

**AFTERLANDS**

# BEFORETIMES

VOL. 1 }

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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## THE EMPEROR

WORDS AND ILLUS. BY BOOTS



Laria looked up at the wretched thing, indignant and furious at the edge of the slanted roof. "Come down here, girl," she ordered. "No one is going to hurt you." "They'll hurt me!" she said, refusing, "though I did nothing wrong!"



**AFTERLANDS  
BEFORETIMES**

**BY BOOTS**

Volume I

*Afterlands: Beforetimes*, Volume I, “The Emperor” 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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*An injustice had been done.  
So the People of the Mountain  
and the Grasslands went to war.*

# THE EMPEROR

## I. FAREWELLS

IN WHICH LARIA LAYS DOWN HER RANK.

Was the war over? Who was in charge now? Were they even an army now that the Mother was dead? Everyone looked to Emperor Laria for answers, but she had none.

Laria was the last of the Mother's emperors. Most were killed at the Harrowing. Others had already disbanded and shuffled back to what was left of their homes and families. The Legion was all Laria had and she wasn't sure how to let it go.

They narrowly escaped the fate of the others at Sandbottom Valley, having been ordered to sweep the King's Keep, which they found in turmoil on arrival. By the time they got word of the Harrowing, there was nothing to be done. They made no attempt to approach the ridge because of the intensity of the still smoldering heat. Laria was not eager to see what was down there anyway.

Now they camped in the foothills of Lastcat Mountain and General Bos refilled Laria's cup from a half empty bottle on the table between them. The weight of the decisions that needed to be made cast a somber tone as Bos whittled away at a broken spoke, fashioning a crude effigy. The figure's face was just pinholes for eyes and a mouth opened as if in a scream.

"I think I'll be a carpenter in the next life," Bos

announced with levity.

“Will you be any better at it than you are as a sculptor?” Laria chided.

“I like to work with wood. It’ll be more precious than gold one day.”

Both fell silent because they knew that it was already close to the truth.

After a while, Bos put down his knife. “We’re the last,” he said. He chose his words carefully as Laria was sensitive on the subject. “The Legion looks to your leadership alone.”

“I was appointed by the Mother,” Laria replied. “What authority does my appointment carry now?”

“The *Once* Mother,” Bos corrected. She glared at him, though he was right. “Once” was the appropriate title now that the woman had been catapulted into the After.

“Are we all that remains between the Law and anarchy?” Laria replied. “Is it our responsibility to govern?”

“Was anyone governing before? Seems even the Kingdom was long out of the business of governing.” Of course Bos would say this because he was a Grasslander and Grasslanders who fought for the Mother were really fighting for independence from being under *anyone’s* rule.

“What would you do?” Laria asked.

Bos now poured himself another cup, eyes shying down the length of his long snout to peer at her from behind his tusks. “The people are tired and worn out,” he said. “With no one to tell them it’s over, how can they be sure unless the Legion is disbanded?”

“As if the King did not keep a standing army

even in times of peace?"

"Once King," Bos again corrected. Now he was just provoking her on purpose as he grinned through the words. Laria did not grin back.

"Once King, False King, King Pretender," Laria said, tossing back her drink with disgust. "The titles are meaningless now. All of them."

"Including ours," lamented Bos.

Laria glanced to the campfires of her Legion where men and women shared drinks and stories and no doubt speculated as to their future as they patiently awaited word.

They all knew what was coming. Their military exchange script was worthless and tonight's meal of horsemeat and rough bread was near the last of their food stores. One of the officers suggested slaughtering their benus in addition to the unserviceable horses, but for all her practicality Laria refused to consider it. These roly inoffensive beasts, last of the large land animals, were near extinction and it was the cruelest of fates to make a meal of them after years of tireless service hauling the armies around the Continent.

There was reality to be reckoned with, however.

"If we can't feed ourselves, I fear the soldiers will turn to banditry," Laria said.

"Have heard of such things already," Bos answered. "It's not as if there's much to plunder, but if there's something to be had it can be taken."

"What they do once discharged is on them. I hope they have more honor."

"You know they do," Bos assured her.

It was clear from her words that Laria had already made up her mind. She drank down the

last of her cup and made a face at the gritty dregs at the bottom. Then she rose and Bos, as a matter of habit, rose with her.

“Stay,” she told him. Her voice was unusually gentle. “I’ll walk the perimeter, then turn in. We’ll call Assembly in the morning. Tell the Quartermaster to be prepared to distribute our resources. We’ve little to give, but can divide it fairly among them.”

The general saluted.

“Good night Bos,” Laria then said. She was feeling unusually sentimental and touched his forearm as she passed. She knew he wanted to speak, but to his credit, he remained silent.

Laria tramped the bivouac, silently acknowledging the pickets who saluted, gratified to see that even under these circumstances none were sloppy or careless about this tedious duty. They were loyal and good, all of them, and she hated to disappoint them.

But she would have to. The army could not sustain itself and it was time they looked to the future, even if that future seemed very uncertain.

