

Rhiannon Lassiter

HEX
GHOSTS

MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

HEX

GHOSTS

Rhiannon Lassiter wrote her first novel, *Hex*, when she was seventeen. She was born and brought up in London but now lives in Oxford with two small cats who sit on her manuscripts. *Hex: Ghosts* is the final book in the *Hex* Trilogy.

Reviews of *Hex* and *Hex: Shadows*:

‘Stirring stuff that’ll keep you on the edge of your seat and make you eager for the sequel.’

Daily Telegraph

‘A pacy sci-fi adventure thriller, both engrossingly written and confidently plotted . . . this is a considerable debut from a young writer from whom there will be much to look forward to.’

Books for Keeps

‘*Hex* shows a considerable narrative style and a real flair for atmosphere.’

Philip Pullman, *The Guardian*

‘A riveting first novel . . . a compulsive page-turning narrative complete with shoot-’em-up finale and a satisfying resolution.’

Michael Thorn, *TES*

‘*Hex: Shadows* is a fast-moving, exciting and authentic story of revolution and betrayal and Rhiannon Lassiter has a great future herself.’

Terence Blacker, *Waterstone’s Best Books of 1999*

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Tried in the Fire

Drow dropped off the edge of the walkway, landing with a jolt that knocked the breath out of his body. A blaster shot zinged past his head and he didn't waste time on catching his breath, staggering to his feet and running to where the arches sloped down to a lower level. He heard more shots around him but the Seccies were falling behind. A street kid wasn't worth the trouble of an extended chase and he was heading into the depths of the ganglands now.

The lighting on the next level was damaged, flickering erratically and creating odd shadows against the skyscraper sections emblazoned with gang colours. This was Spider territory: not far from home, but Drow kept to the shadows anyway. The Spiders wouldn't cause him hassle as long as he didn't mess with them, it wasn't their style. Their territory was the rec complexes that surrounded Drow now: vice-joints, dream palaces and gaming 'cades. They catered to the low-wagers who couldn't afford to move up to the heights of the city but could spare the cred for a cheap thrill. The locals paid protection money to the Spiders and the gang patrolled the streets but, while they would get tough if they needed to, they didn't waste their time shaking down anyone wearing the wrong colours.

Drow weaved his way through Spider town, checking back over his shoulder casually every once in a while. As

far as he could tell, the Seccies had cut their losses and decided not to follow him into the ganglands. But that didn't mean he was safe. They had holocams on their flitter and a record of him running away. If they picked him up later they'd be able to ID him as the kid who'd stolen a case of data discs from the Fractured Image. For now though he was as chill as you could be on the streets. Heading down through the levels of Spider territory he mapped out the route ahead in his mind. He had two choices and neither gave him much of a buzz. The way back home to his own gang's sector lay through Katana space. The knife gang wouldn't like his colours and if they caught him short-cutting through their turf he might not only lose the discs he'd lifted but wake up dead tomorrow. The alternative would take longer, circling Katana territory through the Ghost area. However, the Katanas were a menace Drow understood: no one knew anything about the Ghosts.

Catching sight of his own reflection in the grimy windows of a black-market tech store, Drow made up his mind. The fragments of shining circuitry braided into his black hair and the silvery mirror lenses in his eyes marked him as a Chrome, and a lone ganger was a target on the streets. The Katanas were expanding their area and any stranger would be fair game to enhance their rep. The Ghosts were known to be hard as ice and no one gave them trouble but they were a secretive gang and didn't need to prove themselves all the time. They controlled levels and enclaves all over the skyscrapers and starscrapers of London but never displayed their colours or openly hung out on the street. Ghost territory was a no-go area and gangs who tangled with them suffered runs of bad luck that made them suspicious of the Ghosts and wary of trouble. Standing in line for a public grav-tube to the

levels lower down, Drow tried not to remember the other stories he had heard about the Ghosts. It was rumoured they stole children to increase their numbers and that they were anarchists trying to bring down the city through terrorist action. It had been reported on the holovid that the Ghosts were linked to Anglecynn: a terrorist faction that engineered net crashes and gang attacks on European Federation agencies. But whenever the Seccies made a move on Ghost enclaves they arrived to find everything abandoned, not even trash left behind. Meanwhile, the Ghosts started up in some other wasted section of the city ganglands and the local gangs steered clear.

