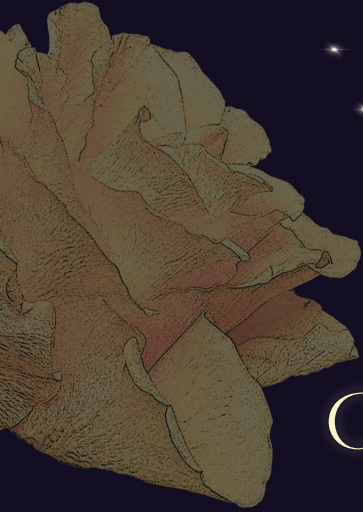


ISSUE 3

AUGUST 2025

# GLYPH.

*The literary magazine for the casual writer*



## THE HEROES & VILLAINS ISSUE



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*The literary magazine for the casual writer.*

**Issue 3: heroes & villains**

**August 2025**

# THE HEROES & VILLAINS ISSUE

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# FOREWORD.

**H**eroes and Villains. We all have them. We have all been them. Every great story hinges on conflict, that seemingly never-ending battle between good and bad, dark and light, heroic and, well, villainous. We exist in a time where we are seeing these battles happen in real time, on our social feeds, our tellies, and in our homes. While the theme for this issue of GLYPH. was never meant to echo the grim reality we are all currently facing, as we put it together we found that several of the stories, artworks, and prose we received did end up encapsulating many of the thoughts and feelings of our current societies, and some of our own fears too.

But a lot of these stories also reminded us that there can be light in dark times, that hope, although oftentimes a fickle flame, can still burn brightly, and well, isn't that the point of storytelling? To reflect the world around you trying to reach for something better?

I'm not sure I can say for sure. What I do know is that although Heroes and Villains are a timeless dichotomy in storytelling, their roles are rarely ever straightforward. One person's savior can often be another's enemy, and sometimes even the worst roads to hell are paved with good intentions.

In this issue, we invited our creators to look at the lines drawn between good and bad, light and dark, and ultimately, this is the true thread that underpins the ten pieces of work that lie here within.

We see how easily that line is blurred and how those we paint as heroes can quickly become

villains. In both of our shorter pieces, 'Eggshells' and 'This Violence We Call Home', the idea of a hero versus a villain is grounded in the everyday, taking place within the home.

For others, the making of a hero is the question at the centre of their work; in 'The Day Gods Left' we see ancient Athens greet a new hero in dark times, while 'The Hammer' hails the heroism found in mortal kindness amidst violence.

Then there are those that question our perception of heroes and villains. In 'A Usurper's Last Confession', 'The Knight', and 'Masquerade' we see how those heralded as heroes can quickly become villains even when their true intentions could be considered heroic, while 'Before the Gunshot' challenges us on our immediate perceptions of those roles. Adding to this list is a GLYPH. first, the graphic story 'Peace Offering'. This short, beautifully illustrated story centred on the initial interaction between a siren and a fisherwoman continues to provoke thinking about heroes and villains, and where we draw our own lines; what is true evil, and what is simply nature?

There is of course some malintentions to be found within this collection. In 'Knifework' we see true cruelty in action, and the lines between heroic and villainous are blurred.

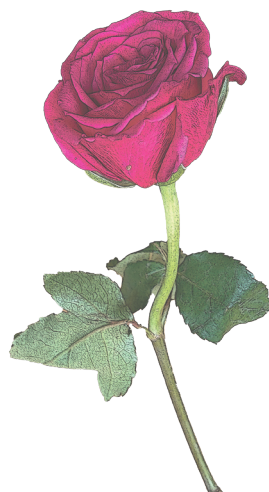
Across all of our work, it is the small acts of the characters that truly capture what makes a hero or a villain. While some pieces embrace the archetype of hero and villain, others dismantle them entirely. We hope that what you find is a collection that provokes: who should we root for, and why? And perhaps, in enjoying these pieces, find your own moment of light amidst these unsettling times.

**Rach**

Editor-in-Chief

& Team **GLYPH.**

**El, Sofía & Gio**



# MASQUERADE

Emily A. Crawford



‘My good people, know fear. Darkness has come, and there is a monster among us.’

As the televisior flickered to life, the warble of the machine did well to tremble her voice. It wasn’t often she had to address the kingdom, but this mess of wires and coil allowed her voice to echo through the city, reverberating off crystal spires and iron-clad towers.

The glass surface shimmered, casting the growing crowds into an eerie, artificial light. In hushed anticipation, their voices were swallowed by the arcane hum, their eyes fixed on the shifting static that crafted her illusion.

‘Many of you have already been shrouded by the shadow of which I speak. One that many of you invited into your homes, as I once did, only to have it tear and burn all that you held dear. And if you have not been touched by this shadow, this monster, then I pray your luck never runs out.’