Laria had never felt such uncertainty. She always expected one day for the war to end, but not like this. There should’ve been a glorious homecoming, laurels and feasting, revelries across the land. But in the end there were too many graves and nothing to celebrate. Nothing was gained and the lands were depleted. Everyone lost.

She tried not to focus on loss. Twenty years in the Mother’s army had taught her to push her personal needs to the rear. But as she reflected on her service, it was loss that stood out in bold relief. Some who served her now were the children of

soldiers with whom she had enlisted. Too many were orphans for whom the Legion was their only family.

Passing another picket, she recalled, too, how many of her soldiers were replacements recruited from among people left behind the Mother's destructive roughshod run of the Harrower. They were Once King's deserters and refugees, dispossessed Grasslanders, loyal Forestlanders, and people of the Mountain who chose from the start to side against the Once King. People of divided lands intermingled in dutiful harmony.

The war brought them together, but the dissolution of the armies meant these people would go back to their homes—and find what? Even if homes were waiting—many were not—what homecoming would they receive? What they fought for was every bit as destroyed as what they fought against.

Laria had nothing waiting on the far Shore. Her family's house, if it was standing, and a fishing village full of people who disapproved of her decision to join the Mother's army. Just like her father.

"Daughter, I've never discouraged you in any pursuit," he had said when she stood at the supper table and announced her imminent departure. Had she really been so young and full of Spark—brash enough to weather her Beloved father's sad disappointment?

"I believe in the righteousness of the Mother's Cause," Laria told him.

He nodded gravely. "I believe you do," he said. "And that you've given this matter due consideration."

"I have, Father."

"But I would be remiss as a parent if I did not express my concern. You've heard my arguments and you've rejected my wisdom."

That was harsh and it pained Laria to hear it. She frowned but stayed silent because, after all, she was an obedient and well-brought-up daughter.

"The heartbreak of raising one's children to think for themselves is that they will," he then said with a wan smile. "I do not condone your choice and will not support the Mother. But I also remind you that whatever your allegiances and where they take you, you may always come home." He looked at her sternly now. "No matter what happens," he told her, "promise me you understand these doors are forever open."

He spoke so seriously, like a man who knew bad things would come. Bad things for Laria and, more ominously, *from* Laria. The kind of things that might make her too ashamed to return, for which, in her pride, she might find it too unbearable to seek help.

"I understand, Father," she told him with the same stoicism that would make her a ruthless emperor one day. But over the next twenty years she would not stray from her chosen course, from her Oath, from the certitude of being right. Not until the end.

Until now.

Now she questioned everything: the Mother's motives for usurping her brother, the role of the Harrower, her own loyalty, her leadership, and all of the sacrifices made—for an objective that even now she had difficulty articulating in a way that made sense.

“Is it true?” the last picket was bold enough to address her after the courtesies of the salute. “Are we to be discharged? Is the war really over?”

“The war is over,” she said for the first time outside of her tight circle of officers.

He wanted to press, but didn’t. She wanted to linger, but had to keep moving. The two stared at one another, holding Breath, then Laria marched away.

## II. DISMISSAL FROM IMPERATOR TO CIVILIAN.

Laria didn’t sleep that night. She was aware of some altercation well past midnight, but didn’t get up to investigate. All the urgency had gone out of her. In the morning she put on her dress uniform and made sure all the fittings were polished to a shine.

Her intention was to Call to Order, make a brief speech—which despite thinking on all night, she was not prepared to deliver—then dismiss the Legion one final time. Instead, she stepped out of her quarters to find a Disciplinary Assembly called.

Ranks were at attention, the Provost stood with two guards and a man in restraints. Laria knew her people intimately and recognized the young soldier as a recruit within the last year who enlisted after deserting the Once King’s ranks. She could not immediately recall his name, but understood he had served without complaint or infraction.

Until now, with Laria just moments away from disbanding them.

“What are the charges?” she asked, frowning

with distaste at the thought of ending their tenure on this sour note.

“Disorderly conduct and striking a superior,” the Provost said. He then went on to explain without any dramatic embellishment. “This occurred during the early morning guard, between Private Neel and Sergeant Bale. I was the arresting officer.”

Laria now remembered the name. Neel had received a commendation for initiative at the Battle of Rungrun.

Commence with the discipline?” asked the Provost.

“Neel, what have you to say for yourself?” Laria asked.

The young man was surprised by the question. Everyone was. It was not customary for an Emperor to address an enlisted man directly in the course of such proceedings. But nothing would be the familiar custom among them again.

Neel bowed his head in the courtesy of addressing a senior officer. “Emperor,” he said, “there’s a rumor the Legion is to be disbanded. I felt such tattle-talk was...disloyal, if not downright treason. The fight arose from this disagreement.”

“Did your *disagreement* warrant striking your sergeant?”

“Ay,” he answered. “He was being a right ass-smear about it.”

