

ANDY WOODAGE



THE
AFTER-TIME
CHRONICLES

One Small Spark

“A rich adventure story with the right mix of excellent world-building, intense action, mythical creatures and a sweet coming-of-age story of a boy and his unlikely best friend.

The After-Time Chronicles: One Small Spark is as gripping as it is charming.”

— Jennifer Platt, The Sunday Times

The After-Time Chronicles: One Small Spark

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IMAGINARY HOUSE

*To Matthew, Keryn and Lucy.
Your love of stories inspired me to let my imagination loose.*

SAMPLE

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A MAP OF
THE EMPIRE OF
VAIKI

-  DROWNED BAY
-  JOTHAN'S FARM
-  THE TEMPLE OF ELOHIM
-  VAIKI'S CITY

PROLOGUE



Priscilla knew something was wrong. Her shoulders were tense and she was grinding her teeth again.

She scanned the farmhouse kitchen. The fire was vigorous in the hearth, the evening stew simmering gently in the hanging cookpot and the cups of mead warming nicely. The table was ready with four places: two for her and Kal, two for his father and mother. There was nothing out of place in the sideboard on the far wall and the supper bowls waited patiently on the worktop.

The stew smelled good, the herbs from the kitchen garden adding a floral aroma. There was no sound coming from the bedroom. She was sure Jothan was asleep. He had struggled to settle at first, partly because his father had promised to take him for catapult practice tomorrow. ‘Please, Momma, will you sing to me? I want to sleep so that tomorrow comes quicker.’ She had smiled as he had shuffled about in his covers. He had looked back, showing the gaps in his own smile where he was waiting for his adult teeth to grow in. So, she had sung and he had then settled quickly, his breathing slowing to a steady rhythm.

In the third room of the farmhouse, on the other side of the kitchen, she could hear her mother-in-law grumbling and suddenly she realised what was wrong. Not Merle complaining – that was her normal state of mind. No, it was the fact that her words could be clearly heard.

‘... and if she doesn’t stop spoiling him, he’s going to grow up...’

Priscilla shut her mind to the worn-out words and breathed a sigh, running a hand through her straight, brown hair.

The fence was off.

The dull, constant hum of the electro-fence was missing from the background noise around her, causing her unease. This had happened all too often recently, the electro-company battling with an aging system that was long overdue for an upgrade. Any moment now Halitt, her father-in-law, would realise and add his own tired grumbling to that of his wife's. At least it might give Merle another reason to be indignant other than her daughter-in-law's parenting. She sighed again.

Still, the birds should be in their stalls by now and the cows in the barn. She tried to relax. Everything should be fine.

She moved to the kitchen doorway, stepping into the late evening sunshine, fiddling with a dishcloth. Kal should be back at any minute. He would be checking the perimeter, which was all the more important in a prolonged power cut. He should be nearing the end of his inspection, unless there were problems. Stingerholes could be a nuisance at this time of year and would sometimes compromise the boundary fence before it fully electrocuted them.

She gazed out around the farm's large courtyard, the grey-stone stables on one side and the cattlebarn on the other, made dark by the long shadows of dusk. She looked beyond them and down the dirtroad towards the tall, wire-meshed gates enclosed within the electro-fence that surrounded the property. The last rays of sunlight glinted from the electro-netting as it stretched away over her head, twelve metres above the ground, covering the entire farm. Fleeting, she fought her normal caged-in feeling, but then saw Kal plodding home, broad shoulders sagging and greying hair clearly visible under the black cap he always wore. She let out a breath she had not realised she was holding.

Then came a crash.

The electro-netting released a reverberating twang as it juddered violently. She looked up, stunned, as the wire roofing bowed dramatically above the courtyard in front of her. With an almost musical sound, taut wires began to snap, slowly at first, then all at

once, creating a huge tear.

Through it came a nightmare.

There was a rush of dark wings. Her first thought was that one of the griffins had escaped stabling time. But there was no way Kal would have gone to check the fences if one of the birds was not in. Besides, the wings were far too dark and a griffin would be trying to get out, not in.

As the creature landed in the centre of the stone yard, it turned on four powerful limbs. Muscles bunched under the dust-coloured fur of its thick legs. A dark mane flowed from the top of its head, down its neck and halfway along its muscular back. It folded huge, bat-like wings; the taut, dark skin furling over finger-like, skeletal struts.

A manticore.

Glued to the spot by fear, she watched as the giant creature, parts of lion, bat and scorpion, scanned the courtyard, head moving slowly from side-to-side. It was easily the largest manticore she had ever seen. It stood over three metres tall and, from its glinting canines to the end of its curving scorpion-tail, it must have been at least five metres in length.

It turned towards the farmhouse and saw her. Even across that distance, she was shocked at the raw intelligence shining through its cold eyes. For a heartbeat, everything was still. Then the creature took a deliberate stride towards the house. Towards her.

She did not fear for herself. Her first thought was for Jothan. She stood between him and this monstrosity and her mind raced for ways to protect the sleeping five-year old. She was just about to step inside and slam the door when she remembered Kal. She looked out past the beast and saw him, eyes wide with worry, breaking into a run. The creature took a second stride in her direction and she heard her husband's deep voice echo around the yard, 'Cilla! Get back!'

The creature stopped, twisting its head towards the sound.

Priscilla stifled a screech as the creature turned to face Kal, a deep, rumbling growl coming from within. She then noticed something

bizarre; the creature had a shokcollar around its thick neck, entangled in its mane. What was it doing here? The collar meant that it was not one of the wild creatures, that it had not come from the Wilderness Zone. This one belonged to the Empire. How could that be? An electro-shokcollar was designed to keep its wearer under tight control. How had the manticore gotten here? How was it out of control? Had they not realised it was gone? Impossible.