The image flitted. Still pictures flashing across the glass as, at the source of the loop, she shifted ever so slightly.

‘This monster,’ she said, taking a breath, ‘he was one of us, once, and for some time, we trusted him. But we looked away from the writing that was scrawled so plainly. We let him slip into the shadows. We let him take while we gave. We cannot afford to make that mistake again.’

‘Last night, the Amos, our most reverent sanctuary, crumbled to ruin. It now stands in memoriam to our might, our majesty, our faith, and our fervour...to everything that was once a pillar of this great kingdom. This cataclysm was no accident, it was an attack. The work of one who shows no mercy, who has no heart capable of such things.’

Her illusion shifted again, eyes closed and head bowed, as the hum tried its best to relay the quiver in her voice.

‘I know of this malice because I was there. In the night, as he burned all who dared to be brave enough to stop him, we received word of the assault. But by the time we arrived, it was too late. The air smelt of cindered flesh. Ash caught in our throats. There were no screams, no signs of life or of struggle. The distant spire, the Beacon of Amos, toppled down and cut clean the nave. Our finest, standing by my side, thought not of their own safety and charged forth, praying to find survivors. Their forms disappeared into the smoke. Then, through a haze warmer than any sunrise, I witnessed it. Crackling magic, as if the heavens themselves had erupted. Flashes of white, each one outlining a silhouette that vanished from sight in an instant.’

‘Through tears, I commanded the last of them to stand down, but none listened. I could barely hear their last moments. Then, through the smoke, I saw him standing there, watching me from behind that mask. The man I once knew given new, true light in the wake of ruination.

‘He came to me. No words nor warning. But the Goddess...it was She who protected me from his darkness. It was a miracle that allowed me to see his eyes one last time, eyes transformed and unfamiliar. It was a miracle that left me broken, just as so many of you have parts of your lives chipped and shattered by his hand.’

A moment lingered. It was a moment that should have been left in silence, to allow for the weight of her recollection to hang heavy in the air, but the apparatus refused to stay quiet. Her illusion froze on the screen, waiting for the impact to pass. The crowds ceased their whispers, waiting for what was to come next. But the current that charged the televisor continued to buzz, stuck in standby until new information entered the loop or until it was shut down.

The static flicked and clicked, stuttering as it readjusted.

Her illusion had lifted her gaze, staring out from the glass as if she were looking and speaking directly to the people. The image jumped again; she now stood with her hand over her heart.

‘This hardship might have been mine to face, but this pain, it’s ours. This monster does not care who you are. We all bleed the same. We all burn the same. To him, we are nothing. So, my good people, know fear. But we will not become our fear...’

\*

‘...we will not hide. We will not cower. Together, we will rise and find light in this darkness.’

He was at least three blocks from the nearest prompter but still her words, crowing like a cockerel, reverberated down the street. She really wasted no time. It was almost impressive how alike they were. She had done well to remind him: of his potential, of her potential, of their potential together. The now-ridiculous notion curled his lip as he brought the tankard up and nursed the contents inside. She might be in a rush, but he certainly wasn’t—not anymore.

‘Oi, mate, you ‘appen to be a bit sought now, don’t ya?’ The barman called across the floor, corralling the room to eye him with sudden suspicion.

He lowered the tankard slightly, keeping it suspended for a moment. The hum of conversation had withered into silence, even the hearth seemed to burn quieter, and through the sockets of his mask, he scanned the room with weary eyes and saw the faces, set like stone, staring back.

‘Depends,’ he said, swirling the dregs of his drink. ‘What exactly am I sought for?’

The barman stepped from behind the safety of his counter and examined him with rigour. His eyes flicked to the sword at the stranger’s hip, then to the scars tracing the back of his knuckles. ‘We ain’t deaf. We ‘eard the prompter, clear as you. If I’d ken who I’d let take a roof last night, I’d ‘ave turned you away there and then.’

‘And who would that be?’ he probed again, setting the tankard on the table.

‘A traitor. A murderer—’

‘A monster!’ a patron called out, adding to the barman’s hallucinations.

‘Aye,’ another chimed in, ‘no honest man ‘ides behind a mask.’

He sighed, voice light, ‘Well, when you put it that way...yeah. That’s me. Name’s Eliza, if any of you care for it.’

The room shifted. The air suddenly felt heavy. The calm before the storm. Chairs scraped. Boots scuffed against floorboards. What little patrons there were this early in the morning began their approach; some daring to pick up the odd oddment as a makeshift weapon should things take a turn.

‘Go git the Keepers,’ the barman said, nudging one of his patrons.

Watching the man run from the inn, even if no one else could hear it, Eliza heard the rolling thunder in the distance. For now, though, it was without spectacle.

‘You must think we’re fools, just lettin’ you waltz in ‘ere,’ one patron said.

‘Lettin’ you take your drink like an honest man,’ another added.