There was a slight titter among the crowd, sniggering covered by hands. Laria glared at the company closest to her and the noises stopped.

“The matter should have been reported in an appropriate manner,” Laria said.

“I lost my temper, Emperor,” Neel

acknowledged. "I dishonored my Oath."

The tension in the crowd was palpable. It was Neel who would be punished for questioning the inevitability of their discharge, but Laria knew the concern was on the hearts and minds of *all* the soldiers.

"I waive your corporal discipline," Laria told him firmly. "You owe Sergeant Bale both apology and recompense. Return to your rank."

The words should have been shocking; Laria was a fair but firm disciplinarian and Neel knew he had earned the punishment due.

If anything, Neel looked disappointed at being dismissed because he knew then—as they all did—that the rumor must therefore be true.

Laria waited as the Provost unshackled and dismissed Neel, then cleared the court before the wooden dais on which she stood, flanked by her senior officers. She was grateful for Bos' steady presence at her right hand. She wouldn't admit it, but she was going to miss him.

Oratory was not one of her strongest skills, but Laria was articulate and succinct in her language, unsentimental in laying out the facts of what the death of the Mother and the devastation of the Harrowing at Sandbottom Valley meant for them.

But as she wound down her brief remarks, she scanned the sea of faces, their eyes shining with emotion, and she had to pause and collect her thoughts. They weren't so much in her head where she usually expected to find them, but in her chest, which was tight around her heart in a way she hadn't experienced since the death of her husband.

Rhaphys too has been a good soldier, Laria thought without bias, for she was spare in her

praise even to those she respected and admired. But these soldiers had done something even Rhaphys had not: they survived the war.

“You served well,” she said to them, feeling an unfamiliar sting in her eyes and flush to her cheeks. “You fulfilled and honored your Oath. It is my great privilege to discharge you from the duties you have so faithfully executed. May this honor carry you forward in your next life as you bear the experience of your service with pride.”

Then she paused one last time to soak in a memory, straightened her back tall, and gave them the salute that for years had been given to her as Emperor. In unison, the army returned the gesture. Then, with a curt nod to the officers, the calls to fall out began.

“You also served well,” Bos told her before she could leave the dais.

She looked back with a storm in her eyes. “To what end?” she asked.

That it hadn’t ended in victory may as well have meant defeat. Though Laria would not couch it in those terms to the soldiers filing from Assembly in a numb daze, Bos knew it was what she felt. He served alongside her long enough to know how deeply this cut.

Nevertheless, he went about preparing for departure, allowing her the space to do the same in peace. She insisted that her attendants and adjutants see to their own needs, and though some offered the courtesy of a protest, they respected her too much to argue.

Her groom even bowed as was the custom of old Mountain people before the Once King. At first Laria was embarrassed, but then touched and

deeply honored. There could be no greater compliment.

At the end of the day, despite many soldiers having nowhere to go, more than half the Legion had departed. They travelled in packs, accustomed to living together, marching together, having formed their unique bands of disparate souls. They might not cling to one another long down the road, but they would begin this new journey as family

Laria, however, would walk alone. She was not reconciled to being a civilian. She had never wanted nor expected to be one. Her officers took it as Imperator confidence and independence. Bos, however, knew Laria feared an ordinary life. She resented giving up the power she had worked so hard for.

"We'd still follow you if you would lead," Bos told her.

She was adjusting her saddle. Though others preferred to travel by daylight, Laria favored the cool quiet of the night. If nothing else, it made it easier to not look back.

"I'm going to the Shore," she said. "And I'm going alone."

"There's nothing for you there," he replied. Her responding glare told him what he already knew: he was overstepping; she would not change her mind.

"Well," Bos said, "So long as you know you don't have to." He knew she understood this, but felt the need to make it explicit.

"Bos, you have been my right hand since Rhaphys," she then said, softening her expression, though it was a challenge. "Your loyalty and camaraderie made his passing less painful and I

appreciate your words. But I find direction comes easier when there's only one finger pointing the way."

"For now," Bos appended with a barely concealed grin. "Perhaps after some time on the Shore staring at the lonely cold sea, you'll want for company again."

She offered him a smirk. "I've no doubt I'll be able to find you then, if I just follow the trail of clumsy woodwork."

He laughed aloud, always amused by her willingness to share even a small sliver of humor. "How apropos when I was just about to present you with a parting gift!"

He drew from a pouch a hastily carved tinderbox that was a common token reminder of the Spark from which all living things were created. And yes, it was clumsily carved, though charming in its crudeness. It made Laria smile.

Still, when the Once Emperor saw that the resources had been fairly distributed, she made her leave without fanfare or goodbyes, slipping into the dark and bringing to an end seventeen generations of Royal Order on the Continent.

### III. THE ROAD

IT NEVER LEADS WHERE ONE EXPECTS.

She took with her two horses she'd managed to salvage, and a benu named Odo to carry a light pack containing her few personal items and some supplies for the journey to the Shore. She expected it would take three days if she went directly, though chose a circuitous route. She wanted to see the country and what was left now the fighting was

over, to get a sense of what it would take to rebuild something like Order across the lands.

