

AFTERLANDS

BEFORETIMES

VOL. I }

MONTHLY
SERIES

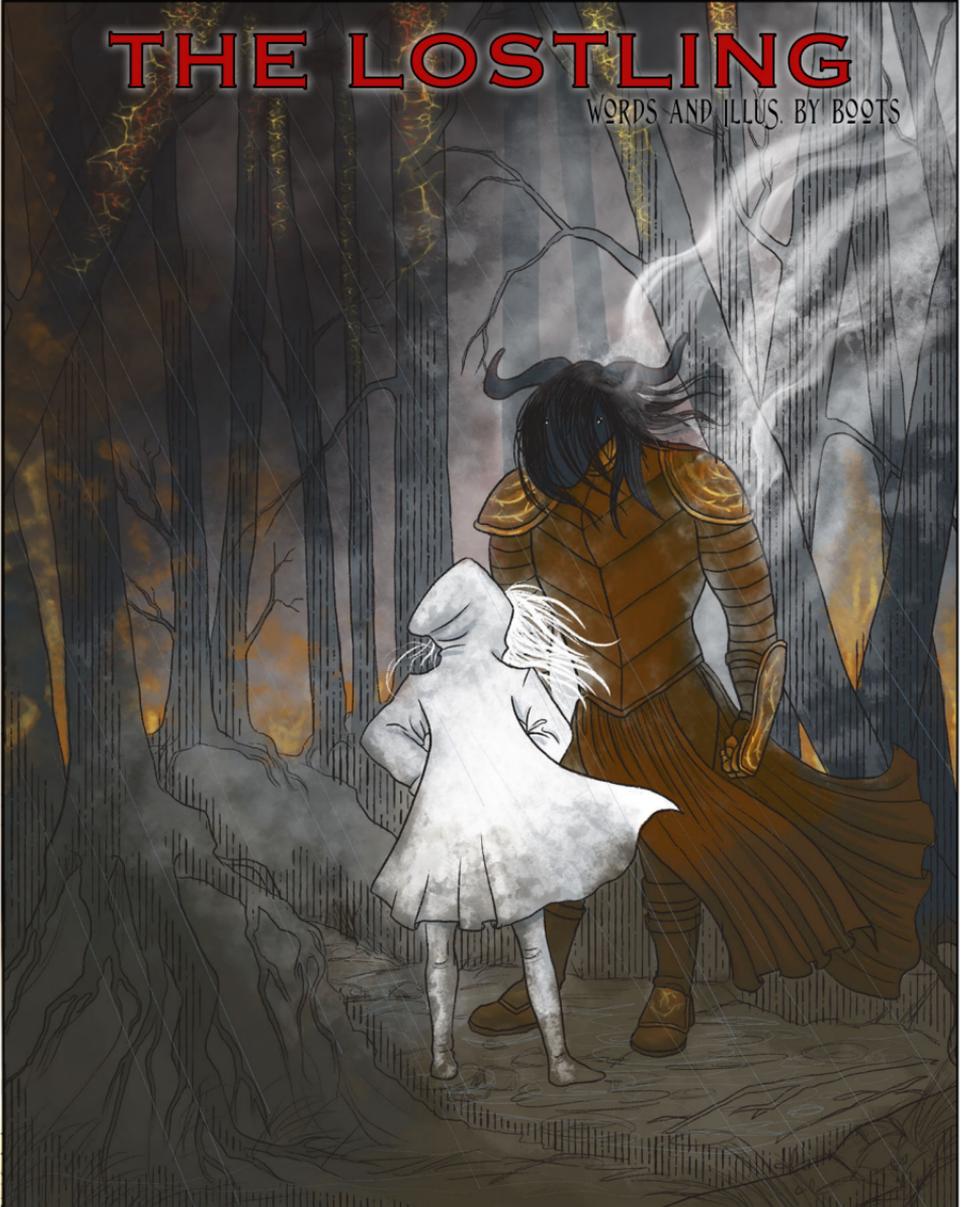
Afterlands stories of the Continent, from the time of the
Mother's war against the Once King, before the Harrowing.

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{ No. 2 of 4

THE LOSTLING

WORDS AND ILLUS. BY BOOTS



"Are you...a Lostling?" She nodded. "I'm Hyhryn."
"Hyhryn." He said the name in one soft sigh. "That's nice."



**AFTERLANDS
BEFORETIMES**

BY BOOTS

Volume I

“Afterlands: Beforetimes, Volume I, “The Lostling” is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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CONTENTS

CONTENTS

THE LOSTLING

- I. THE FOREST
- II. THE COTTAGE
- III. THE REPAST
- IV. THE HEARTH
- V. THE PARTING

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*An injustice had been done.
So the People of the Mountain
and the Grasslands went to war.*

THE LOSTLING

I. THE FOREST IN WHICH HYRHYN ENCOUNTERS A WOUNDED BEAST.

Hyrhyn didn't mind Bad Rain. It was poison and nothing would grow from it, but Good Rain came in cycles and every Bad Rain meant a good one was soon to follow.