The other people waiting for the grav-tube gave Drow sidelong looks. Two kids wearing Spider colours, at about thirteen just a couple of years younger than him, gave him lazy salutes. Trying to act it up like they were real hard men but chill enough not to try and prove it, Drow thought. The rest of the tube-riders were mostly low-wagers: looking at Drow shiftily until they dismissed him as too young to be a threat. That wasn't true, any street kid had to be able to take care of themselves, but Chromes didn't fight for thrills and Drow ignored the looks. The grav-tube car arrived with a low hiss and Drow dropped a three cred piece into the slot, receiving a piece of scrip for three levels down in return. Behind him the line shuffled along and the car filled quickly with people. Just before it took off another two people hurried aboard and Drow blinked in momentary surprise. The boy didn't look to be much older than Drow but he held himself with a self-assurance that made him seem much more experienced. Drow felt certain the stranger was a ganger, although he wore no symbols or colours on his clothes. But it was the girl who really drew his attention. There was no way a girl like that could be a ganger. She

wore white, an unusual colour down in the slums since it attracted notice and was quickly stained by the grimy streets, and her shining pale blonde hair and graceful stance made her look even more out of place. Drow couldn't take his eyes off her as the grav-car sank down through the levels and it was with a jolt that he realized that they had reached his destination and both the strangers were disembarking ahead of him.

Drow stumbled off the grav-car and on to the level. The strangers were already some distance ahead of him but Drow forgot about them when he noticed the silence of the streets. No other gang territory was ever this deserted. All the skyscraper sections on this level were shuttered up but they didn't look abandoned so much as closed off. Garbage and debris littered the streets but the areas in front of the buildings were swept clean and the doors were sturdy enough to be blast-proof. Glancing around warily, Drow realized that some buildings were empty, doors and windows damaged or gone. Those empty doorways worried him. Anyone could be hiding within: sentries watching for intruders into Ghost territory. Drow only hoped that he looked unthreatening enough for them to leave him alone. That thought suddenly reminded him of the couple ahead and he lengthened his stride to catch up a little, trying to keep them in sight. The girl's long white coat flapped in the still air behind her and the boy's hair glinted bronze under the streetlights. No sunlight filtered this far into the depths but Drow found the artificial lighting eerie. Despite the emptiness of the level the Ghosts obviously chose to keep the lights working. Instinctively, Drow scanned the area for holocams: the Seccies had them placed all over the upper levels to keep an eye on people. At first he could see nothing, but then a small black box on the side of a building

caught his attention. Beside it someone had scrawled a graffiti image of a black bird with outspread wings. Across the street and lower down there was another slightly differently shaped box with the same bird emblem next to it. Drow's heart rate began to speed up as his eyes flickered across the scene. Black birds seemed to leap out at him from all directions and he realized that, if each symbol meant some kind of surveillance tech, he was under more complete observation than when he ventured into the Seccie-patrolled upper levels of the city. He checked ahead for the figures of the two strangers but they had crossed the plaza ahead and rounded the corner of a building. Drow followed their route cautiously just in case there was an ambush ahead. But when he got to the spot where they'd disappeared there was nothing. Not a sound stirred across the level, although in the distance he could hear the thrum of activity above and below. The strangers must have been Ghosts, Drow realized uncomfortably, and he was lucky they hadn't taken exception to his presence in their area. With that in mind he picked up his speed and kept to a smooth run across the level, heading as fast as he could back to Chrome territory.

As the door slid closed behind them Ali frowned to herself and then glanced at Kez.

'Was he following us?' she asked.

'Don't think so,' Kez replied. 'But let's check.' He touched the keypad on his wrist-com lightly while Ali waited. They were standing in the foyer of one of the larger building sections that their group claimed and, in contrast to the deserted streets outside, the large room was a hive of activity. A flitter was parked in the middle of the space and three gangers in blue and gold Snake colours were unloading crates of equipment. Over to one

side a larger group of Anglecynn members were going through a final weapons check and Geraint, their leader, flipped Ali a brief wave when he noticed her. The Ghosts were an unusual allegiance of different groups and in the two years they had spent hiding from the Seccies the gang had grown hugely. Ali had begun to like the feeling of being an important part of the group and she found herself smiling as she looked around the room.