The beast took two purposeful steps towards Kal and the questions flew from Priscilla's mind. She saw the manticore's muscles tightening in its back legs, ready to pounce. Kal lifted the sidearm he always carried and, with a well-practised action, fired at the beast. The laser struck it on the shoulder and the manticore fell back, onto its side.

Galvanised, Priscilla remembered the old-fashioned shotgun they kept in the kitchen. She dashed across the room, reached to the top of the sideboard and pulled it down. At that moment, Priscilla was thankful Kal had won the argument about keeping a gunpowder weapon in the house. She checked it was loaded just as another high-pitched squawk issued from the lasergun. Merle, in the sideroom, asked, 'What's that?' and Halitt muttered in reply, 'More moles, I expect. Told you before, those darned, ugly birds attract 'em.'

Without thinking to call out, Priscilla dashed back towards the door, raising the shotgun's long barrel. She heard a third laser shot, shortly before an unearthly howl vibrated around the courtyard. The noise unnerved the griffins within their stalls and the stable echoed with their concerned screeches.

Stepping out, she saw the manticore was injured. There was a smoking hole in one of its wings and it limped awkwardly towards Kal, who, rather than running away, had set himself in a determined stance, hoping for a cleaner shot. He was pointing his lasergun defiantly at the beast, waiting as it recharged. Priscilla knew there would not be time. She aimed the shotgun, slightly low like Kal had taught her and, arrowing a silent prayer to Elohim, fired. She expected the recoil as it hit her in the shoulder and she watched as the creature's left wing was torn to shreds by shot pellets. The

manticore snarled with a mixture of fury and pain but did not turn, instead taking another stride towards Kal. With horror, Priscilla realised the monster was too close to her husband for her to fire again. She rushed out across the grey stones to get closer.

‘Cilla—’ cried Kal, but whatever else he was going to say was stopped by a scream of agony as the creature sank its teeth into his chest, massive jaws puncturing a lung, crushing ribs and sinews. Kal’s last act was to fire his now-charged laserpistol into the beast. The manticore yowled in pain, loosening its powerful bite and sprawling backwards across the stones.

Kal’s lifeless body fell next to it.

Everything was still. Priscilla stared in disbelief and despair. She did not hear the griffins shrieking in distress. She certainly did not hear the curtains being pulled back in the sideroom as Kal’s parents finally realised something was wrong. She did not even hear the scream coming from her own lungs. Her whole world at that moment was the limp form bleeding out before her.

Then came the rasping scrape of claw on stone. She looked in dread as the manticore heaved its body from the ground. Inexorably it rose, despite the large pool of blood where it had fallen.

Dark eyes fixed her to the spot. The beast towered over her, staring mercilessly. A deep growl gathered like a storm in its chest, before being snuffed out by a rattling cough that racked its whole body. It took an unsteady pace towards her.

Finally, she remembered the shotgun. Hefting it to her shoulder, she fired carelessly, knowing she was too close to miss. The pellets exploded into the already tattered torso of the beast. Its legs gave way and it sank to the ground, dying. The fierce light in its eyes began to fade.

Then anger sparked brightly and in a last, insolent act it flicked its scorpion tail towards its conqueror.

Priscilla felt a piercing pain in her left shoulder. She looked down to see the huge scorpion sting spearing her body and barely felt the cool stone as she sank to the ground. Despair turned to resignation

as intense, fiery pain raged through her. She turned away from the monstrous carcass and looked towards the little farmhouse. As paralysis took her, she had time for one final prayer. 'Take care of my son. Take care of my Jothan.'

SAMPLE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, to my readers: Thank you so much for picking up this book and reading its words. As my debut novel, the story lies close to my heart, and I hope you feel you are rewarded by what it has to offer.

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Yours in writing,
Andy Woodage

- ABOUT THE AUTHOR - ANDY WOODAGE

Andy Woodage is a young-adult science-fiction and fantasy novelist, living and working as a principal and teacher in Clarens, South Africa.

Andy was born in Nottingham, England, and lived most of his early life in various towns in the Midlands, only recently moving to the Free State in South Africa.

As his children grew old enough, Andy began telling them many stories.

One day, after a two-hour, epic tale, he realised he was having a lot of fun and decided to give writing a try. *One Small Spark* is his debut novel and the beginning of an epic, fantasy-adventure series, *The After-Time Chronicles*.

Get in touch with Andy Woodage for any question you may have about “The After-Time Chronicles” through his publisher at hello@imaginaryhouse.com.



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IMAGINE A WORLD WHERE ARMIES NO
LONGER BUILD METAL MONSTERS, BUT
BIOLOGICAL HORRORS. A WORLD WHERE
GENETIC ENGINEERING HAS BECOME THE
ART OF WAR.

This is 12-year-old Jothan's world. Orphaned by a terrible accident, he dreams of one day leaving his uneventful life with his grandparents on the family's griffin farm. However, when a catastrophic attack wipes out every homestead in The Zoological Zone, his dreams are turned upside down. A warrior appears out of the flames and offers to take him to a place of safety, the fabled 'Temple of Elohim'. Accompanied by his best friend, the griffin Gozell, he sets off across a land ravaged by poverty and wild creatures, opening his eyes to an empire in the grip of war and unrest... with the ever increasing weight of his role in events to come.

Will they make it to the Temple? Will they be welcomed when they arrive? Can Jothan unravel the secrets that seem to control the lives of everyone he meets, including his mysterious saviour?

"A rich adventure story with the right mix of excellent world-building, intense action, mythical creatures and a sweet coming-of-age story of a boy and his unlikely best friend. 'The After-Time Chronicles' is as gripping as it is charming."

- The Sunday Times

