did not!"

"Did too."

Rune's eyes narrow. "Why can't you ever do anything right?" He gets up and disappears into his tent, without so much as a good night.

"What's up with *him*?" Jabber asks me.

"Dunno. It must be the weather. You know how he hates the cold."

"Doesn't seem like it. He's downright icy."

I shoot him a glare.

Jabber and Rune's dislike of each other are not unknown. In fact, it's quite the opposite. Their rivalry is infamous back home, but both of them like me too much to let me go off on my own to The Isle. They're like the brothers I never had, I guess.

"Well, I'm gonna go to—" Jabber's voice cuts off, and he peers into the woods.

"What?" I twist around, squinting, straining to see whatever he sees. "What is it?"

A faint blue glow pulsates through the foliage, moving with unreal fluidity. It has no form, no meaning. No start and no end.

My heart pounds in my head, my breathing turning quick and shallow.

What are you?

And then it comes closer, seeming to fixate on me and Jabber, making my heart leap into my throat.

It comes closer. A deer, maybe? No, no, it's a woman.

It's a woman who can *only* be described as a queen.

Her long white hair ends in blinding tendrils of light, her flowing blue robes never entirely ending, merely whispering and melding into the air, maybe even becoming the air itself. She brings a sort of wonder about her, a sort of wonder that makes me forget myself and see only her.

And then her eyes meet mine.

And they're impossibly human.

I freeze, and silently, soundlessly, she moves toward us—toward me. Not me and Jabber.
Me.

I don't even think I'm breathing.

And then her voice touches the air, and the birds and animals cease to make noise, and the leaves on the trees themselves become still and shake no more.

A shiver rattles my entire body, but I cannot move.

I will not move.

I am not afraid of her.

One glance at Jabber and I can see he's as star-stricken as I am. Unblinking, unmoving...
unbreathing.

"Where is Rune?" She asks, and this time my shudder is not pleasant.

*She knows our **names**??*

He's in his tent, I think. *He's in his tent*. My mouth cannot seem to make the words.

"He's in his tent," she guesses, but then she looks at me, and I can tell that that was not a guess. She *knew*.

“Do you know who I am?” Her voice is the only sound. It is soft but cuts through the woods like a shimmering blade.

Jabber and I share a look before we shake our heads.

The queen smiles sadly, then takes a seat on a rock, regal and erect. “I am Queen Nix of Vandland.”

If there had been any lingering sounds, they would have disappeared then.

Queen Nix? Like... the queen who died in the war to save her kingdom?

She nods, though I hadn’t spoken out loud. I glance at Jabber uncertainly. His green eyes are wide. *Is she telepathic or something?* I wonder.

She smiles gently. “Yes, I am, Kajsja.”

I jump. That was unexpected.

“Don’t worry, I don’t do it often. Just in the initial shock.”

This makes me wonder how many people she’s spoken to since the Silver War.

“Not enough. But you are different. You and Rune and Jabber. You have what it takes.”

“...for what?” Jabber barely gets out the words.

“To save Vandland,” she replies simply.

“To *what*??” I choke.

Nix stands to pace as she speaks, her robes of light floating softly as she walks. “I am often given too much credit for saving my people—our people, I mean. But I did not.” She looks up. “Yes, I died to save my people. But not in the way many think. I did not *do* anything during my time in the world to contribute towards my goal, rather, I died in a way that would preserve my spirit long enough so that when the Greatest Evil was at its weakest point, I could find a group to strike.”

I blink. “Wait, *us*?”

She nods.

“No, no no no no no. No way,” Jabber says, shaking his head. “Somebody could get hurt.”

Jabber’s fear of pain was not unknown amongst us, and I guess that the queen already knew that as well.

“It isn’t necessary,” argues Nix. “It can be done without any pain at all.”

Jabber looks unbelieving, so I speak up before he can keep arguing.

“What has to be done?”

Nix looks at me and Jabber each in turn. “That is something I cannot tell you unless you are certain you want involvement.”

I look at Jabber. “Get Rune,” I order.

He whines but complies, though reluctantly and with much protest. Nix smiles at this, which makes me smile, too.

Rune looks like he’d been sleeping, his hair rumpled and his voice gravelly. He looks exhausted—and eternally grumpy toward Jabber, I suspect.

“What the—” he cuts short as soon as he sees Nix. His eyes grow huge, and he is speechless. Jabber snickers.

Nix approaches Rune. “Hello, Rune. I see you’ve done your research.” She moves around him in a slow circle.

