

**AFTERLANDS**

# BETWEENTIMES

VOL. 1 }

MONTHLY  
SERIES

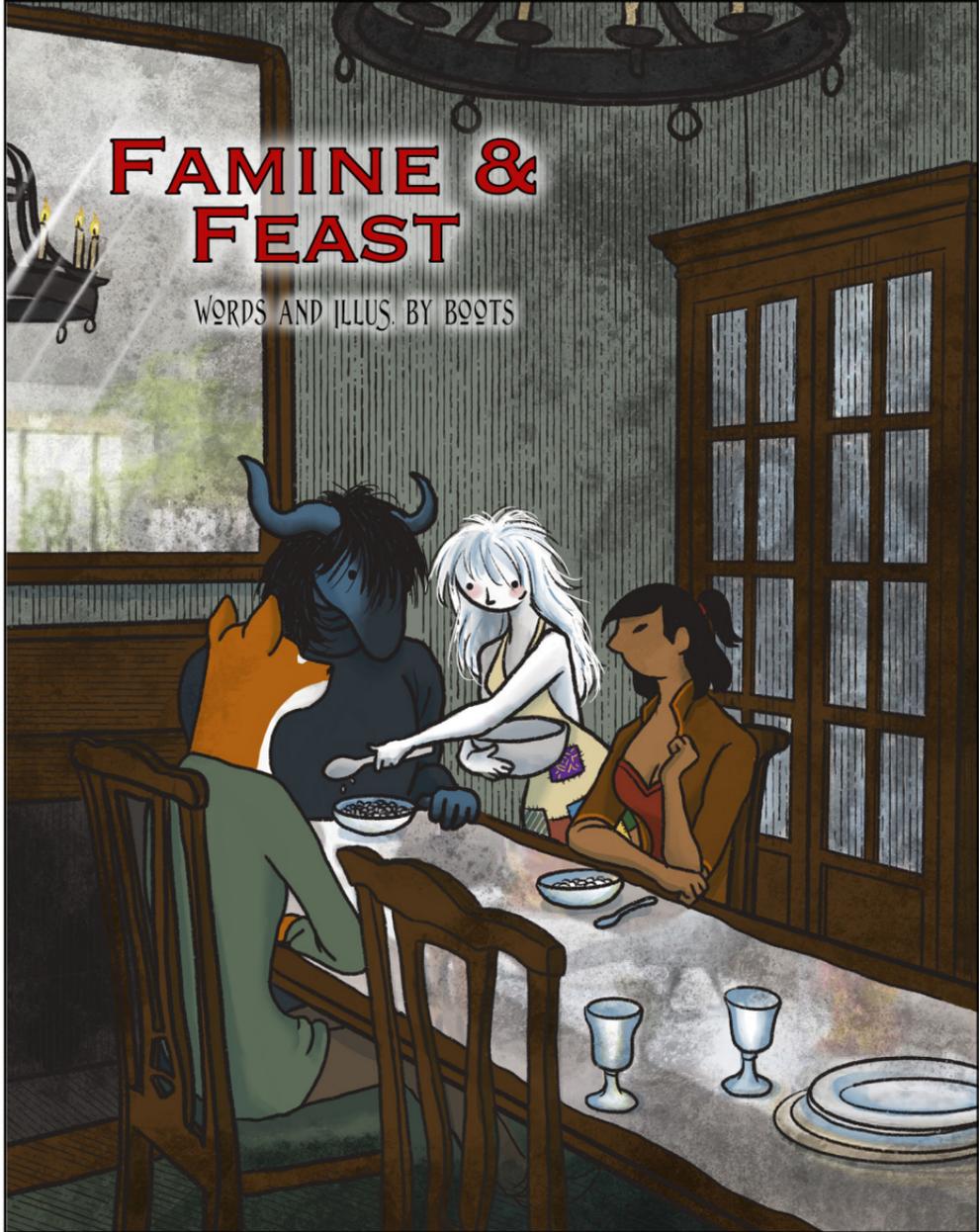
Afterlands stories of the Continent, from the time After the Harrowing, when our heroes have retired to the Shore.

JUNE  
2022

{ No. 4 of 4

## FAMINE & FEAST

WORDS AND ILLUS. BY BOOTS



"You can have more than that," Hyrhn told him.  
"Beloved, you're bigger than the rest of us and you need to eat more."