With the hood of her oversized slicker pulled forward to shield her face, and long leather stockings tied at her thighs, she kept moving in spite of the storm. Her feet were soggy and numb, but the more distance between herself and the Penance Quarry, the better. A lifetime of watching out for herself alone had made her expertly cautious.

She was well off any road or major trail, tramping through a slurry of mud in what used to be a dense forest. The older trees with deeper roots were still alive, though their branches drooped with sickly and peeling bark. Others were dead, having long yielded their crowns not just to the winter, but for all time.

Hyrhyn's keen nose smelled fire long before she saw smoke. Normally she would have redirected away from the threat of something unknown and potentially dangerous, but her internal Spark urged her forward and she *always* trusted her Spark.

She headed into the shallow ravine of a Once

River, a long wide bed of smooth stones and debris. Water pooled in the deeper parts, but there would never be enough to make it run again.

Navigating the rocks toward black smoke billowing from a stand of skeletal trees, she saw that some of them smoldered with embers. The lick of orange flames on the blackened wood wavered even under the pelting of icy rain.

The whole countryside seemed to be burning no matter where she went, so she wasn't bothered about the fire. But her equally keen ears caught something above the patter: a keening, wounded sound.

She mounted the Once River bank on the opposite side. The fire was on the edge of burning out under the deluge. At the center of the burn squatted a man clad in heavy dark leather and metal—the kind used to make pots and kettles. Hyrhyn loved the shiny color, but also knew the Mother used it to decorate her army, so it gave her pause.

The man was enormous despite being folded in on himself. A trail of steam rose from his hunched shoulders like fleeing phantoms. Hyrhyn was both alarmed and piqued, but mostly her heart broke to hear his sobbing.

Gathering her courage, she approached and stood before him. His face was buried in copper-gloved hands. He was so distraught, he didn't notice her at all.

"Oh," she said softly as she bent forward to part the long wet black hair between his turned-back horns—horns that marked him as a Grasslander. "Are you hurt?" she asked.

The instant her hand made contact, he reared

with alarming force to his full, broad height. Hyrhyn was thrown back by the suddenness of his lift and for a moment, as she caught her balance, she thought she saw flames in his nose and eyes.

She rarely questioned her own sight, but dismissed it as a trick of the light, a reflection from the guttering blaze. She was also distracted by his size and muscularity. His thighs were easily thicker than her body. His clenched fists were like boulders. The wet leather of his doublet seemed ready to burst at the swell of his chest. He smelled like burnt pine, ash pits, and trumpetweed. She wanted to scale him like a tree and nest in his hair.

He had *other* opinions.

"Don't touch me!" he roared with ferocity.

Then, seeing her, tiny, unafraid, and unthreatening before him, he backed away. He crumpled down again, settling into the mud and drawing his knees up, hugging them tight. A shag of thick hair obscured his face again, though he watched her with small black eyes that ran with tears.

"Go away," he said, this time much less fierce, and very much sorry. "I'm...not hurt."

"You *are* hurt," she argued lightly. "Why else would you be crying?"

He snuffled, ashamed. "It's...nothing," he said softly.

"Nothing a dry shelter and a hot cup of water couldn't help?"

He looked at her incredulously. His chest heaved with deep breaths. "*Please...go,*" he said. He chose the words carefully and with difficulty—though clearly didn't mean them.

Hyrhyn liked his voice as much as his scent. It was deep and soft like the perfect bed.

"I can't," she told him. "Not like this, knowing you're sad." Again, she reached for him, but again he flinched. She withdrew her hand. "You won't let me hug you?" she asked.

"Let you...." The idea was so foreign to him, he couldn't bring himself to repeat the word. "Why?" he then asked, head tilting in confusion.

She didn't like the question. "Is it so strange for someone to offer comfort?"

"It is to me," he answered sullenly.

"Because people think you're big and scary, I suppose. Are you a monster?"

He didn't answer right away and Hyrhyn gave him space to think it through while the rain dropped to a calming susurrant around them. Finally, he lifted his head, beseeching her through the sopping wet curtain of his hair.

"Yes," he said, a faint breath.

She pressed her lips, hands planted on her hips. She cocked her head at him. "Oh, I see," she said, not believing him at all. "So you're going to hurt me or kill me or rape me to pieces?"

He looked genuinely startled. "What? No! Wh—"

"Ah! Not much of a monster, then, are you?" She laughed as if she had caught him at something. But he didn't share her amusement and she reigned her joy back quickly. "You really *are* sad, aren't you?"

"That's why...you should go," he answered.

"That's why I should stay," she chirped back.

She crouched down and rested on her knees comfortably. She bowed her head so the rain

streamed off the peak of her hood.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm being with you," she said. "If I can't comfort you with a hug, then I can at least comfort you with my company."

"Like...this? In the rain?"

"I haven't any other choice, do I? It's where you are."

He saw the truth of that. "If...I said I wasn't sad...would you go?"

"I'd have to believe you."

"That's fair." He was still sad, so no claim was forthcoming. "Are you...a Lostling?"

She nodded. "I'm Hyrhyn."