Eliza tilted his tankard towards himself, seeing how much of the drink he had left. A thin skin of foam fizzled atop maybe a mouthful or two. Couldn’t even finish one in peace. He sighed.

‘Correction. I didn’t waltz in here. I arrived last night, paid for a room, took my leave, and decided that, this morning, I would partake in a drink before taking my leave once more and taking to the road.’

‘And you think we’ll let you?’

'I think you will. You'll let me finish my drink. No trouble. No bodies.' He then fixed his gaze on the barman, 'And you get to keep your fine establishment. Sounds reasonable?'

A tankard was hurled through the air, narrowly missing his head as he veered out of the way. More out of instinct than thought, chairing kicked out from under him, Eliza spun from the table and drove his elbow into the closest man's jaw. Bone cracked. Whatever improvised implement fell to the floor, and the man followed, limp. In the same movement, Eliza had drawn his blade from his side and ran the sharp along the palm of his opposing hand. Lightning began to crackle, pulled from his blood and channelled along his steel. The storm had arrived.

No more than a pack of rabid hounds, they attacked without hesitation.

They didn't stop.

They should have.

His blade was able to deter any who came too close, carving through their attempts to subdue him. Life left their bodies long before they fell to the ground, and yet the current from his steel left many twitching for a moment or two more. It was enough to make some of them reconsider. But then one, perhaps more valiant than the rest, struck from behind. It was enough to have him stumble and allow another to find his courage and crack a stool against Eliza's side. Some of the fractured wood caught beneath the leather of his mask, and he could feel the splinters stick into the flesh beneath his eye.

Eliza quickly readjusted, arcing his blade through flesh and air as he straightened himself. Blood sprayed across the counter. The one who had found courage collapsed with a wet gurgle, twitching on the floor. And as for the valiant one...Eliza thrust his hand forward, blood from the cut that very aggressor had made flicking into the air.

Suddenly, a bolt of white-blue jumped from his palm, ripping across the space between them and striking the man square in the chest. His body convulsed, eyes rolling back, before the force flung him into a table.

The stench of burned flesh quickly filled the room.

More fell, one after another, in a similar pattern. The floorboards grew dark and wet as blood dripped and pooled.

The barman retreated and fumbled behind the bar top counter. Eliza turned to face him,



the last patron falling by his feet. The firearm, no larger than a pistol but more than evidently using an early model cell, came up, trembling in the barman's hands. Eliza sighed. Too slow.

He raised his bloody hand, pallid skin dyed crimson, and then snapped. The motion was as fast as the sound; a click that burst into an eruption. It was enough to lift the barman off his feet and slam him into the shelves. Liquor rained down like fire, catching on every surface on its way to the ground. Smoke began to rise from behind the bar. From the wood or the body, he didn't care to discover.

The lightning faded, the last sparks crackling softly across his fingers before dying out. The storm had come and gone, as it always did.

Eliza cast a glance to the table he once sat at, now upturned with a leg broken and body curled beneath it. He eyed his tankard, lying on the floor with the remains of the foam seeping into the floorboards. He sheathed his sword and picked it up, staring into the empty cup, wiping the rim with his thumb. His reflection stared back, the mask hiding much of his features and the tarnished metal warping those left exposed. He tilted it and got a glimpse at what hid beneath.

He sighed, sinking into silence as he set it aside, turning towards the stairs.

The slats bent underfoot, each step heavier than the last. He moved with careful urgency, checking his hand on the incline and having it wrapped in gauze by the time he reached the landing. The bar below was still burning; it wouldn't be long before the building would catch, and they needed to be long gone before then.

The hallway stretched out before him, dim and quiet. He walked past the first two doors, stopping at the third. The handle was cold, and the bite caused him to flinch as the temperature seeped through the bandage and stung the still-open wound—the more than unfortunate side effect of his more than unusual curse.

He pushed the door open to a dark room. The curtain was still drawn, and the lump was still curled under the blanket.

'Get up,' he said, his tone fathering as he took no more than a step across the threshold. He removed the mask, balancing it in one hand as with the other he plucked the splinters from his cheek. It felt no different than coarse stubble, though was certainly more cumbersome to remove.

Movement from the corner of his eye drew his attention, but not enough for his liking.

‘Get up,’ he said again.

The blanket fell, bunching together as she sat up, wiping sleep from her eyes. Her hair was dark, falling in uneven strands over her face. She couldn’t have been more than eight or nine, clothes hanging loose on her small frame. But it was what ran out from beneath the ill-fitting rags that marked her as something more. Glowing veins flowing in intricate patterns, channelling the essence of arcane throughout her body, as well as the countless metal puncture points that once connected to the central nervous system of the Amos.

Eliza tossed her cloak from the rack, ‘We need to go. Now.’

The girl tilted her head, the sleepy glaze over her eyes still fading. ‘I thought you said tomorrow.’