**AFTERLANDS  
BETWEENTIMES**

**BY BOOTS**

Volume I

*Afterlands: Betweentimes*, Volume I, “Famine & Feast” 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.

Copyright © 2022 LookingLand

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any manner without written permission of the copyright owner except for the use of quotations in a book review.

# CONTENTS

[CONTENTS](#)

[FAMINE & FEAST](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

*The People of the Mountain  
and the Grasslands went to war.*

*No one won.*

## FAMINE & FEAST

The Bad Rain had continued longer into the growing season than expected and food was scarce. The cost of fish caught out of the bay was exorbitant and nothing within it was edible. The garden was spoiled despite Hyrhyn's best efforts to salvage it, and Laria was spending all of her dwindling resources just to keep the horses fed.

Beans and salt were all that was left and one meal a day was as much as they dared, uncertain how they would sustain themselves throughout the summer. The good news was that the Bad Rain finally passed, the Linden bark gauges were all washed white, and they had enjoyed a full week now of cloud-thinned skies. The wallows of mud about Cliff House had begun to dry.

To celebrate, Juba cooked up a pot of beans and they served it in the dining room with all the windows open to overlook the moody grey ocean.

Juba was still, even after months of being free from the clutches of the Mother, incapable of comfortably doing for himself without explicit permission or direction. Hyrhyn encouraged him to serve himself, accustomed to gently helping alleviate his anxiety. Everybody watched as he tentatively spooned himself a small portion.

"You can have more than that," Hyrhyn told him. "Beloved, you're bigger than the rest of us and you need to eat more."

But Juba was used to the starvation diet

imposed on him in his former station, and conscientious of the fact that they were all very hungry all the time. He froze, spoon poised over the serving bowl, all eyes on him, paralyzing him with fear.

Hyrhyn knew that glassy look all too well. She gingerly rescued the spoon from his hand to take over ladling duties, and heaped a nice portion into his bowl.

"There," she said, very satisfied. When she saw his tears of shame threatening to spill, she kissed the corner of his eye, lingering a moment to feel the overheated flush of his cheek against her lips. Then she finished serving the others.

Laria and Hyrhyn tucked in, eating with gusto. Hyrhyn cleaned her plate in under a minute. Nix pushed his beans around and nibbled fussily. He knew better than to complain about the food but the way his nose wrinkled at every bite made his sentiment clear enough.

He was also distracted, reading a book he had found in a kitchen cupboard. Hyrhyn was curious about the unusual item, but disappointed when Nix told her it was about poultry and receipts for dinners for which they had none of the necessary ingredients.

Still, she asked him to read a receipt out loud just to hear the words for food she had a little knowledge or experience of, and tried to imagine what the dish might taste like.

Nix had lived at Court and knew a good deal about food, but Juba surprised them all by being able to describe with detail what all of the ingredients looked and smelled like; even things with which Nix was unfamiliar. But then Juba grew

up in the kitchen after all, so it made sense.

"Poultry sounds just heavenly," Hyrhyn said, swallowing back her salivation. "But would it be sad to eat Flip and Flop?"

"Eat *what*?" Laria asked.

"That's what I've named your chickens," Hyrhyn explained.

"Don't even think about it," Laria then warned them all, but Nix especially. Nix's people had a gross reputation of being chicken thieves, after all, and Laria was very protective of the silky blue birds that hung around the patio pecking between the paving stones.

"Your mud-clotted hens aren't laying anyway," Nix sniffed at her, flipping the pages of the book. It was full of dense text that detailed the care and feeding of various breeds—some of which were now thought to be extinct.

"Nevertheless they are still *my* chickens," Laria told him pointedly. "And you better not even think of harming a single feather on their fluffy little heads."

"They're so filthy, I doubt they could be made appetizing even if I did have a mind to put them in a pot," Nix replied back in his usual sniping tone.

"I wouldn't put it past you even so," Laria scowled.

"It's pure nonsense," he sniffed, ignoring her as he did anybody whose opinion he had no desire to hear. "And anyway, what's the point of keeping chickens that won't lay except to eat them?"

No one was going to dare answer. Not even Laria.

Juba passed the now-empty serving bowl to Hyrhyn because he knew she was eager to lick the

residue at the bottom, even if it was mostly just water and salt.

After their meager repast, Hyrhyn agreed to go into Whiptail with Nix to stop by the Aviary and see if there were any messages for him. Although he knew that his children had left Crophaven, details of where they went from there were slow to come. His credit with the Aviary was running thin and if he got no word soon, he'd be beyond any means to send more peregrine inquiries.