"Hyrhyn." He said the name in one soft sigh. "That's nice."

"Hyrhyn, *here in your presence!* Do you like that? There's a word for words that sound the same. I don't know what it is, though."

"Me neither...." For an instant he seemed to relax, but then his tone grew dark again, as if to answer an unasked question. "There are... people...looking for me."

"Oh! Well, people are looking for me too!" she replied, thrilled by this commonality. "Come with me and let's get out of the Bad Rain!"

She held out her hand, expecting him to take it. He stared at her, thinking about it.

"It's as easy as saying yes," she said. "Really, it is."

II. THE COTTAGE

HYRHYN BRINGS THE BEAST TO SHELTER.

He didn't take her hand, though he obviously

wanted to. Instead, he stood up, head bowed, shoulders slouched, attempting to make himself appear small.

“Okay,” he said in a voice even smaller still.

Hyrhyn tucked her wet hand back under her oilcoat and gave him a smile that seemed impossibly big and bright under the smolder and gloom.

Then she led them back through the trees, her heart too full of excitement to worry about anyone pursuing her now. She was nimble and swift as they clambered over the terrain. For such an ominously large man, he followed with graceful silence.

“You didn’t tell me your name,” Hyrhyn said.

When he didn’t respond, she turned to look back, wondering whether he heard her over the rainfall. He halted abruptly as if caught at something he was embarrassed about.

“I don’t...have one,” he mumbled and dropped his eyes to the mud.

“Everyone is called something,” Hyrhyn told him. “What do people say when they want you to answer?”

“No one wants me to answer. I was given no name I want to be called.”

It was the most he had uttered to her all at once, and even though she didn’t like what he said, she liked that he was talking more easily.

“We’ll make that right first thing, once we get dry,” Hyrhyn said decisively as they started to move again. “You do *want* a name, don’t you?”

He was too stymied to answer – as if he’d never considered having a choice.

Eventually they came to a break in the woods,

revealing a field littered with woodcutters' stumps. At the far end, barely perceptible through the sleet, was a cottage with warm yellow light glowing faint in its small windows.

"There," Hyrhyn pointed with glee.

Her strange companion staggered and craned his long neck. By the squint of his eyes, he wasn't convinced. He looked sluggish and tired. Steam rose from his head and back, and every exhalation was like a chuff of exhaust off a vented flue.

Hyrhyn had sprinted ahead and now circled back, wanting to take his arm, but respectfully maintaining her distance. She danced alongside him, splashing in the water pooled at their feet. "Come on! Think how cozy it'll be once we're inside."

His strength renewed at her urging, he forced his stride wider to cover more ground, lurching forward until the cabin was in reach. Hyrhyn ran to the door and banged on it with her fist. He hung back, nervous.

"The people here are good," she assured him. "They'll help us."

"They'll help *you*," he said fearfully.

Hyrhyn didn't have a chance to argue. The door was yanked open and cheery light spilled over the threshold from within. A smiling old woman bundled in a fluffy shawl stood before them, stooped from a twisted back. Her eyes were milky white with cataracts.

"Come in from the cold," she said, staring right through them.

From a back room of the cottage another woman's voice scolded: "Ganga! How many times do I have to tell you to ask who's at the door before

you open it!"

"Who is it?" the old woman repeated sweetly, even as she waved Hyrhyn inside.

"Ganga!" shouted the other woman with exasperation. Then she appeared, looking cross, her hair up in knots. The two women were Old Mixed Blood—it was impossible to tell their region of origin.

"Lostling!" the younger one exclaimed on seeing Hyrhyn. "You're back! I warned you not to go off in Bad Rain. You must be bone-cold!"

"Only a little Tess," Hyrhyn said with her perpetual good cheer. "I've brought a friend. May we get dry by your fire?"

"Of course," Tess said, pulling Hyrhyn in. She turned once more to the old woman. "Ganga, we must be more careful. The Mother's army is close."

"Courtesies, my dear," Ganga replied, patting Hyrhyn's hand. "Whatever comes, we mustn't *ever* forget the courtesies."

Hyrhyn motioned for her reluctant friend to follow. "It's all right, see?" she said.

He entered, hesitating at the low frame of the doorway and then bowing his horns to clear it with care.

Tess, who had not seen him at first through the rain pouring off the eaves, now looked startled. "Not you!" she suddenly objected. "We don't know you!"

"Oh but I do," Hyrhyn said quickly.

Ganga took his heavily armored wrist so suddenly he didn't have a chance to react. His whole body tensed and all the lamps in the house sputtered as if touched by a sudden gust. Ganga patted the back of his hand as she had done with

Hyrhyn.

"Welcome," she said. "You are welcome."

"Ganga, he's...," Tess started again. But one blind look from Ganga silenced her.

The crease in her brow deepened, but since Ganga had welcomed the stranger, she would have to as well. He looked sheepish and tried very hard to be non-threatening, but Tess was very threatened.

"I'll stoke the fire," she said, fearful with resentment. "So you can get warm."

"I can do it," the stranger offered.

Tess had moved to put another log on the middling blaze that kept the small cottage warm, but now she backed away. "Very well," she said.