Even more reassuring was the feeling of safety that came from being part of a large group. Despite their attacks on the brutal laws of the European Federation, no member of the group had been captured. The Hexes used their ability to interface with the net to gain information that the group could use. Their consistent attacks on EF facilities and their release of restricted information made it increasingly difficult for the government to cover up how much the regime was hated. More important to Ali were the young Hexes they had successfully rescued from extermination. Despite the Civil Protection Service's best efforts to keep their records secret, the Hex group found them and tried to get to the victims before the CPS could. To some of these children their Hex abilities came as a complete surprise but to others who, like Ali, had lived in fear of discovery for almost all their lives, the Ghosts were the first real security they had ever known. They called themselves Ghosts because they aimed to be uncatchable and because none of them had any legal identity. They took their safety seriously and even minor threats, like the ganger boy who had followed them down to Ghost territory, were responded to quickly and efficiently.

Kez had stopped speaking into his wrist-com and Ali looked at him inquiringly.

'Jordan's reviewing the surveillance holos but she

thought the kid was just taking a short cut,' Kez explained. 'I don't think we have a problem.'

'In that case we'd better get going,' Ali replied. 'There's a briefing in an hour's time, we have two rescue attempts tomorrow and Alaric's team have a plan to sabotage Seccie communications.'

'Electric!' Kez grinned, and as Ali smiled back she realized he was enjoying life as much as she was. Two years ago they'd disliked each other; Kez resenting her for her privileged upbringing and she despising him for growing up on the streets. But now the group was so much larger the differences between them no longer seemed important and there was always too much work to do to waste time quarrelling.

As they headed up through the building, friends and allies greeting them briefly as they went about their work, Ali thought about the rescued children who were the main focus of her own activities in the group. There were almost two hundred of them now, ranging in age from five to as old as Ali herself. It was Raven's responsibility to teach them to use their Hex abilities but Ali, Kez and Luciel were responsible for the rest of their education and for any other needs they might have. It was demanding work. Wraith and Raven virtually ran the Ghosts and one of the few things they agreed on was that the Hex children should grow up with every possible advantage the group could provide. As a result Ali was having to relearn things she'd never paid any attention to at school in the luxurious Belgravia complex just to stay one step ahead of her students. Kez soaked up knowledge like a sponge, Luciel experimented constantly with new teaching methods and ideas and between the three of them they had constructed a education course that covered everything from philosophy to firearms. Their reward was that

the children liked and trusted them, although they were still wary around Raven.

The thought of the group's leader caused a shadow to pass over Ali's cheerful mood. The children weren't the only ones to have been trained by Raven: the older Hexes relied on her to give them the benefit of her experience. Luciel had progressed by leaps and bounds; his ambition to be a scientist had been revived by what Raven taught him of his abilities and he was trying to write a study explaining them. Avalon, the former rock singer, had successfully integrated her powers into her music and was still entranced by the idea of being a Hex. Although she remained on the sidelines of the group, her celebrity continued to gain the Hex cause prominence in the media. But Ali, despite her best efforts to understand Raven's teaching, was intimidated by the net. She had progressed sufficiently in her studies that she could wander happily through databases and nodes. But secured systems alarmed her and the infinite depths of the data network made her feel scared. She sometimes wondered if Raven was more like the net than a human being. The dark-eyed Hex with her cold summaries of people and situations and her dizzying mood swings reminded Ali of the dark, unknown expanses of information which frightened her.

The flitter hung like a bird above the city and Raven stared down at her domain. She came here more and more often now, watching the starscrapers linked by a glittering network of bridges and arches sinking into bottomless depths where no light penetrated. Up here she felt like a Ghost, unseen and intangible, with the cityscape spread out beneath her like an array of complex circuitry. While the others had found fulfilment in being part of a group, Raven felt increasingly stifled. None of

them was any match for her, in abilities or imagination, and as she trained the legion of Hex children she wished that just once they would find a Hex who had struggled as she had had to and triumphed.

‘What are you thinking?’ a voice asked quietly and Raven turned to regard her companion. Cloud Estavisti was the least likely member of their group. Cloud had fallen from the pinnacle of fame with Avalon and had tried to save them both by betraying the Hexes. He’d made up for his treachery when he’d saved their lives, but most of the Ghosts still felt uncomfortable around him. However, Raven saw in him a foil for her own black moods and a companion in her isolation.