He sighed. ‘Change of plans.’

She said nothing else, climbing out of bed and wrapping herself in the cloak. He affixed the straps of the mask back around his head before stepping further into the room to gather their supplies.

‘Eliza?’ she asked, voice small.

‘Yeah?’

‘Where are we going?’

‘I don’t know yet, but it’ll be away from here,’ he admitted, slinging the sack over his shoulder and outstretching a hand for her to take.

‘Okay,’ she whispered, slipping her hand into his.

Making their way out into the hall, the smoke from the fire had started to creep up the staircase. Eliza held her hand tight, stopping her from going any further.

‘No. This way,’ he said, gesturing towards the bay window at the opposite end of the hallway.

She looked at him with concern.

‘Trust me.’

She looked at the window, then back at him. He smiled, though the curl of his mouth was barely visible under the bottom edge of the mask.

‘Okay.’

He squeezed her hand gently, feeling the warmth of her small fingers against his own as he led her to the window.

Her hand still in his, he knelt beside her. 'First, I'm going to need this back,' he explained, gesturing to his hand. 'Then, once I'm out, I'm going to need you to jump. Don't worry, it's not far. I'll be there to catch you.'

'Why can't I go first?' she asked, still gripping his hand tightly.

'Well, because I need to make sure it's safe.'

'To make sure there's no Keepers?'

He sighed. He was hoping she wouldn't ask about them, as if by having some semblance of freedom, she'd have put them from her mind. 'Yes,' he admitted, 'to make sure there's no Keepers.'

Cautiously, she released him and watched intently as he pried open the window, threw down the supply sack, and then twisted himself out and onto the sill.

'Remember,' he said, clinging to the window, 'when I say jump, you climb through and drop down, okay?'

'Okay.'

'There's a good girl.'

Letting go of the sill, Eliza dropped a story and landed on the ground. He tried to cushion the fall as much as he could, but the shock left an ache in his legs. He massaged his knees as he stood upright.

The flames on the lower level had grown; he could hear them roaring, but beyond that, he could hear the rumbling of approaching vehicles, spurred by the repetitious crow of the prompters. Keepers were en route—first alerted to the presence of a wanted criminal and now responding to the growing fire. They had to get moving.

'Alright,' he called up to the window. 'Jump!'

Slowly, she emerged from the window, but clinging to the frame, her legs dangling over the sill, she froze.

'Hey,' Eliza said, softer now, despite the sirens getting louder by the second, 'look at me.'

She did.

'I've got you. I swear it. Just like I said I would.'

She hesitated another moment. A second passing, and then another. Then she let go.

She fell like a feather, falling to the ground with almost weightlessness. It made it easy to

catch her, and once he did, he didn't put her down. He held her tight—tighter than he needed to—and she clung to him, arms around his neck. He didn't even try to put her down. The fire behind them cracked louder, and the Keepers were close now, too close.

But none of that mattered.

He turned and ran. ■

The background of the cover is a solid black field. In the upper left quadrant, there are intricate, glowing yellow and gold lines that resemble a complex web or a network of fibers. In the lower right quadrant, there are similar glowing lines, but in shades of red and purple. The overall effect is one of a dark, mysterious, and perhaps divine or cosmic space.

# THE DAY GODS LEFT

Daphne Artola D.

Year 1 of the 71<sup>st</sup> Olympics.

The Hellenodics do not usually accept this kind of imprudence, even less so coming from a *barbarian*.

They determine who wins an athletic event, and organise the games to Zeus, and Hera's competitions too. They determine, likewise, in the name of the Gods, which victories are what humans call "*fair*," when they gather in the Bouleuterion.

Fifty members of the Olympic Boule judge whether a man shall participate or not in their sacred games. This senate can't define what a Greek is, but it's very easy for them to define what is NOT. For them, it's clear, therefore, that Kleomachus isn't Greek.

Epirus is as old as Sparta, Corinth and Athens, and its roots are surely more Achaeian than those of any of these cities, the Epirotes being the descendants of Achilles himself. The Greeks love to narrate the grief of the Pelis, and every good Hellenic must be able to sing how he mourned the death of Patroclus, to dance his vengeance when he killed Hector. But the royal and divine lineage of Achilles were now mere *barbarians* to the Hellenes.

Alcon the Molossian, current king of Epirus, appeals to that Hellenic divine past. Every Greek knows well of the Great Trojan War. They know that, although the Achaeans, strong-greaved, had many other kings, princes and heroes before him, without Achilles they wouldn't have succeeded in reducing the Trojan walls to ashes.

Hugely disrespectful, the members of the Boule act as if they don't understand the Epirote king. His accent's strong, but if they were free from prejudice, these men would understand him as well as if he were an aristocrat from Lesbos.