It took no effort for him to lift a large log onto the coals. Crouching at the hearth with the copper of his fittings all aglint, the log caught almost instantly. Within a matter of seconds, the blaze was big and bright.

"Oh, that's nice!" Hyrhyn said, surprised at the quick result. Then she shed her wet slicker, shook out her damp hair, and pulled off her halter dress without a second thought. She stood naked but for her stockings and wrung the rag garment out onto the floor.

"Hyrhyn!" Tess exclaimed with horror.

"Oh!" she said and stopped wringing. "I just wanted to get the water off before I hung it by the fire."

It wasn't true: the dress was not that damp. She just wanted *him* to look at her.

He *had* turned to see what Tess was alarmed about and caught a glimpse of the young woman's back, pale as dough and marked with dark stripes

— a sign of Forestlander in her blood. Hyrhyn knew the stripes were there even though she had never seen them herself, and knew they had a curious allure for men: from her shoulder blades, down her spine, to the curve of her....

He turned back quick to the fire, which crackled as it threw off sparks.

Tess tossed a blanket around Hyrhyn's shoulders and pulled it closed in the front.

"This is so nice," Hyrhyn said. The blanket was nothing special, even tattered on the edges, but she hugged it like a lush mantle. "Have you got another for my friend?"

"No," Tess said bluntly. Then she excused herself to the alcove in the back where the kitchen stove and cupboards were. Ganga had retreated there already and now banged about, arranging a tray for the guests.

Hyrhyn dropped herself into a stuffed chair close to the fire, pulled off her long stockings, and stretched her wet and wrinkled toes to the warmth.

"Isn't this nice?" she beamed at her new friend.

He cheated a shy look at her from under his hair as he neatly hung her stockings from the mantle, along with her oilcoat and dress. Then he bowed to her feet, practically blue from the chill, and exhaled. His breath was hot and brought the pink back to her toes almost instantly.

"So nice!" she said again, delighted to soak in the heat.

He looked very pleased at her approval.

"You should take your things off too. You must be uncomfortable in that!" she said.

That caused him to retreat again. "I'm okay," he

replied softly.

Disappointed not to see more of him, Hyrhyn realized that his hair was nearly dry. Where there should have been a puddle beneath his giant copper-toed boots, there was only the stone floor.

"Doesn't the Bad Rain ruin your hair? It turns mine green," she said, fluffing the silvery thistle-like nest of her own tresses.

He shook his head. "It's...beautiful," he said.

She hadn't expected a compliment, even though she was secretly wishing for one. No one ever used the word beautiful with her. She knew she was plain even by the lowest Lostling standards. Now she blushed furiously.

"It is?" she asked, unable to hold back her smile.

He nodded.

Ganga returned, hobbling under the burden of a tray with two large steaming bowls. Respecting her independence, Tess did not assist with the service. This was an important courtesy about which the old woman would tolerate no interference.

Ganga offered the first bowl to Hyrhyn, who took it eagerly.

"Thank you! Real tea is so generous when hot water would've suited!"

Ganga offered the second bowl to the stranger. He looked panicked at the gesture.

"Oh...I..." he stammered.

"Please," Ganga said gently. "You're my guest."

He looked to Tess, whose disapproving face gave him no reassurance, then back to Hyrhyn, who grinned over the rim of her own bowl, enjoying the fragrant steam that wafted over her face. She nodded encouragement and at last he took the tea. What looked enormous in both of

Hyrhyn's hands seemed tiny in his own.

"Thank you," he said softly.

Ganga nodded. Though she was blind, she seemed to look on him with sympathy.

"It's very hot. You should blow on it," Hyrhyn instructed.

There was something precious about the way he held the bowl. He gave a little puff of air to stir the steam off the top, then raised it to his lips. It wasn't cool enough to drink yet, but he sipped as if there was no heat at all. When he swallowed, his expression was a mix of surprise and suppressed joy.

"Do you like it?" Hyrhyn asked. He nodded and she turned to the old woman. "He likes it. Thank you for sharing tea with us, Ganga."

"My pleasure, children," she answered. Her hand reached to touch the Grasslander's face. He froze, startled, but dared not pull away.

His breath shuddered.

"How weary you must be," Ganga told him, as if she could read the whole history of his sorrows in his trembling silence. "You are safe here."

Tess looked tense as if she feared something terrible was about to happen. And something terrible did: the stranger's lip quivered and his eyes filled with tears. He gulped back a sob that shook his shoulders.

This time there was no mistaking it: the lamps in the cabin all guttered at once and the log in fireplace threw off discomfited sparks.

III. THE REPAST

HYRHYN NAMES THE NAMELESS BEAST.

For a second time, Hyrhyn's heart broke for him: this hulking gentleperson clapped in the Mother's copper thorns, who clearly wasn't used to being treated with kindness, and who ached for a tender touch. Ganga sensed it too, for she patted his plump cheek affectionately.

Hyrhyn wanted to tell him not to be sad, but she suspected this was a sadness too deep for simple comforts to fix. She stood close to him, to be present, and he snuffled his emotions back as if bolstered by the reminder.