‘That maybe Kalden was right,’ she said softly.

‘Kalden?’ Cloud raised an eyebrow. ‘The scientist who experimented on all those children? I thought he was supposed to be renowned for his evil.’

‘To simply say something is evil means you refuse to understand it,’ Raven replied, turning to look back down into the maze of the city. ‘Research like Kalden’s cannot be dismissed, no matter how twisted its origins.’

‘So why was he right?’

‘For the wrong reasons,’ Raven replied. ‘He was trying to exterminate the Hexes but the trauma he subjected them to unleashed their potential in a way my training hasn’t been able to duplicate.’ She swore suddenly under her breath, her fists clenching with frustration. ‘We just don’t have the knowledge,’ she hissed. ‘There’s so much we don’t understand and I can’t even teach all I know.’

‘Are you advocating torture as part of the training programme?’ Cloud asked ironically. ‘I can’t see Wraith liking that option much.’

‘No, I’m not advocating it,’ Raven’s voice was drained

and lifeless. 'But it was being forced to struggle that made me what I am and so far I am unique.'

'Poor Raven,' Cloud laughed mockingly. 'Only godlike powers and the European Federation living in fear of you. What more does life have to offer?'

Raven grinned, her mood changing suddenly at Cloud's irreverence, and her dark eyes flashed.

'Damned if I know,' she said. 'Come on, let's fly.'

Smiling back, Cloud touched the controls lightly and the flitter fell like a hawk towards London.

Night was falling across Europe but in the glittering splendour of Versailles it brought anything but peace. Sergei Sanatos, the Federation President, scanned the ranks of his advisers with barely hidden fury. The most powerful men in Europe struggled to maintain their equanimity in the face of his rage.

'Sir President,' the Governor of the CPS began cautiously. 'We have taken all possible precautions—'

'Enough!' Sergei slammed his fist down on the table with a crash that made all the advisers jump. 'You speak of possibilities and precautions. I want facts. I want this rogue Hex caught and for the past two years you've failed to give her to me!'

Charles Alverstead took a deep breath. He wanted Raven caught almost as badly as the President did. It had been during his governorship that she'd escaped from them, despite security measures he had personally approved. He'd been able to blame her escape on Kalden, the scientist studying her, but now he was running out of excuses.

'The situation is difficult,' he began again. 'England was one of the last countries to be brought under EF rule and our attempts to tighten up security there have caused

deep resentment. It seems the Hexes have formed some sort of alliance with an established terrorist group, and despite sending Federation troops to work with the Security Services we have no way of combating an enemy who knows our every move in advance.'

'We've tried keeping records off the net,' the Minister for Internal Affairs added. 'But our system would collapse if we attempted it on a large scale. We can't control the Federation without instantaneous data transfer. Information is the currency in which large governments deal. We've worked for years to prevent a Hex gaining power over the net because without it we are crippled.'

'I know we're crippled,' Sergei said softly and dangerously. 'Your continued failure to deliver this Hex tells me that much at least.'

'Sir President, we will capture her,' Alverstead said quickly. 'There have been threats to international security before and we've overcome them. There were other mutants before this—'

'Wait!' Sergei held up a hand and Alverstead stopped speaking as the President's cold grey eyes narrowed in thought. 'There have been threats before this,' the President mused. 'How did we combat them?'

'Those events occurred during your predecessor's rule and the information is classified, Sir,' the Minister for Internal Affairs began but as Sergei's expression grew dangerous he added: 'But doubtless we can find it.'

'Does no one know anything?' the President snapped in annoyance and around the table the senior ministers shook their heads.

'Sir President?' a measured voice spoke up and they all turned to regard the elderly Minister of Propaganda, the man who controlled all European communications and media agencies. He was nodding to himself, a slight smile

playing across his wrinkled lips. ‘The events you speak of are known to me. It was my department that handled the subsequent cover-up. The Federation was threatened by a mutant once before, twenty-five years ago. Listen and I will tell you how it happened . . .’

The cloak of the night fell over England and France like velvet wings and moved to capture the rest of Europe in its darkness. South and east of the palace of Versailles, night touched another palace where water lapped through the once splendid hallways and the crumbling wrecks of other ornate mansions surrendered to the inevitable triumph of the sea. From the top of the golden stone palace Tally looked out across the grand canal and gazed on the ruin that was once Venice in the last rays of the dying sun.