She chose a road through the Grasslands because it was the most devastated in the final battles and she wanted to see the breadth of damage. It was the Mother's vindictive initiative, but as Emperor, Laria gave the direct orders.

She never questioned it until the Harrower was brought in. Now Laria wondered how she could have aligned herself so recklessly. She believed in an honorable war and the principles for which the Mother justified her actions. But the way the destruction had escalated, the livelihoods and lives lost....

They said the Once King intended to surrender at Sandbottom Valley. No one could agree how the Harrowing happened. Some said the Mother refused his offer and the Once King killed her. Some said she killed him. Some said the Harrower just killed them all.

Laria didn't want to know the truth. The Mother was not the woman she had admired from her youth, who preached justice and cursed her brother for having sired a Harrower in secret to begin with. What was worse: the man who fathered the beast or the woman who actually turned it loose on the Continent?

Laria felt betrayed and the desolate landscape echoed the hollow in her heart.

*This* was the reward of her life's work. Not a just world, but a dying one.

In the Grassland town of Pebble Creek she stopped to rest her animals and find a meal better than the dry army rations that had sustained her for several days. Displaced Mountain people hailed

her on sight and welcomed her like a hero.

She was invited to supper and though hesitant to accept, found herself an honored guest at a table set with roasted roots, braised rodent meat, and plenty of beer made from a local barley that was reaped before the crops were destroyed.

“Will they replant it?” she asked while savoring a hint of nuttiness that floated beneath a more prominent bitter foretaste.

“Who is they?” asked her host. He was a large ruddy fellow who clearly enjoyed the drink too much and had the broken veins in his nose to show it. “The locals are scattered and the farms requisitioned. I suppose it’s not out of the question to try to raise crops this summer, but labor will be scarce and water hard to come by. It’s turned to poison all over.”

“Where has everyone gone?” Laria asked. The others at the dinner seemed to be army dropouts who were wounded and cashiered. Many were missing essential limbs. It was unlikely they’d be successful at more than just meagre subsistence on their own.

The ruddy host shrugged. “To the cities – safety in numbers, I suppose. I don’t pretend to understand what the Grasslanders do. Not that there’s much of anybody left regardless. What the war didn’t kill was taken by famine this winter, and disease. Even without the Harrowing, I don’t think the war could have lasted. They say the Once King was quite mad in the end.”

Perhaps the Mother too, Laria thought.

A woman at the table, close to Laria’s age and blinded in battle the year before, asked after any new faction rising from the ashes. “Someone will

have to take charge, don't you think?" she asked. "Who will lead the people?"

"They'll have to do for themselves," Laria answered mildly.

The woman was not comforted by the response, clearly hoping Laria might have a stronger opinion on the subject. But Laria wasn't interested in that kind of leadership. She was a soldier, not a politician. If these people wanted to set up a new government, they'd have to do it without her.

"We'll fall to anarchy," the woman said disconsolately.

"No one has energy for that," replied the ruddy host. "We're tired of fighting and what would we fight for anyway? Scorched earth? It'll be fight enough just to survive now all's said and done."

Laria knew it was true. How long before the people began to squabble over their dwindling resources? Laws and courtesies had always existed, but who would enforce Order? And if someone *did* step up, would they do so justly?

"What will you do now with no army?" the host then asked her.

It was the question she dreaded most. "I'm going to the Shore," she said because she knew that much at least. "To see if my father's house still stands."

"Your father was a foreigner, a diplomat, I understand," he replied. "Will you seek your original people?"

Laria shook her head and finished her drink. "I've no interest in traveling by sea. This is my home and I do not intend to abandon it."

Even as the words left her lips, she wondered at this foolish loyalty. It had kept her fighting for the

Mother long after she was disillusioned. She also didn't want to think about her father. This was not the end he would have wished for her, for *so many* reasons.

"Will you cut your warrior's braids?" asked another fellow, drunk enough not to mind his manners over such a personal question.

"To cut one's braids is a sign of defeat," she reminded him, scanning those around her to see whose hair was still arranged in the military style. Some among them had cropped or combed their locks out. Laria softened her tone when she saw the distress in their eyes. "In time, I may loosen mine as you have yours," she said in a conciliatory way.

The following day, on the road South, Laria received a much different reception. Here she crossed paths with Grasslanders from ruined principalities across the plains. They traveled in great herds, carrying their few possessions in rucksacks and handcars.

Dust rose from their slow winding column and the wind carried the trail like a white flag in retreat. Laria pulled a scarf over her nose and mouth so as not to breathe in the great cloud, but even with her head and face covered, there was no mistaking the design and insignia of her uniform.

This enormous wave of tired, shuffling bodies parted to make way for her, and as they forked their path, she could feel their contempt and fear, see it in the eyes of small children pulled along by caregivers who directed them in hushed tones not to stare.