"Tess and I will fix supper," Ganga then announced.

"Stay put 'til you're dry," Tess told them. "Ganga and I can manage."

They watched the two women return to the kitchen. Tess glanced back at them and Hyrhyn gave her a big grin.

"They've gone to talk about us," Hyrhyn then whispered once the two were alone.

He nodded, wiping tears back before they fell into his tea.

"Did you run away? From the army?" Hyrhyn asked. "Is that who's looking for you?"

He didn't answer and Hyrhyn suspected he couldn't. His expression was still fragile.

"I ran away from the Penance Quarry," she told him, offering her own admission.

Hyrhyn saw the subtle widening of his eyes. The Penance Quarry was where criminals were sent to earn their remittance at hard labor. Its reputation as a place of severe punishment was well-known, and being confined there was often a death sentence.

"Shocking, I know," she said with as goofy a grin as ever. "But I had to escape. It wasn't fair I

was sent there to begin with."

"Why...did they send you?" he asked.

"For being a Lostling," she answered, as though it should have been obvious.

"Is that...a crime?"

She frowned. "Some people think it is. They'll blame you for anything and lock you away on account of it. Like being an orphan can be helped. You know, we can't go on having a conversation if I don't know what to call you." Her voice was stern. She took a long drink.

"Oh." He looked crushed, as if that was the end of it.

She came up out of her bowl. "It's easily fixed," she said. "Just choose a name!"

He rebounded. "Oh! I don't...Will you...choose?"

"If you like! But then I'll own you forever."

He didn't blanch. "Okay," he said. "I...think I'd like that."

"Goodness, no! I didn't mean it, sorry! People *shouldn't* own each other."

"Oh." Now he looked confused. Maybe even disappointed.

Then they both sipped their tea while Hyrhyn scrutinized him from her comfortable position on the soft chair. He was so pensive, the way he crouched, as if ready to rise again at a moment's notice, the way his hands clenched and unclenched.

She wiggled her dry toes and watched as his eyes raced to catch their movement. Then she sat up, the blanket falling from around her shoulders.

"I know what you remind me of!" she announced.

He moved quick to adjust her blanket.

"When I was wee and may have still had a mother—I have few memories of that time and they're mostly a jumble, some of them I'm not even sure are real, though I like to think they are because they're all very pleasant—"

"That's nice," he said.

"Have *you* got a mother?" she asked.

"No," he said. Though his hair was in his face, she could see he was still a little misty-eyed.

"Did you ever?" she asked.

"I'm told she...died...when I was born."

"Oh, that's sad. She never knew you either."

"For the best," he whispered.

"Oh, not true. I think she should've been very sorry for it."

He looked uncomfortable, so she got back to the subject. "Anyway," she continued, "I remember my mother telling me about the Beforetimes. Do you know about the animals that lived before the Great Extinction?"

"I don't," he answered, politely.

"There were so many! My mother drew the shapes of them on the ground. Named their names. All kinds of shapes and sizes! And there was one with feet like a capra, large and shaggy-headed, and it had two horns turned back just like yours. She drew it special, with a kind and gentle face. Made me sad to know it was gone forever in the Great Extinction. That *anything* should be gone forever. That anyone should destroy anything so good and beautiful."

They were staring at one another intensely. Hyrhyn had leaned forward and he inclined toward her as well. For an instant it wasn't clear if

she was talking about the animal or the man in front of her, and she realized it too.

A rosy flush overtook her cheeks. "You have a kind and gentle face," she said. "Maybe at least that much can never be gone forever."

He was embarrassed, as unaccustomed to compliments as he was to receiving tea. Something flashed like firelight in his eyes and he cleared his throat. Once more he hitched Hyrhyn's blanket to cover her thin shoulders. Then he sat back to catch his breath.

Hyrhyn hugged the blanket as if it was a new and precious gift.

"Albojubatus," she told him, triumphantly. "That was its name!"

He almost smiled. "Okay. Thank you," he said.

Hyrhyn sensed his hesitation. "It's a whole big mouthful," she conceded. "We'll shorten it. What do you like? Albo? No, sounds like Elbow. Boju? Jubatus?"

"Juba," he said.

She smiled and all her teeth shined bright. "Yes," she said. "*Juba*. You can just forget that other name they call you."

His expression fell, deeper tension returning to his neck and shoulders. He *had* forgotten that other name until Hyrhyn reminded him. She realized too late she had broken their perfect private circle. The world outside threatened.

"Oh Juba," she said. "If you *are* running, keep running. We'll run together and never let them catch us."

Suddenly Ganga and Tess spilled back in from the kitchen where all this time their clatter of pans and utensils had grown more faint as Hyrhyn's

world had narrowed.

Tess' voice was arch as she crossed to the window where a sheet of gray sleet was the only view.

"This awful weather," she huffed. "Every season it comes back worse than the last. It used to snow in winter. Now it's just a long season of damp blight."

She looked at the two of them.

"I don't see it letting up," she told them. "If we're lucky you can be on your way in the morning. Hyrhyn, you can share our bed."