After taking a deep breath, and in his best attempt to sound Athenian, Alcon gets the attention of the judges. He gives a solid argument explaining that he himself has gone to the Oracle of Zeus at Dodona, and to the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi, and that the gods have established that Kleomachus, his bastard son, shall participate in the games, as do many others from Argos, Ephesus, or Syracuse.

Reluctantly, the Boule accepts. Who are they to stand against the will of the gods? And that of the Father of Gods and Men', and the Patron of the Arts', no less. They know, *or so they say*, what

it's like to enrage the gods, and they do not wish to do so, so they let the Epirote participate in the competitions.

Leaving the Bouleuterion, Alcon grabs his son by the chiton's neck, and speaks in low tone. Threatening, almost:

'You'd better honour us, after all I've had to do for you to be accepted back there.'

Brown curls and eyes like olive leaves, Kleomachus vows to do as he is asked, to honour his country despite being a bastard, and watches as his father leaves in frustration. He groans softly, and looks up to the sky, praying to the gods that the judges won't find out that, in reality, the oracles had been bribed with large amounts of gold and silver to say what Alcon wanted to hear. And that not Zeus, nor Apollo actually wanted him there.

As if harbingers of tragedy, the clouds settle in the sky, growing darker and darker as they pile up. The young man sighs, and noticing the first drops of water caressing his tanned skin, he heads as fast as he can to where the rest of the Epirotes, and his father, are taking refuge.

\*

High in the Heavens, meanwhile, in a dimension very different from the one in which mortals dwell, lies Heleia, running her fingers carelessly over the strings of her father's lyre, consumed by the boredom of Olympus. Eternity is something humans seem to seek, while it exhausts those who breathed life into them. Hearing heavy footsteps down the corridor, she rises quickly and addresses his magnanimous grandfather with sweet words. After all, she's a descendant of the poet muse.

'Great ancestor,' she greets him with a broad smile. Zeus sighs as he receives on his arm the eagle that keeps him up to date with what's happening around the world.

'Say, Apollid, what do you wish to know now?'

'Does Aeto know if the Hellenes are holding any games this year?' she asks, closely following the King of the Gods as he receives the information from his messenger, an innocent smile decorating her pink lips.

'They celebrate one every year. When they're not at Delphi, they are at Nemea, and when they aren't, they are held at Olympia, or Corinth,' he replies, gesturing for the young immortal to

come closer. 'This year the games are taking place once again at Olympia,' he mentions nonchalantly, knowing his granddaughter's great determination for watching human competitions.

'Ah, but the Olympics aren't interesting, there are no artistic competitions in them, only boring athletes...' She groans. Zeus, though heedless of human celebrations, knows that these feasts are in his honour, and frowns at her words. '... Excuse me, Great Ancestor...' she rectifies once she realises the silent scolding of the Delighting in thunder.

'Don't let them find out, Apollid,' Zeus, the Cloud-piler, growls, and beckons her with his hand to dispatch her.

'... Not that I would show up personally,' she says, and as she leaves, she can hear him snort, knowing well that, out of the children of Apollo, of the golden bow, Heleia is the most restless of all.

*Of course not.* The Cronion murmurs, aware, at this point, of all the tricks of the young deity.

\*

After a month's training in Elis as it's required to participate in the Olympic games—a month in which, by the way, Kleomachus has formed more enmities than friendships—the athletes finally return to the Sanctuary of Zeus, so that the games can begin at once. Aurora's pink fingers touch the morning and bring the sunlight with her, and the priests of Zeus perform a great sacrifice in his honour, his altar burning with the Olympic flame.

On the first day, the youngest competitors, not yet considered adults, participate in less severe trials, although the referees maintain the same rules as for adults. Kleomachus ignores the great crowds that come to the stadium to admire those who, not long from now, will be Greece's soldiers, and victors of greater trials than those of the Panhellenic games. In return, he spends all day training in the gymnasium, and when the sun is about to set, he heads to the altar of Apollo. Not many remain around, since they've already left to the inns, and to their tents that are set up in the designated areas of the Sanctuary.

Thus, when the last rays of Helios hit the Epirote's neck, he murmurs a prayer to the god of the arts, begging for the strength needed to honour his father, who has already been offended enough



## *The Day Gods Left*

by the Greeks. He offers as a votive offering a small clay figurine, one that he had made when he was little and carried with him since he can remember. The sun has hidden behind him by the time he finishes, and he thanks in a soft whisper, in case there's a god to hear his prayer. Then, he heads back to where the athletes are staying, his steps heavy.

... Heleia, in the distance, reads in him as if he were an open book the name *Achilles*. The gods, after all, no matter the minor deities they may be, recognise their blood even when it has been almost buried by the humans' own. And it matters not how many generations have passed since Neoptolemus, the direct descendant of the Pelis, because Heleia's interest is triggered as she sees through them all the great soul of a hero.