Rune’s eyes follow her as she moves. His expression is disbelief and wonder... and there’s something more, but I’m not quite sure what it is. Not that it matters, though.

“Enough talk,” I blurt.

Jabber and Rune both snap out of their daze and look at me, each wearing an expression of “*huh?*”

“We’ll do it. We’ll save your people.”

“Good,” she replies. “Very good.”

Rising Action-

It’s been weeks.

We’ve wandered through the woods for *weeks*.

And still, there is no sign of “smolderlands,” or “Lorr,” or even just a plain old castle. I’m sick of it. Either Nix was delusional, or she was lying.

We’ve trekked through dangerous forests, we’ve been nearly killed by animals that are not supposed to be feral, and barely stayed alive for weeks on end. We’re barely keeping up our food supply.

Rune’s nearly starved to death. He gives whatever food he has to me, and he refuses to let Jabber share with him or to let me give any of it back. Boys are ridiculous. *Ridiculous*.

What we’ve been doing lately can’t even be described as “getting by.” But we swore on our lives that we would save Nix’s people and make her sacrifice worth everything.

“Hey, Kajsa?” Jabber’s voice cuts through the air, disrupting my thoughts.

“What?” I demand, a bit more irritably than I had intended.

“Is that...?”

He doesn’t need to finish.

As I crest the hill, smoke fills the air. The grass beneath my feet soon becomes ashes and embers, some still glowing. The smoldering skeletons of trees rise from the ground, barely retaining their trunks—though it would be more appropriate for them to be referred to as stems.

And looming above it all is the castle. The Castle of Lorr.

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I yank Jabber behind a pillar as an Entity passes.

“What were you thinking?” I whisper-hiss. The last dark tendrils of the shadow guard pass as my words take shape.

He clamps a hand over my mouth and shakes his head. Then, peering out from behind the column, he gives Rune the all-clear.

Nothing happens.

We’d made it into the castle last night, and since then, there’d been no time for rest.

“What...” my muffled voice asks, confused.

“I don’t know.” Jabber’s hands release me. *“Rune?”*

Jabber takes a step out into the hall—which becomes his terrible mistake.

An Entity sweeps past, and then Jabber is gone. Soundlessly, silently, swiftly. A strangled cry escapes between my lips.

Rune rushes across the hall and slows beside me. *“Shh.”* He grabs my arm and pulls me down the passage. *“They only took him to the dungeons,”* he whispers. *“Don’t worry.”*

“How do you know?” I glare.

“I just do, Kajsa. Don’t argue with me.”

I don't answer him, instead pull my arm from his grasp and hustle down the corridor.

When we stop for a break, I look him dead in the eye. "You know one of us is going to have to go get him. We can't do it without him."

He sigh-groans. "I know, I know. But—"

"No buts."

"Fine. You stay here. I'll get Jabber."

I nod, though I have absolutely no intention of staying here all day.

Rune sighs, glances at me one last time, and leaves.

Climax

Since Rune left, I snuck past countless Entities to find the Heart of the castle. Which conveniently turns out to be a giant sinkhole. That I probably have to jump into.

Great.

I left a message in my old corridor for Rune and Jabber when they get there, and I've been staying here for a few days. I'd hoped we'd be out of here by now, but I guess the Greatest Evil had different ideas.

The boys should be here any minute if everything goes according to plan.

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"Kajsa!" Rune calls.

I leap to my feet. "Rune! Jabber!"

It's been about four days since Rune left me in the corridor.

"Why'd you leave the passage?"

"I thought it'd be faster to divide and conquer. I mean... I found the Heart..."

"But we still had to find you. Didn't help much."

"Sorry." I bite my lip. Both boys have various injuries, and I don't want to know what I missed.

We go to the sinkhole's edge and peer into the darkness below.

"Ready?" I ask. Part of me knows that there will be something below to catch us. There HAS to be.

They nod.

"Together on three."

Again, both boys nod.

"One."

We all link hands.

"Two."

We bend our knees.

"Three."

And we jump.

Falling Action

We barely have time to scream before we hit a net below us. It's enough to knock the wind out of me, but I'm alright. I help Rune and Jabber down, and then an uncannily familiar voice cuts through the air, and a blue glow joins us in the darkness.

My posture turns rigid. As I turn around, I take her in. Her luminous white hair; her long, blue, flowing robes; her majestic aura, though now it is crippled by something heavy. Something dark.

She sneers. "I see you fell into my trap."

Disbelief settles over us, underwhelmed by panic and distress.

As soon as I can form words, my voice slices through the air to meet hers.

"Nix?"

THE END