Hyrhyn finished her tea. "I like it by the fire," she said. "I want to stay with Juba."

"Oh it's Juba?" Tess raised her eyebrows at the Grasslander. "You have a name now."

The newly-named Juba gave a slight nod of acknowledgment. His own tea was still steaming, cupped between his copper gloves.

"We have root soup with wild onions. It's not much but Ganga insists you join us."

"I love root soup with wild onions!" Hyrhyn said, excited to be fed at all.

For the meal, they came to the table. Hyrhyn put her halter dress back on, which by then was ready to wear again. Juba was completely dry as if he had never been in the rain.

Tess regarded him suspiciously as she served his soup along with a small piece of quartered flatbread.

Hyrhyn crouched on her knees on the bench since she was too small to sit and reach comfortably, and she pounced on her own thin soup once it was put in front of her. Though they were provided with spoons, she lifted the bowl and

sipped and blew on it in alternating gulps. It was too hot to drink down.

No one else paid any mind to her manners, but Juba watched her attack the food in awe of her appetite.

"Aren't you hungry?" Tess asked him.

He was startled by her voice and embarrassed that he had been staring so openly. He cast his eyes to his own bowl, which had a few chopped roots and a long peel of onion floating in it.

"It's...cooling," he said.

"It'll cool faster if you stir it," Tess replied, her own spoon swishing in her bowl.

He took up the spoon and stirred the soup obediently.

"Thank you Ganga, this is delicious!" Hyrhyn said, already half-finished.

Afterwards there was no conversation. Juba took a sip and then kept stirring. Eventually Tess and Ganga finished and Tess collected the bowls.

Hyrhyn used her piece of bread to go around and around the bowl to get every bit of flavor. She licked her fingers and dabbed at crumbs on the table afterwards.

"I'm...slow," Juba said when Tess looked at him expectantly. "I...can...wash up."

"Oh yes," Hyrhyn said. "It's the least we can do after such a fine meal."

It had *not* been a fine meal. It scarcely filled their stomachs. But there was nothing false in Hyrhyn's enthusiasm; any day she had a meal she didn't have to scavenge or catch for herself was a great day. When hunting was poor, she ate nothing at all and chewed long stems of dry grass just to chase the hunger pangs away.

Tess relented and after asking whether the two needed anything more than the blanket she had already given, and receiving no requests, she took drowsy Ganga to bed, leaving Hyrhyn and Juba to settle themselves for the night.

Outside, the rain continued to buffet against the window.

"Would you like my soup?" Juba asked. He pushed the bowl and the bread to her before she had a chance to answer.

"Don't you want it?" she asked, surprised. "Aren't you hungry at all?"

"I don't...eat much," he told her.

Hyrhyn never questioned an opportunity for food. "Well, if you insist," she said, and tucked in before he could change his mind.

"I do," he said softly, enjoying again the voracious way she consumed it.

Halfway through, she lowered the bowl to belch. She laughed and was delighted to see how his eyes sparkled. As though watching her eat was his greatest pleasure.

"Hey," she said, "this soup is still warm. Can you believe it?"

He just nodded.

As before, she mopped at the dregs with the small piece of crumbly bread and tapped up all the crumbs after licking her finger.

"So good!" she declared. "A full belly and a toasty fire. We'll sleep well tonight!"

IV. THE HEARTH ONE SPARK, TWO HEARTS.

They didn't sleep well. They didn't sleep at all.

They cleaned the dishes as promised, Hyrhyn pouring sparingly from a Good Water reservoir into the small sink to wash and rinse, Juba returning the quickly-dried items to the cupboards that were too tall for her to reach.

Then they returned to the hearth, Hyrhyn in the comfortable chair, snuggled in the blanket, Juba on the floor, his chin on the soft bulge of the armrest. He so clearly wanted to be close and Hyrhyn combed her tiny pink-tipped fingers through the length of his hair that fanned across the faded fabric.

"Why were you crying in the forest when I found you?" Hyrhyn asked gently.

"I ran away," he said. "And I don't know where to go."

"We can go to the Shore," she said. "Then south. They say the fighting's not so bad."

"I want to, but..." He spoke painfully, as if he had been struck through the heart.

"The Mother's army has a very long arm," Hyrhyn responded.

"There are things...about me," he said, struggling.

"I know," Hyrhyn said.

"Monstrous things."

Now there were clouds in Hyrhyn's eyes. "Juba," she said softly, "I *know*. But whatever you've done: that's not who you are. And who hasn't done bad things? What they sent me to the Quarry for was nothing compared to what I did to escape. But I won't go back. And neither should you."

"It's too late," he said. He was on the verge of tears again, and turned his face to the side of the

chair.

She slipped down and sat as close as she dared, close enough he couldn't hide. "Changing direction is easy as saying yes, remember? It's never too late so long as you have Breath."

His eyes glittered, dark and vulnerable, yearning, but still afraid.

"I'm a Lostling," she reminded him. "I've felt all the fear and most of the hurt there is to be had in the world. I know what it is to be afraid. Let me be with you?"