\*

*The heroes left Greece on the same day that the gods did. The excesses and great mistakes of all those who participated in the Great Trojan War led the Cronid, Father of Gods and Men, to punish the Achaeans and their descendants, depriving them from the divine help of those who gave them life and helped them on so many occasions. He did so moved by the strong disappointment he felt towards his own lineage, engendered so that order and justice prevailed among mankind.*

*The gods no longer heard prayers, nor did they pay attention to ox sacrifices in their honour. Nor did they notice when humans went out in processions to deliver peplos, or when they did so to perform in their name. No, the gods had turned their backs on them. Zeus's orders. They seldom violated this rule, and when they did, it was severely punished to the obscurity. Only Ares escaped this punishment, when he gave his blood to those who founded Rome on the second year since the 6<sup>th</sup> Olympiads.*

*The Apollid did not yet exist when the verdict was given, but it was well known to her also that those who dared to defy Zeus's word were doomed to oblivion. To Tartarus. Yet, looking sweetly at the Epirote bastard's curls, and his tanned skin as he walked away from her father's altar...*

*... the punishment seemed worth it.*

\*

The second day arrives causing a scandal in the athletes' camp even before dawn. They get up in order to train one last time before the competitions, or to pray to Zeus, Hera or Athena. Kleomachus only stretches, and heads to the Stadium as soon as he can.

The first rays of daylight see Heleia arrive in crowds of people at the stadium. Disguised as a mere mortal, her beauty diminishes, but she still manages to hear how some viewers compare her to *the face that sailed 1000 ships*. She snickers to herself, and when someone asks her for her name, she smiles sweetly, and answers with innocent malice, '*Helen*.'

Soon the bleachers are filled with people, and as expected, five thousand Greeks fill the stadium of Olympia to watch the races that are about to take place. Impatient, she observes the door through which the athletes must come out, and when they do, one of the Hellenodics, using an amplifier to make his voice heard, introduces each of the competitors. There are nobles from so many cities in Greece and from their corresponding colonies, and each of them is warmly received by the cheers of their countrymen. On the contrary, when the name of Kleomachus is announced as the representative of Epirus, there's hardly any encouragement to motivate the young man, like the rest of the athletes have received. Instead, a murmur fills the stadium, each of those present wondering how they could have let a *barbarian* show up for their sacred games. Heleia listens sadly to the harsh words aimed at the young man, and looks in his direction affectionately, compassionate.

The soft female voice that proudly calls his name brings Kleomachus out of his thoughts. His gaze connects with the black eyes of the beautiful lady, and when he sees how the glint that the sun reflects on them makes them golden, he understands at once that she's not a mortal. He also realises how those who sit around her try to move away when they learn that the one they had called *Helen* is also a *barbarian*. The Epirote bastard seems offended by how the goddess is treated, but with her staring at him so intently, so tenderly, Kleomachus almost forgets where he is.

In the greatness that comes with being the descendant of the swift-footed, he wins all four races that take place that day. It's the only thing in which the rest of athletes give in to recognise that, in fact, the Epirote's superior. After the trials, the stadium empties faster than it was filled, with Heleia leaving last. Coming out of the Dorian columns, the Epirotes seem eager to approach her, but at the sound of clamour in the Sanctuary, they run away.

Kleomachus hears the riot, and hurries to the epicentre of it, against the crowds fleeing in

terror, moved by a force that even he himself does not understand well. He watches in horror as a tall snake sits on its body until its head reaches the height of the temple of Hera. Eyes of fire and rough scales that threaten to tear the skin of anyone who touches them, with teeth like daggers. People run from one side to the other, headless chickens. They flee to public buildings and temples. The priests try to prevent them from passing, for it is sacrilegious to enter the abode of the Gods, in vain.

Many athletes, who are hoplites and cavalymen of their cities' armies, take up their weapons to face the monster. But the monster's skin is so thick and rough that it's impossible to pierce it with their bronze weapons. Such is the strength of the beast that, in a powerful movement of its muscular tail, it causes some Spartans, who have set themselves up in a phalanx formation, to be thrown through the air, hitting the portico of the temple of Olympic Hera. The rest of the soldiers flee to the temples at that, so they can pray to Zeus to free them from the evil that has been unleashed.

Only Kleomachus stands in front of the tremendous serpent, which seems to mock him and his heroic attitude with a threatening hiss, waiting for the best moment to pounce on him and take him as an appetizer. He wonders why he is still there, he could easily run off... but he doesn't, and keeps his stance firmly, taking deep breaths as calmly as he can. Once the serpent finally lunges at the Epirote with its jaws open, his spear shines like gold in the sun. Seeing himself already crossing the Styx, Kleomachus closes his eyes and attacks the monster as it charges at him. It's so fast that he can hardly believe what's happening when he hears the monster's cry of pain.