For the first time, Laria, who had never cared what anyone thought of her, wondered at being an object of scorn.

Knowing the grim state of things from where she had come, she also wondered at their destination. They were traveling from lands reduced to nothing to more of the same.

There was not a uniform nor a visible weapon among them, though some used staves for walking. These were displaced civilians—hungry, thirsty, exhausted—and had likely been walking for days. The children were listless, the sick and elderly were carried in barrows and litters. On the side of the road, a woman sat to rest and suckle her baby. Her eyes were sunken with despair.

Water was scarce and the land was quickly becoming a desert. Spring would bring rains, but would it be enough and in time for these people with nowhere to go? The column closed up again when Laria came to the end of it. The whole time they passed, no one said a word. When Laria looked back over her shoulder at the dissipating dust, she felt haunted—as if they had merely been the spirits of innocent victims of the war.

And perhaps they felt the same chill on seeing her: a passing demon to remind them that the war may be over, but they carried it still.

That night she used her side-arm knife to sever her braids and made a burnt offering of them to the Spark—not that she believed in the old religions, but it still felt appropriate. Then she tied up what remained of her cropped hair in bits of red ribbon that had been threaded through the braids before. It wasn't as common a sign of mourning as black ash across the eyes, but it would serve well enough to tell of her grief.

#### IV. THE WATERING HOLE

LARIA DOESN'T FISH, BUT STILL MAKES A CATCH.

Eventually Laria came to a rest stop that boasted of a well from which potable water could be drawn. There was a city several leagues further, but Laria decided to take a chance and water her animals since they badly needed it.

There were horses drinking from a trough when she arrived and though they wore locally-woven saddle blankets, both bore the briar circle brand of the Mother's cavalry.

Under an awning near the stone well, two men in partial uniforms sat at a table sipping from canteens. Laria dismounted near the trough and called over to them.

"Does it taste of sulfur?" she asked.

"No worse than any other source in a dozen leagues," answered one of the men who wore his hair in knots. She knew then they were *not* soldiers of the Mother's army—or were indifferent ones—for Laria was still in full uniform yet they made no courtesy to her rank.

Laria wasn't interested in trouble, so she went about arranging her horses and benu. The benu, usually a polite and gentle creature, pushed his way to the front and dunked his thin snout to drink deep from the trough.

"Steady Odo," she patted him on the head, "there's enough for everyone."

She paid a coin to refill her skein with water from a boiling station set up under the awning. The boiler-tender barely paid her mind. Laria disliked having eyes on her when she was Emperor but now she felt strange that in this company no one seemed even mildly curious.

She moved to an adjacent table to get out of the late winter wind which had been biting at her cheeks for days. Long hours of rocking in the saddle didn't bother her, but she was glad to rest on a solid bench for a while. Within seconds, her eyes drooped closed.

A shout startled her back to her feet.

The knot-haired man had bounded off his bench to the trough. At first Laria thought he was going for her horse and steel sang as she drew her saber.

But the man had lunged to catch hold of a young woman—scarcely a woman as she was so tiny—who had crept between the horses and now dangled by the wrist from his meaty hand. She kicked frantically.

"Let me go!"

She hoisted herself with unexpected strength given her spindly arms, and sunk her teeth into the back of the man's hand.

Knot-hair yowled and threw her off violently. She tumbled into the dust, head over heels to end sitting upright, her long tangle of white thistle-like hair all in her face.

She flung it back with an impatient huff and pouted at the man who loomed over her. "What's the big idea!" she demanded.

"You bit me!" he answered, shaking his hand where her teeth had nearly broken his skin. "You little beast! You'll learn some courtesy!"

But before he could catch her, she scrambled out of his grasp and launched herself up the side of the awning and onto the corrugated top. A heavier person would've brought down the whole rickety affair, but the girl weighed next to nothing. She perched as light as a bird on the slant from where

she could taunt the man well out of reach.

"Pick on someone your own size!" she snapped. "The trough is free – I'm allowed to drink!"

"You'll have to come down eventually, Lostling!" Knot-hair said as he nursed his wounded hand. "And don't pretend for a minute you're here about a drink!"

Lostlings were seldom treated with any courtesy – their feral upbringing often meant they had none themselves. To make matters more complicated, *this* Lostling had stripes down her back, which Laria had caught sight of as she flew up the awning, her oversized rain wrap flapping up in the wind. She was Old Mixed Blood: Forestlander and something else, Laria guessed by her remarkably fair hair and skin. It put the girl in a dubious class too often exploited by others.

"Leave the girl alone, she is traveling with me," the Once Emperor said impulsively.

"You didn't ride up with her," the second questionable soldier said. "Hey! You should be thanking us – it's your horse she aimed to steal!"

"You can't steal your own property," Laria countered. "I said: the girl is with me." Then she turned to look up at the wretched thing, indignant and furious at the edge of the slanted roof. "Come down here, girl," she ordered. "No one is going to hurt you."

"*They'll* hurt me!" she said, refusing, "though I did *nothing* wrong!"