"No one...ever wanted that...with me," he said. His voice dropped lower than his natural baritone, as if he feared that by making the statement she might rescind her offer.

"Me neither!" she answered. "I've been alone nearly my whole life. Most Lostlings find each other, travel in packs, work together. But when I was wee, they tore my hair and kicked me away because I'm very small. They didn't think I was useful. But I can do a lot of things. Being small is not the worst thing a person can be. Being mean is far worse."

He nodded, absorbing every word. "You're different," he said. "Not afraid."

"I'm stronger than anyone would think," she nodded. "You are too. We're the same."

They let that settle between them. Hyrhyn's heart ached at how warm it made her feel—what she always imagined it would be like to find her place of belonging.

"I didn't do it all myself," she then said. "Kind people helped. I try to be kind too. A single spark can kindle a large blaze, someone told me. Many Sparks have kept me warm."

"Sparks," he repeated, acknowledging the subtle shift in her emphasis.

"A Spark is hope. Mine, yours, everyone's. Without it, how would we live? Why would we *bother*?"

Her voice was rapturous, but she saw he struggled to see the source of her rapture. He knew little of kindness, and now she realized he understood little of hope as well.

"Say you'll come with me to the Shore," she begged. "I'm tired of being alone. I want a friend, a partner, someone to share the road...and my heart."

He exhaled a long breath as if his own heart had seized and he had to force himself to unclench the muscle to keep it beating.

"You're not saying no or calling me moony. You *do* feel it too," Hyrhyn said. "Juba, from the moment I saw you in the forest it was like...like my Spark already knew you. Like we had lost our way and now found each other again."

He leaned forward to bring his face close to hers, close enough to share Breath.

"Hyrhyn," he sighed. "This war..."

"Is it yours to fix? It's so much bigger than us."

He dropped his eyes.

Hyrhyn put a hand softly on his forearm. "Let me be with you. I'm small, but not useless." He glanced again up at her through the curtain of his hair. She could tell he wanted to say yes. "Say yes," she urged.

But he couldn't. Softly he covered her hand with his, the copper glove very warm and very heavy, but comforting, like a thick bed cover on a frigid night.

"What are you afraid of?" she asked. "The

Mother? Is there no Spark who can help?"

"Maybe," he answered. Then he said the words, weighted like lead: "My father."

"You have family? Where?"

"The Keep."

She was pensive and took a deep breath. "They say the Mother will take the Keep soon. She'll kill the King and anyone in her way. Oh Juba, if you have family there, you must go and warn them!"

He sighed. "They know," he said.

"We'll go together. You don't have to face it alone."

She hugged his arm. He tensed and the lamps in the room fluttered strangely. Everything about him was over-warm, but she enjoyed it after the chill of the rain. She sighed with contentment at the smell of leather and metal and smoke.

He didn't relax, but gradually placed his head against hers. They sat in silence and watched firewood burn out. Neither moved to rekindle it because the room was full of pleasant radiating heat.

"I don't want to sleep," he said, even as he yawned. "I don't want this to end."

She concurred with a contented hum. "Then I'll tell you my dreams and about the Shore, and maybe by the time the sun breaks you'll be convinced that you belong with me."

"I don't...need much convincing," he said.

She told him anyway, and he was content to listen as she spoke of her travels, nice people she met along the way, good things to eat, lucky finds, and dreams that stretched to infinity because in spite of the decay of everything around them, there was no limit to the hope she had for the future.

V. THE PARTING
AS IF *TRUE LOVE* COULD BE PARTED.

Tess emerged before daybreak. Hyrhyn and Juba were so intent on each other, neither took note as she swung on a woolly hood and slipped out the back kitchen door. She returned thirty minutes later, carrying a large brown lepus by its ragged ears.

"Sun is rising and the rain has stopped," she announced.

Neither Juba nor Hyrhyn was in a hurry to disentangle themselves. Tess flopped the lepus onto the table and crossed to put some kindling back on the fire.

"The cottage is quite warm for you having let the fire die," she scolded.

At last Hyrhyn got up to stretch her arms and legs, and investigate the carcass on the table. Juba followed, knees cracking as he stood. Though the two had been comfortable together on the floor, he hadn't moved at all for many hours and was very stiff.

"You have to go now," Tess addressed him directly.

"Oh Tess," Hyrhyn frowned. "Is it too much to ask to stay for breakfast, seeing you have brought this feast?"

"Did I not feed and shelter him already? This perfect stranger from the Mother's army? Have I not been courteous? You could be the Harrower himself for all we know!"

Juba cringed. "It's all right," he told Hyrhyn. "She is right. She's been very kind. It's time to go."

He sounded sad as ever.

"The road is clear," Tess said dismissively. "I just came that way." Then she went to the kitchen and fetched a skinning knife to make herself busy.

"Lucky catch," Hyrhyn said.

"I'll give you a haunch and then be on your way," Tess replied.

"Without even saying goodbye to Ganga?" Hyrhyn asked. "Oh please, Tess, let me prepare it. It's the least I can do."