He opens his eyes when he hears the moan, and feels drops of blood on his face. He then sees that he's pierced the monster's head from the roof of the mouth.

Its weak spot.

Debilitated, the snake's tail flaps violently. The people begin to come out of their hiding places, to watch the serpent get killed.

Under the pressure of hundreds of glances, Kleomachus strikes again. This time with his short sword, which now also shines like the spear. The thrust makes the monster cry again, defeated, and it collapses on the ground with a loud thump.

The ground trembles. The Epirote removes his weapons from the now inert being's head, watching in disbelief how, stained in blood, the golden glint fades. Breathing heavily, he pays no attention when the Hellenes come out to hail his victory, and proclaim him a hero. He's looking for

something, but he doesn't know what. He feels dizzy after killing this strange being, and the slight trembling of the ground only destabilises him more.

Until he sees Heleia in the portico of the temple of Hera. And everything seems to make sense now: where his courage came from, where his strength came from. It's all thanks to her.

After seeing her slip through the people to disappear from the scene, without knowing how, Kleomachus' legs make room among the Hellenes who previously repudiated him and now cheer for him. But he hears not what they're saying, not the flattery of the Hellenodics, nor of the Spartan or Argive soldiers. His gaze is fixed on the lady, trying not to lose sight of her. He finally manages to get rid of the people and arrives at a clearing of the Sanctuary, near the shores of the Alpheus River, but he doesn't see her.

'Impressive, Pyrrid,' Heleia speaks, appearing behind Kleomachus. He immediately turns. She's increased in size, abandoning the disguise of a mortal, and is now in her divine glory and splendour. Her reddish blond hair glows, screaming *Apollid*, and the robe falls to her ankles, rolling down her pale shoulders.

Air escapes from Kleomachus' lungs in a harsh exhale. His pupils dilating, he kneels before her, and bows his head.

'What are you doing, Prince of Epirus?' she asks affectionately, and when he looks up, he finds her inches away from his face.

'... You deserve the respect due to a god... You're one—' he justifies himself, and delights in the sound of her sweet chuckle.

'Since I am not worshipped, and there are no temples nor altars dedicated to me, I have no authority to reinforce other than my name and inheritance. And since you share the blood of gods like me, it would be unfair for me to treat you as less than.'

He snorts quietly, and the tenderness in her words ceases the adrenaline that ran through his veins, in return giving way to a beautiful sense of ease.

'... Are all gods like this?' he asks under his breath, his clear eyes getting lost in the black abyss that are hers, who smiles at his question.

'No. The Great Ancestor would think your bow is little to his magnificence. And so would my father,' she replies, her voice so warm it could light fires.

## *The Day Gods Left*

It's already lighting one in Kleomachus' heart.

'I must be lucky, then,' he comments, admiring the goddess's facial features. How her black eyelashes curl gracefully, how her rosy cheeks give her a youthful look.

Eros, the Epirote thinks, would look just like her if he were not a god, but a goddess.

'Luck is a human invention, Kleomachus,' Heleia says, the young man's name spilling from her lips like honey. She then rises on her feet from the ground, and extends a hand to the dark-haired man.

*'Greece has not seen heroes since Odysseus arrived in Ithaca, Pyrrid. But the world is dark. And in a time and place when the light is lacking, your soul shines with the strength of your divine ancestor. Allow me, then, to guide you as Athena, the silver-eyed, did in ancient times with Heracles Dactylus, the magnanimous Odysseus, or the swift-footed one, that who began your lineage, so that the light is restored to Hellas.'* ■

The background is a solid yellow color. It is decorated with white, ethereal starburst or nebula-like patterns. These patterns are composed of thin, branching lines and small, bright dots, resembling distant stars or magical sparks. They are scattered across the page, with a higher concentration in the top-left and bottom-right corners.

# EGGSHELLS

Charlotte McDonald

They were hungry.  
Not just empty—hollow.  
Scraped clean.

They had licked every pot, swirled the last dusting of flour into gray water, cracked open jars from the back of the pantry—sour pickles, shriveled beans, vinegar-stained hope.

On days when the weather dared to soften, the wife combed the fields for dandelion greens. Most were bruised by late snow, sagging like wet paper.

Still, the wife searched. She *always* searched.

The husband's cheeks carved sharp angles along his face, bone outpacing flesh.  
And the child in the wife's belly twisted under skin pulled thin as parchment.

They were starving.

Not the fast kind. The kind that lingers, confuses, changes a person. A slow fade, muffled only by the odd fish, a bitter root, the brittle petals of something half-edible.

But there was still one place of comfort.  
One place the wife could breathe.

The henhouse.

Every morning before the sky opened, she crept out and unlatched the door, breath clouding in front of her like smoke from a dwindling fire.

She searched every corner for the first egg of spring.

It had to come soon.