Hyrhyn didn't care much for going into town. She was drawn to people, but shy of crowds. Nevertheless, she also liked riding in Laria's phaeton and being helpful to Nix, so she was happy to accompany him.

They were halfway to town when they saw a crowd gathered on the wharf. Nix diverted the Phaeton to investigate.

Men and women surrounded a peddler with a pull-cart who had set up his business near the dock. On the pull-cart was heaped what appeared to be skinless fresh meat in large but indistinguishable chunks. Some of it was still on the bone, other hanks just large slabs still bloody from the carving. A great deal of bartering was going back and forth as people angled for cuts and made offers for trade.

"It's fresh meat!" Hyrhyn marveled as she hopped down to get a closer look.

Nix remained in the Phaeton and held the tired horse whose ears twitched at the commotion. It had little energy to do much more than that.

"Well well well," Nix tsked at the peddler, who was taking others' goods hand over fist in exchange. "Where did you come across such an

extravagance?"

"Hunting in the Forestlands," the man answered gruffly. He kept his focus on the trade and looked no one in the eye, shoving both coin and other items either into his deep pockets or into a basket under the propped cart.

Hyrhyn got as close as she could to look at the cuts. She was genuinely interested at first, but when the peddler snorted and shooed her away, she got a good look at him from under the shadow of his hunter's cowl.

"What game?" Nix replied pointedly, ignoring the rest.

"Do you not have eyes?" the man challenged, waving at the meat cart. Then he said no more as Petel, the bartender, was making an offer on one of the largest cuts.

Suddenly Hyrhyn was scrambling back into the phaeton, grabbing at the reins. "Let's go," she said, pulling Nix's arm. Her voice was small, fearful.

"Never imagined you would be so quick to turn from fresh meat," he remarked.

"That meat's not honestly gotten," Hyrhyn said.

Nix nodded, having suspected as much as well. "There's no game in the Forestlands," he concurred as he walked their trap away from the scene. "Was hunted out decades ago."

"I know that man now that I see him up close. He is *not* a man—he's a monster."

"What do you know of him?"

Hyrhyn's narrow eyes peered back behind Nix, where the crowd still jockeyed for their portions. "He hunts Lostlings," she hissed.

Nix also turned back to look at the growing mob around the cart, each one pushing harder than the

next before the meat was gone. "Knew it didn't smell right," he said with disgust. "We should warn them."

"They know," Hyrhyn then said. "How could you not? They just don't care."

"They'll care if someone calls them out for it."

"Let's go," Hyrhyn tugged at him again. "I just want to go."

Hyrhyn, normally so undaunted, was genuinely distressed. Nix wondered what she knew—what she had seen that made her so fearful. He urged the horse away, leaving the clamor and the stench of blood behind them.

Back at Cliff House, having collected no messages at the Aviary, Nix bitterly told Laria what he and Hyrhyn had seen. Laria was deeply provoked by the news.

"He's selling *what*?" she said, staggered at the thought.

"Human flesh, I suspect," Nix replied airily. "What do you intend to do about it?"

"What did *you* do about it?" she countered.

"Nothing—what was I supposed to do? Overturn his cart with my walking stick and be bludgeoned to death by a hungry mob? If you had seen Hyrhyn's face...."

Laria was already stomping to the coatrack to throw on a light jacket and collect her bow. She muttered as she thrust her hands through the sleeves. "Of all the...."

"Why don't you take the Harrower with you?" Nix then suggested. "Guarantee your own safety."

"*That's* all we need!" she rounded on him with misplaced fury. "Why don't we just use him like

the Mother did! Is that what you mean?"

"Take it as you will," Nix snipped back, unconcerned about wounding her pride.

"I don't need the Harrower to get a job done and I never did," she then barked. And with that, she went out the back door, banging it shut behind her.

Nix just rolled his eyes.

The crowd on the wharf was gone by the time Laria arrived in town, but the man's empty blood-stained cart was parked at the Drinkery, so she went inside to confront him, crossbow in hand. The place was packed, smelled of charring flesh, and behind the bar a grill sizzled with hunks of meat waiting for hungry tongues.

"Where is the meat-peddler?" Laria demanded, addressing Petel.

"We don't want any trouble," Petel said. "If you want to kill the man, he's over there." He pointed to the far corner where the man was halfway through a bottle of some of Petel's hardest rye. "Just do it outside; I've got paying customers in here."