It was the only home she had ever known, although most of her life had been spent fleeing from one country to another. It was to Venice that her mother had brought them, exhausted by the chase and looking only for safety and silence. While their mother had tried to make a home for them in the ruined palazzo, Tally and her twin brother had discovered the forgotten history of Europe, explored the art galleries and museums with their treasure-trove of ruined beauty and moored their boat to the pinnacle of St Mark’s Cathedral while they watched the sun set over the island city the sea had reclaimed. Now their mother was dying and Tally couldn’t see the magic of the city any longer. The life she had known was coming to an end and she was afraid to admit it even to herself.

These last few months Tally and Gift had immersed themselves in the past, but the romantic splendours of doomed Venice were as alien to the world of the twenty-fourth century as the life they had lived up to now. Amid

the technological sophistication of EF-ruled Europe they had lived in the shadows of the system, camping in the wildernesses abandoned or rejected by the technocracy and avoiding the vast data-hives of the urban megaplexes. Only briefly had they even seen cities – while being smuggled through and round them by allies or gangers bribed to assist them. Even in so precarious an existence, their mother had educated the children to the best of her ability, but Tally knew that when her mother died it might be too late to learn the familiarity with the high-tech world that the city-dwellers took for granted.

Her brother's voice came floating up from the floor below and Tally got reluctantly to her feet.

'Tally!' He was still calling her, his voice high and anxious. 'Tally! Come quickly!'

'I'm here!' Tally broke into a run, jumping down through the hole in the broken roof to land on the floor below. Inside the palazzo darkness and dust seemed to cover everything. But in one of the once luxurious suites her brother had kindled a fire and the light was like a beacon as she made her way through the dark.

'There you are!' Her twin appeared suddenly from the shadows like a confused mirror image. Her own golden-brown eyes stared back at her from his face, framed by the same auburn hair. 'I was scared you weren't coming back.'

'Where would I go, Gift?' she asked. 'There's nowhere left to run to.'

'Then perhaps it's time to stop running,' a weak voice said softly and Tally turned to face the bed where her mother lay.

Her name was Harmony and she had been a beautiful woman once. The rich auburn hair she had bequeathed to her children hung limply around her gaunt pale face and

the same golden eyes watched them tenderly. But what she retained of her beauty was little enough. The years of fear had worn away at her and sapped her strength until she couldn't go on any longer.

'Mother,' Tally said softly, her voice breaking. 'How do you feel?'

'No worse, darling.' Harmony tried to smile and lifted a thin arm towards her children. 'Come here and kiss me.'

The twins came to sit on her bed, each taking one of her hands, and Harmony again tried to smile, comforting them as best she could in the little time that remained to her.

'I must talk to you now before it's too late,' she began. 'There are things you need to know . . .'

'His name was Theo Freedom and he was the danger we had always feared,' the Minister for Propaganda explained. 'Listen closely, for this is a story I had never thought I would need to tell. It begins with the greatest secret of all: of how and why the Hexes were created.'

Around the table the assembled dignitaries leaned closer as the Propaganda Minister lowered his voice. Even the President looked around warily, although none knew better than he how safe the security was here at the political heart of the Federation. Past governments had shrouded the events of their rules in secrecy, as did the current administration, and none of them had any direct experience of the Hex threat. The object of their fear fascinated and repelled them as the old man related how a Hex might shake the Federation from its foundations.

'Our ancestors were misguided in their march towards progress. They experimented with genetics and created mutants intended to be a fusion of mind and machine,

technological wizards who would guide us into a new age and some day out into the stars.'

The Propaganda Minister snorted contemptuously.

'They were fools and dreamers and they thought to play God. It has taken centuries for us to undo their work. They released the Hex gene into the world, wanting to give everyone the "benefits" of the mutation. They didn't think of the dangers. There is such a thing as too much knowledge. Our society is founded on privacy, there are secrets that must be kept hidden for the good of humanity.'

The President of the Federation nodded and around the table there were murmurs of assent. All of these political leaders had secrets they wished to hide: abuses of power and privilege and petty injustices against the people they had been elected to serve.