She nimbly took the knife from Tess' hand and pulled the lepus across the table toward her. "Sure *is* lucky," she marveled. "Especially since it's days old and quite brined!"

Tess started to back away, but Hyrhyn grabbed her by the wrist, smashed her hand onto the tabletop and then drove the skinning knife right through the loose flesh between her thumb and forefinger into the tabletop. Tess opened her mouth to shriek but Hyrhyn shoved her fist in so hard that Tess couldn't clamp down to bite.

"Don't even," Hyrhyn warned. "You wouldn't want to upset Ganga, would you?"

Tess choked, tears flooding her eyes, she shook her head.

Hyrhyn withdrew her fist and wiped Tess' spittle on the backside of her skirt, trusting her to keep quiet. "Whatever you've done, I think Ganga won't like it. You might as well tell us."

"There's soldiers...," she panted in a hushed tone. "And men from the Quarry."

"Tess! How could you be so discourteous?"

"I didn't mean to betray *you*," she cried. "I only told them about *him*!"

Hyrhyn turned to Juba. He was standing behind

her with his jaw dropped, aghast. For having such a tiny frame, Hyrhyn proved formidably powerful indeed.

Tess pleaded. "They traded the lepus for information. It wasn't about *you*, Lostling!"

"Juba is my *friend*!" Hyrhyn huffed at her. She was still leaning on the knife that pinned Tess to the table. "Soldiers of what army? Are they coming?"

"They're waiting in the road. The King's men. I told them I would send him, *not you!*"

"How long? How long will they wait?" Hyrhyn demanded.

"I don't know how long!" Tess sobbed.

Suddenly Ganga emerged in her nightdress. "Tess?" she said worriedly as she cast her blind eyes in the general direction of the commotion at the table. "What's wrong? Has something happened?"

"Nothing's wrong, Ganga," Hyrhyn called over cheerfully, even as she made a sign for Tess to stay quiet. "We're leaving and wanted to say goodbye is all."

She pulled the knife from where it was lodged in the table through Tess' skin. Tess bit the back of her wrist to keep from crying out.

"Must you go so early?" Ganga wondered. "I can make tea."

"Oh, Ganga, that's so nice, but we have a long way to travel. Thank you for everything." She went to the old woman and kissed her cheeks affectionately, still holding the skinning knife in one hand and the dead lepus in the other.

"Very well, be warm in the Spark, Burn Bright," Ganga said, blissfully ignorant.

Ganga insisted on gifting them a whole day-old

flatbread. Tess watched sullenly, her hand wrapped in a towel as Ganga kissed Hyrhyn's cheek at the door. The old woman ran her wrinkled hand down the length of Juba's arm as a sort of reassurance.

"Burn Bright," she blessed him as well.

He cleared his throat uncomfortably. Smoke curled out of his nose and he quickly waved it away.

The morning was bitterly cold, the wet ground covered in frost. Clouds still threatened, but trundled slowly to the east. Outside the cottage, standing in the crust of half-frozen mud and looking together across the deforested landscape, Hyrhyn could see there was still shock in Juba's tense expression.

"Did I upset you, Beloved?" she asked. Then she huffed. "None of that would've been necessary if she hadn't sold us out. She'll *think* about it next time."

He didn't have to think about it. "No. I'm surprised...not upset," he said.

She smiled, reassured. "Small," she said. "Not useless."

"Not at all."

She took his hand and he let her. She scanned the wintered forest, anxious about the decision, but knowing it must be made. "I have to go. If the Quarrymen catch me, it'll be very bad. Can't take the road or the riverbed. I'll cut through the forest."

"I can deal with them," he agreed.

Hyrhyn's brown rumped. "Juba," she said painfully. "Tess said they were the King's men. They can take you to the Keep."

Juba let her hand go, surprised by her words. She took from him the tied-up towel that held the

lepus, the flatbread, and the knife.

"But...I want to be with you," he said.

"Not like this," she said, her own heart breaking.

"Always running," he nodded, understanding. "You're right."

"Go to the Keep," she said. "Go to your father. It's what you need to do."

"Alone?" he asked, his breath heaving.

"You're not alone," she said, reaching up to touch his face. "Beloved."

"Hyrhyn," he whispered. "The war will end soon. I'll end it. Then we'll find each other." For the first time, he sounded confident, almost hopeful. "I'll find you. Beloved."

"At the Shore," she said.

He nodded.

Hyrhyn caught the sound of horsemen tramping through brittle branches in the far woods. "They're coming," she said. "I won't say goodbye, Juba. This isn't goodbye."

She clasped his hands and he lowered his forehead so she could touch hers to his.

"Soon," she told him.

"Soon," he echoed.

Then they parted as young lovers do, trusting the Spark in their very full hearts.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I love to write, I love to draw. I love winter and tea, Italian ice, and talking animals who wear cravats. I own a modest collection of nickel weeklies of my own, and a *massive* collection of 19th century-themed paper dolls. I eat a lot of crackers and never say no to sushi. I miss owning a dog, but one's heart can only break so much. If anything here resonates with you too, welcome to this adventure.

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<https://lookingland.com/afterlands>