"And you have unlawful meat on your fire," Laria told him.

"That's a slander!" It was the meat-peddler's voice that thundered, the man having watched this exchange with interest. "I come by my game as an honest hunter," he declared.

"Game that includes Lostlings?" Laria challenged.

"Can't you mind your business?" Petel said irritably. "We're hungry and want to eat in peace." There were some grunting and muttering noises of assent, but almost no one in the bar dared look

Laria in the eye.

No one but the meat-peddler, who didn't yet know better.

"You've got some sand, disrupting these fine people's luncheon," he said. "Do you suppose you're the Law in Whiptail?"

"I am when no one else will be," Laria said as she cast her eyes around. Cowards tucked their heads toward their drinks and they shielded meat already half-eaten on their plates with their hands.

Someone was whispering confidentially to the peddler now and his eyes went wide.

"Oh ho!" he exclaimed. "So *you're* the one harboring the Harrower, are you? And you think to lecture *me*? Or maybe we should send the beast an invitation: the cooking could go all the more quickly!"

He guffawed and a few others laughed nervously with him, but the tension was palpable and the meat-peddler pulled back, adopting a more sour expression. "Or maybe the monster would just char it all to a crisp," he said. "That would be a waste of good eats!"

"You're the monster," Laria told him. "Just answer truthfully: do you hunt Lostlings?"

"I hunt any game that's profitable," he answered smugly.

Laria then appealed to the others sitting at the tables. "He doesn't even deny it. You're eating human flesh – does that not disgust you?"

She was startled at their lack of a reaction.

"Will no one stand with me?"

From the bar, Moth stood. For the first time Laria noticed him and wondered at this strange foreigner about whom Nix had spoken.

"Sit down, Bug," Petel ordered.

Moth's antennae tilted, but he ignored the bartender and remained standing.

Laria leveled her bow at the meat-peddler. "Get out," she ordered. "You've spread your pollution—it's time for you to go."

"Or you'll shoot me where I stand?" the meat-peddler asked, rising. "An unarmed, innocent man?"

"Unarmed is debatable. Innocent, even more doubtful. Whiptail doesn't need you. You've sold your goods. Get your cart and be gone."

The man turned to the others around him. "You let her speak for you? I just brought you a bounty the likes of which you won't see again if you let her run me out. I brought you meat! What's she done but brought the Harrower to your doorstep?"

But the others in the bar had already gotten what they wanted—they had no further use for the man themselves, didn't care about him personally, and the passing of the Bad Rain meant soon the fish would return. More importantly, did they not wish to get involved where Laria's wrath was concerned.

"Just go," Petel said to the man, sensing this could get messy. "No one wants any trouble here."

"That's gratitude," the meat-peddler said. Seeing the averted eyes of the others and Laria's heaving fury, he too thought better of putting up a fight. He rose on wobbling knees, prepared to make his exit in as dignified a way as he could.

"Go," Laria said firmly when the two met eye-to-eye at the door. "Don't *ever* return."

He huffed and pushed by her to get out.

Laria lingered, glaring at all of them. "Enjoy

your meat, you cowards,” she said, anger boiling. “Nothing but the Dark awaits those who eat the dead.”

At that, even the strange winged foreigner sat down again, wary of her tone.

Others exchanged glances. One young man, nervous and pale, started to rise, but his father pulled him back into his seat with a disapproving grunt.

Satisfied she’d destroyed their peace of mind, Laria turned and went out with a heart so heavy she could barely breathe.



The satisfaction was short-lived.

The following morning Laria turned out the horses and Odo so they could roam the acreage on the approach to Cliff House. Odo was happily fed on the ant hills that seemed to multiply by the day. Only insects seemed to thrive in the blight. There was little scrub, but the horses could at least exercise now that it wasn't raining.

Even with Laria doing the best she could, the horses were thin and their bones were growing prominent under their patchy hides. Even the short drive in the phaeton had rubbed them raw, harness against skin and bones. She applied a bit of salve and then let the two out of their stalls, tracing her fingers along the ridges of their ribs as they went out.

"I'm sorry my good and loyal friends," she said to them. Her eyes burned a little because she knew she was not only apologizing for how lean and hungry they were now, but for the fate that awaited them. If the summer months continued rough like this, Laria was unlikely to be able to keep them through the long winter. As a mercy she would probably have to slaughter them at the turn of the season.