'However, there were some who had doubts, who understood that the Hex gene was an abomination that never should have been allowed to exist and politicians campaigned strenuously to make the use of the Hex abilities illegal. Once those laws had been passed it was the next logical step to make the mutants themselves illegal, to deprive them of any standing in the Federation. And, of course, when they did not know how to use their abilities it was easy to hunt them down.

'I would not know this tale myself but twenty-five years ago what we feared came to pass. A mutant in full control of his abilities single-handedly waged war against the Federation. Theo Freedom was a scientist, a brilliant young researcher without the slightest suspicion of treason ever attached to him. He had the highest levels of security access and the best laboratory facilities the Federation could provide. We had hoped to use him to create a plague that would wipe out the Hexes forever. But we made a mistake.

'Theo was a Hex himself. A mutant clever enough to

hide his true nature from everyone who knew him. For five years he studied the Hex gene and the Hex abilities and *taught himself how to use them.*'

The Propaganda Minister paused and looked significantly around the table. Charles Alverstead, the head of the CPS, shuddered. Keeping the Hexes from ever understanding their abilities had been the purpose of the Federation government for generations. Now he feared that the elusive Raven, the Hex he had captured and lost, was as great a threat as Theo Freedom had ever been. He had seen Raven himself. She had seemed barely more than a child and her black eyes had regarded him with a cool disdain as if she had known even then she would escape him. If a child Hex could evade the forces of the Federation government for so long and incite rebellion against the government, what more could she achieve when she was an adult?

'We had no knowledge of this, of course,' the Propaganda Minister was saying. 'We found out too late that Theo had not only studied the Hex gene but had passed on the knowledge to his son, who also carried the mutation. When a suspicious lab assistant reported that Theo Freedom was using the laboratory to carry out unusual tests on himself and his family we sent a team to investigate. Theo was captured and interrogated but his son had disappeared and not even under torture would he confess the young man's whereabouts.

'More importantly,' and here the Minister's creaky voice sank to a whisper, 'Theo's research had also disappeared. Enough data to write a book about the Hexes was copied to disc the day his son vanished and neither it nor he have ever been located.

'There have been false leads and suspicions but the son was never captured. Our only hope is that he is dead and

the information he carries lost for ever. We have no way to combat an active Hex, and with Theo Freedom's research a Hex could destroy us.'

'And so your grandfather gave the files to your father and, when he sacrificed himself so that we could escape, your father gave them to me.'

Harmony coughed raspily and Tally hurriedly filled a glass of water and held it to her lips.

'Thank you,' she whispered, after she had sipped a little of it and she tightened her grip on her children's hands. 'I have never shared your abilities but I have held the files in trust for you so that some day you might learn to understand them. I never thought that we'd be running so long that there would be no time to even teach you the basics. I hoped we'd find some place safe where I could teach you how to use the knowledge the files contain. Your father named you in hope that eventually the Hex gene would be recognized, not as a mutation, but as something to be treasured: a Gift, a Talent . . .'

The twins looked at each other. Their mother's story had filled them with longing for the father they had barely known and the grandfather they had never met. Tally voiced both of their thoughts when she asked:

'But what should we *do* with them? Can we learn to use them on our own?'

'Perhaps you don't have to do it alone,' her mother said softly. 'Two years ago terrorists attacked the Federation. A Hex escaped from the Federation Consulate in England. Just as your grandfather did, Hexes are again trying to strike against the Federation and his knowledge will help them to succeed.'

'Terrorists?' Tally asked dubiously but Gift interrupted her.

‘We’ve been running from Federation troops all our lives,’ he said fiercely. ‘If this gives us a chance to strike back we should take it. We’ve never even used our abilities but the government would kill us if they knew what we are. If these other Hexes understand the files they can use them to protect all of us.’

‘I hope so,’ Harmony said quietly. ‘I wish I could keep you safe myself, my children. I don’t want to leave you alone.’ Her eyes closed and an expression of pain crossed her face.

‘We’ll be all right, Mother,’ Tally said quickly, pretending a confidence she didn’t feel to comfort her mother. ‘We know what we have to do.’ She looked at Gift for confirmation and he nodded.

‘We’ll make you proud,’ he asserted. ‘Don’t worry about us.’

Tally turned to look at her twin. They were both on the brink of tears but neither of them cried. The journey ahead consumed too much of their thoughts. The road before them was long and dangerous and neither of them was sure how to begin.