There would be no talking her down. Laria knew if she refused, the men would deduce the two had nothing to do with each other. So she rounded on the men instead.

"What should I thank you for? That you terrified

my friend and now she's up a roof? Thanks indeed!"

"She bit me!" cried Knot-hair.

"Yes, and you deserved it for grabbing her. Perhaps you should be on your way."

The second man took a step forward, intending to protest, but Laria coolly leveled her saber in his general direction. It wasn't quite a threat, but clearly a warning. The man wasn't armed and wisely backed away. Knot-hair had a dagger at his belt but enough sense not to draw it.

"You're not men of the Mother's Legion. Just cowards bullying a helpless girl."

"I'm not helpless!" the girl protested.

Laria ignored her, maintaining perfect focus on the men, who exchanged glances warily. "You were quick to accuse her of theft, but maybe I should inquire as to where you procured your own horses? Or, indeed, that sergeant's coat that looks too badly hemmed for a non-commissioned officer. Even one discharged from the service."

"No trouble," Knot-hair said. "And clearly no gratitude from the likes of you. Keep the dirty Lostling. Let her be your problem."

With that, the men swung onto their saddles and plodded off, feigning a casual air. Knot-hair kept glancing back in case Laria followed.

Laria watched them go, remaining perfectly steady with her saber still drawn. She was determined to make sure they were properly intimidated and would pose no threat down the road. She didn't know their story and didn't want to.

The boiler-tender watched all this, large placid eyes fixed nowhere in particular. He chewed with a

slow grinding motion of his jaw at a long stick of wild orchard grass.

Laria sheathed her saber and turned to the girl.

"Come down," she ordered again with impatience. "Now!"

The girl climbed down, but kept her distance. If she wanted to run, she could've done so easily. Laria was not actually interested in catching her.

"What were you trying to steal? My bow or my horse?" she asked. "Or both?"

"I never so much as stole a nut off a tree! I'm no thief!" the girl huffed. She set her hands on her hips and looked well-prepared to put the matter to a fight if needed.

Laria tried not to be amused. At any rate, she had no desire to get bit. "By what name do they call you, Lostling?"

The girl hesitated, predictably distrustful. "You're a soldier," she said instead. "Why did you tell those men I was your friend?"

"So they would leave you alone."

"If you would lie about that, what else might you lie about? And they call *me* a thief!"

"I'm an Emperor—or was. Far as I'm concerned, I can call you whatever I want. Only the Mother gives me orders."

"The *dead* Mother you mean," said the girl. "I heard she was killed in a battle up North. I'm heading there myself to see with my own eyes if it's true."

The way the girl corrected her on the subject of the Mother should have angered Laria, but it reminded her of Bos and she could only smirk at the girl's cheek.

"I will save you the trouble of a long journey

then, Lostling," she offered in reply. "It's true, so there's no cause to go."

## V. COMING AND GOING

### THE SPARK KNOWS WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS.

The Lostling grew excited and, forgetting any fear or shyness, came at Laria suddenly.

"Did you see it happen?" she asked. "Tell me everything!"

"I wasn't there," Laria said, to her crushing disappointment. "But it's no less true. Of what interest is her death to you?"

"Her death?" the Lostling said. "Of no interest at all! But my Beloved—he must've been there and it's him I'm looking for."

Laria was surprised to hear this. The girl looked so small to have a lover. And yet there was something in her voice—an earnestness alongside her innocence.

"Is he a soldier?" Laria asked, knowing she might have to deliver unpleasant news.

"Not exactly," the Lostling said. She looked very thoughtful as if she wasn't sure how to answer. "He's Grasslander-looking. Very large and has huge chewy thighs!" She held out her hands to indicate the girth of them, and indeed they seemed massive.

"You chewed his thighs?" Laria asked, even more amused now.

"Not yet! But I plan to, first thing once I get him out of his pants!"

Laria wanted to laugh, but the fact that this Beloved was likely dead stilled her mirth. There was no reason to put off telling the girl, but Laria

stalled. "What's your name?" she asked again, this time more gently.

"Hyrhyn," said the girl, sensing the shift in Laria's voice.

Laria was surprised. "You have a proper name," she observed.

"I don't know if it has any meaning," the girl replied. Most Lostlings had no family and no formal names. They were called things like Scraps, Chatty, Stink, and Big.

"I don't either, but it's a Forestlander name. Where's your caregiver, your family?"

The girl's face darkened. "In the After? There was a storm...or a battle. We were separated."

"How long have you —"

"What's with all the questions? Maybe I have a few for you!" Hyrhyn then snapped, though there was no anger behind her words.

"All right," Laria said, taking a seat under the awning. "Ask your questions."

The girl joined her on the bench, closer now than Laria was comfortable with. But there was something about her: she had all the inquisitiveness of her Forestlander heritage, but without the expected cagey-ness.

Now the girl was looking at Laria's uniform, her eyes wide and covetous at the sight of so many shiny buttons. It was clear from her body language that she wanted to touch, but wisely restrained herself from doing so.