She chastised herself for being sentimental. When she was an Imperator in the Mother's army she had always been pragmatic. Death and loss were a part of war and she had become numb over decades of service. But the war was over and she was weary of accepting ongoing loss as a matter of fact. Even so, she knew it was naïve to believe things would be different now that the armies were disbanded.

But these were troubling thoughts for another day. For now, the horses would enjoy as much freedom from the harness and saddle as could be afforded. Nix had two feet, even if one was copper and wood. He walked into town in the evenings; he could walk in the mornings as well going forward.

Laria looked around with a sudden realization. Normally her chickens were under foot whenever she turned the horses out, eager to get into the stalls to pick for insects and spilled grain. But neither of the two matted blue birds were anywhere to be seen.

As she let the horses go, she scanned the grounds around the barn and to the small coop. A light breeze off the bay teased the few parched weeds that tufted from between the rocks, but otherwise nothing moved. Her ears could detect no sound – no clucking or warbling.

The chickens were not prone to wander and there were no local predators large enough to carry them off. Laria had never worried about fencing them in, even for their own protection. The locals knew not to come within a hundred feet of the house, but she also knew there were strangers about.

She saw Hyrhyn marching from the back patio carrying an empty sack and a sling. The former Lostling was headed out to the orchard.

“No fish yet this morning,” Hyrhyn announced cheerfully to Laria. “Going to see if I can catch some scooters or such!” Wild rodents made poor eating, but some meat was better than none at all, even if it was mostly gristle.

“Have you seen the chickens?” Laria called back to her.

“Nix had one under each arm—just saw him headed that way,” the younger woman replied, thumbing back toward the shore behind her.

Laria’s face flushed with anger. “He took my chickens?” she scowled. “I can’t believe he would be so bold!”

Hyrhyn only shrugged and went on her way, focused on the hunt before her.

Laria was steaming mad as she trooped in the opposite direction at a quick clip towards where Hyrhyn had indicated. She was halfway down to the boathouse when, rounding a boulder, she saw Juba, Nix, and what appeared to be a large metal basin. Juba was standing with his back to her and obscuring her view, but she could see Nix kneeling with his hands in the tub.

“Nix!” She shouted and her voice was sharper than usual. “If you’ve poached my chickens, so help me....”

At the sound of her scolding, Juba turned slowly, eyes large with worry. Not that he had anything to worry about because by then Laria could plainly see the irritated scowl on Nix’s face and the two birds in the tub, up to their shoulders in thick soapy suds.

“As if!” Nix shot back at her.

Laria was flummoxed. “What on earth are you doing?” she demanded as she stepped up to check on the condition of the chickens. They warbled and clucked and one of them shook its tail so that flecks of suds went everywhere, though Nix was prepared and dabbed them away with an apron.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” he replied testily, adjusting one sleeve of his sweater, which had slid down to his wrist. “I’m de-clotting your

filthy birds. They're so heavy with caked mud, they're more dirt than feathers!"

"They roll in the mud to keep the mites off," Laria explained.

"That may be true but they are no less miserable," Nix told her. "That poultry book from the kitchen explicitly says that clotty chickens won't lay—hence your problem with the egg deficit."

Laria was taken aback perhaps mostly at the sense of it and how she hadn't realized it for herself.

"Furthermore," Nix went on, "the book provides several receipts for a kind of powder that may deter the mites if applied regularly, which appears to be made with common enough ingredients. Maybe you should invest more time reading some books instead of jumping to conclusions." he snorted at her.

Nix lifted the rinsed chicken out of the tub, its legs paddling the air. He gave it a hasty dry with a towel and then let it shake out its feathers.

From a distance Juba then huffed a warm blast of air that puffed it out, soft, dry, and a brighter blue than any of them would've guessed was underneath. The hen gave a startled squawk and trotted away, pumping its little neck as fast as it could go. It dashed right by Laria, back toward the barn.

True enough, the hens started laying again shortly thereafter. The ground was almost dry and Hyrhyn was already at work trying to turn the garden around. Traps were put into the sea to get back to fishing, and the sky was full of pale yellow clouds

and the returning smell of burning sulfur that drifted in from the far east.

The chickens couldn't produce enough food to make a difference between the four of them and the threat of starvation. The season would continue to be a struggle to get enough to the table. But a few small eggs *were* enough to give them hope, which they needed just as much.

~ \* ~



## 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>