"What a uniform!" she marveled. "The color tells me you're from the Mother's army, An Emperor must be very important to have such nice things! You've probably been everywhere and seen everything of the war!"

“If you’d like me to disabuse you of any romantic notions of it, I’m happy to oblige.”

The girl made an exaggerated face of disgust. “Romantic! The war? Oh, it’s awful!”

Laria couldn’t help herself. She laughed.

“Not you, of course,” the girl then added more solemnly. “I expect you had a job. Though it’s a job I wouldn’t wish on anybody.”

“I don’t disagree,” Laria replied, taking no offense.

“I’m sure much of your business is no business of mine,” the girl then said. “I have only one question: why’d you change the subject just then when you spoke of the last battle?” Her expression was serious and concerned.

Laria wondered at the perspective of this Lostling: what ideas she had formed of the war, the world they lived in—such as it was. So far as Laria could see, she travelled with nothing. No pack, no company, only leather stockings and no shoes—and a garment it would be generous to call a rag.

Laria considered the most tactful way to explain. “It was a battle to end all battles,” she said.

“It ended all battles?”

“Yes. The war is over. But you knew that because you knew the Mother is dead.”

“Is...everybody dead?” she then asked. By the slight tremor in her voice, it was clear she anticipated the answer.

“Yes,” Laria told her straight. “There was...a Harrowing. Everyone was killed. If your Beloved was in the valley, he was killed as well. I’m very sorry.”

“No survivors at all?” Hyrhyn asked. She rose from the bench and stepped away, where the

ground sloped to parched and still-wintered meadow.

"There were scouts on the ridge," Laria said. "Only they survived to tell it."

Hyrhyn spun back to her with a burst of inspiration. "Then they might not have told true! Or not seen the survivors," she reasoned.

"I don't think there's much room to hope," Laria said.

"Oh, but there's *always* room," Hyrhyn said breathlessly. Again she looked North. Her eyes were stormy but had a glimmer that had long since dulled in Laria's own.

"No," Hyrhyn said. "My Beloved's not gone. I would've felt his Spark go out."

Laria pursed her lips. There was no arguing with that kind of fantasy. She hadn't the heart to insist on the girl's grief.

"If I hadn't met you, I might've not heard this news. Perhaps I'd've gone North for no reason," Hyrhyn said. "It's a sign—the Spark is telling me to wait and be patient. Oh, patience is *not* something I'm very good at."

"You're strangely spiritual for a Lostling," Laria mused. "Where does this talk of Spark and mysterious signs come from?"

Hyrhyn was perplexed by the question. "What do you mean?" she asked. "It comes from the world. All around us! Look at all the wondrous things that life has to offer—and so much of it mysterious! Of course we don't know everything. We have to listen and look and feel the beautiful things."

Laria glanced about after this rapturous declaration. She didn't see much wonder in the

world. One of the horses was dropping a steamy load from under its upraised tail. The boiler-tender smacked at a biting natterfly on his neck and then continued to chew complacently beneath his vacant stare. It was hard for Laria to find profundity in any of it.

"All right," she conceded, nevertheless, though even her concession wasn't very convincing. She rose from the bench and moved back to the trough. It was time to move on.

Hyrhyn got up after and followed at a distance. "Where are we going?" she asked.

"We?"

"You said we're traveling together," the girl reminded her.

"I said that to call off those thugs."

"You said it so now it's true or else you're a liar. And I don't think your sense of honor would bear it," the girl answered, matter-of-fact. "Oh, that means we're *friends*! How wonderful!"

With that, she dunked her face into the trough and drank deep like the animals did. The girl *was* a Lostling after all. When she withdrew her head and wiped away the water with a broad swipe of her arm across her face, she gave Laria a big self-satisfied grin.

"I like that! I like having a friend!" Hyrhyn said. Then she reached into her oversized rain cover and from a pocket hidden within, produced Laria's Spark-carved tinder box. The one gifted to her by Bos. "Since we're friends, I ought to return this," she said without scruple. "And don't worry: I'll be a *good* friend. I can make myself useful."

Laria plucked the box from her hand, half angry, but more bemused. "I'll bet you can," she said,

wryly. She liked the girl's spunk.

She also liked her strange honesty. It was true that many Lostlings were thieves—or had questionable sense of ownership. But they were also brilliant scavengers, prime hunters, and had unparalleled foraging skills by necessity. Those were assets that would indeed be useful in their new world.

"Very well, we're going to the Shore," Laria told her.

Hyrhyn's face beamed. "I have always and forever wanted to go to the Shore! It's where my Beloved was to come and fetch me! You see: it's exactly meant to be!"

"Don't get too excited," Laria said. "I don't think we'll find much there."

"We'll find just what we should," Hyrhyn replied.

It wasn't like Laria to take on a stranger, but things were different now—the world was changed and Laria knew she had to change too.

"You said this was my horse!" the girl said, hugging its neck. The horse nipped at her hair and shook out its tattered mane. "Can I ride it? What's its name? And oh! Your benu has such a sweet face! I've never been this close to one before! They smell like absolute rump, don't they?" She laughed as she scratched under Odo's chin.

"You're going to talk the whole way, aren't you?" Laria asked.

"Not likely! But even if I did you won't mind because we're friends and friends accept each other just as they are!"

Laria found the prospect of a friend strangely comforting. Even if the girl was just short-term

company. It wasn't such a bad idea to not be *too* alone with her own thoughts. Hadn't Bos said as much?

She had no idea what they would find at the Shore, but she swung onto her saddle, tucking the tinderbox into her coat close to her heart, ready to face whatever was in store.

## EPILOGUE

### I. THE DARK

IN WHICH HOPE FEELS LOST.

In the shadows of the oubliette, the Once King's Broodthrall was fading. Hours had turned to days and then time was lost altogether down in the trench.

They had water so long as the Harrower distilled it—the Broodthrall taught him how. They had something like food. But it took more than food and water to sustain life, and life on the narrow shelf of an underground cavern was arguably not worth sustaining.

There was also the matter of the Broodthrall's injuries, for which they had no medicine and no means of relief.

"Promise me you'll survive this," he told the Harrower when he began to feel time was running out. "Find my children. Tell them...I tried. Fill them with stories that give their lives meaning...and purpose."

"I'm no good for telling stories," the Harrower responded.

"Then give them the facts. Maybe not the worst parts of everything I've told you. Don't tell them about the suffering. Maybe leave out the part where I die like this. Think up...a happy ending."

"I'm no good for telling lies."

"You must be good for something," the Broodthrall said.

The Harrower was quiet because he didn't think he was good for anything.

"Could you have imagined it would end like this?" the Broodthrall then asked.

"Never thought about it," the Harrower answered.

"Never wondered how you might take your last breath?"

"I...find it hard to think beyond the present moment."

"I suppose you would."

In the silence that followed, the Broodthrall thought about how the Harrower, whose life had been one long breath of cruelty at the hands of the Mother, likely couldn't live any other way. What could a Harrower hope for?

Neither knew that the war was over, though they knew that both the Once King and the Mother were dead. They knew no one came for them. The underground river was rising and they would drown in summer if they didn't starve to death first. The many-legged chitinous crawlers they'd been catching to feed themselves had grown scarce.

They had done everything they could. Probed the depth of the untraversable river that swept under the rock that entombed them, sent up smoke signals through the crevice that allotted them

meager light from above, ferried messages in repurposed tins and on floatable refuse that had fallen into the earth with them.

"No more dark thoughts," the Harrower said. "Breath is thin enough as it is."

"These aren't dark thoughts," the Broodthrall argued. "To be surprised to find ourselves here means we *must* have hoped for something else."

The Harrower grunted.

"We can't *not* die eventually," he then told him pragmatically. "Do you want to know what I imagined? How it would end for me?"

"Okay," the Harrower said, reluctant.

"Peacefully," said the Broodthrall, wandering there in his imagination. "Surrounded by my children and grandchildren, maybe even great-grandchildren. That's the Spark I hold onto."

"You're talking about dying. You're not holding onto anything."

"Of course I am," he said faintly, though he wasn't really certain and didn't sound like it. Then he added, nevertheless: "We're not done, Harrower. You could...hope for something too?"

The length of silence held so long that the Broodthrall gave up on receiving an answer. But then the Harrower shuffled, pulled his knees up, and filled his lungs. His voice broke, tentative and guarded:

"There's...a girl...."

## II. THE SPARK IN WHICH HOPE IS FOUND.

Hyrhyn was out spearing sallow-cheeked siltfish for breakfast when she found a tin, bobbing gently

in the waves. Morning sun warmed her pale naked skin as she plucked it from the ocean brine that frothed about her calves.



She gladly accepted the leavings of others, even if cast away as refuse; the tin alone was worth a pinch of fragrant rosmarine oil in trade—and who knew what treasure might be inside!

A crust of salt sealed the cap, but Hyrhyn opened it without trouble. She was runty, but strong. Inside was a scrap of charred cloth the courtly color of citrine. Yellow was her favorite color, though this was more pale than she preferred. It smelled of smolder, like burned leaves, and immediately she recognized the scent.

She clutched the scrap tight and inhaled from it deeply, her heart swelling at the memory and the promise that it stirred.

Then she unfolded the bit of cloth and observed that the burns on the swatch were letters and that the letters formed a handful of words. She could read very little, but Laria would know what it said. She'd take it to Laria and find out what it meant.

Even so, she stood in the ocean with the water lapping her thighs and studied it very hard for herself for a long moment.

Gradually one word came startlingly clear:  
HELP.

~ \* ~

## **AFTERLANDS: THE SERIES**

The story continues in  
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## 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.

Read more about the *Afterlands* series at:

<https://lookingland.com/afterlands>