The hens would feel it—the soft shift in the wind, the light lengthening by heartbeats.

Any day now.

If she found one now, she might eat it raw. Shell and all.

But each morning was the same.

Three sleepy hens blinked at her from their perch. Oblivious.

Alive.

She returned inside with empty hands and a cheerful voice. A performance of plenty.

Today's breakfast: water and willpower.

The husband, of course, noticed.

His eyes flicked to the butcher knife above the hearth.

The wife, of course, noticed.

She had learned that hunger made the husband cruel.

But grief—especially the grief of a pregnant woman—unnerved him more.

The hens had been hers from the start.

Raised from fluffy scraps the color of butter.

Fed from her palm, named in quiet ceremony.

The Ladies, she called them.

The Babies.

The last warmth of summer in a house gone cold.

The husband had rolled his eyes. Called it foolishness.

But tolerated it—back when eggs were easy.

In the summer, the hens had been generous.



They'd fed the family through long days and lazy twilights.

But then the cold came.

The eggs stopped.

Now, the hens gave nothing.

Not even hope.

Now, they were useless.

The husband could see it.

The wife could not. ■



# THE HAMMER

Samuel F. Evans

Powder smoke drifted over the no man's land between the Kealt and Nortish trenches. Three Kealt's, quivering in their charcoal-coloured uniforms, crouched low under the earthen rampart, clutching at muskets tipped with dull, rust-spotted bayonets. Above them guns roared, peppering the mud with lead.

'How are we supposed to hold against that?' Dakin said, poking his thumb over his shoulder, breathing in a lungful of charcoal and saltpetre. 'Half of the fucking Nortts must be on the other side of the mud.'

'We could always surrender,' Knott said, pulling a white handkerchief from his coat pocket and holding it out toward Dakin and Grant.

Dakin and Grant's eyes met; it wasn't the first time Knott had pulled out his handkerchief.

Grant, the oldest and the heaviest of the three, turned to Knott. 'Captain said to hold though; if we go against orders, it'll be the wall for us for sure,' he grumbled from beneath his moustache.

'So that's our choice, is it? Dead in a ditch in some Gods' forsaken trench on the border or dead against a wall back at the barracks?' Dakin said, pulling a goatskin pouch and mahogany pipe from the inside breast pocket of his coat. 'At least we'd be warm and dry at the barracks.'

'Don't light that, they'll see the smoke!' Knott said.

'Can't tell pipe smoke from powder smoke in this light. Bet you can't see your hand in front of your face up there anyway,' he said, pushing a large pinch of tobacco into the bowl. 'I'd much rather die with my pipe in my mouth than my musket in my hand anyway.'

They sat like that for a few minutes, the only sound was the dull whistle of Dakin sucking on his pipe, the embers glowing orange with each draw.

'It's gone right quiet,' Knott said. He looked down and noticed he was still clutching his handkerchief in hands stained black by mud and powder smoke. He tucked the handkerchief away. 'Maybe they've given up?'

'Oh yeah, I'm sure they've used up all their powder and fucked off home, repelled by the three most useless idiots in the Kealtish army!' Grant chuckled.

Knott got to his feet and stepped up on the fire step. 'Get fucking down!' yelled Grant, grabbing the back of his mud-splattered trousers.

Knot poked his head over the parapet. 'There's no one out there! There's just smoke and ditches far as the eye can see!' he said laughing.

'Get down before someone takes your head off!' Grant pulled at his trousers again.

Knott kicked his hand away and looked back out onto no man's land just in time to catch a lead ball through the eye. The force of the round snapped his head back on his neck as he fell backwards. He came to rest with his legs on the duckboards and his brains leaking out into the dugout.

'Fuck, Knott! Knott, can you hear me?' Grant screamed uselessly above the bangs of musket fire and the muted pops of lead hitting the sandbags above his head.

Dakin sat in a state of false calm, sucking on his pipe and staring into Knott's eyes, one an unseeing, glittering ball with a shockingly black iris rolled up towards his forehead, the other a ragged crimson chasm.

Five feet away from the soldiers a round, black iron grenade *thunked* against the duckboards, its fuse fizzling with sparks and belching smoke into the trench.

Dakin pulled his pipe out of his mouth and stared at it incredulously. 'Well shit, if that isn't bad luck.' His tobacco had stopped burning.

Just as the fuse finished burning, a green-coated figure jumped down into the trench clutching a flintlock with blue smoke curling from its barrel.

*Poor sod jumped down to escape the bullets only to land straight onto a grenade...* Dakin thought, closing his eyes and waiting for death. *I hope it's quick, like Knott, I don't want to be one of those fellas screaming for their mothers while they try and hold their guts in.*

The only pain Dakin felt as the grenade exploded was a booming roar against his eardrums, like his ear was pressed to an anvil that was struck by a smith's hammer. *I must be hurt badly.* This had happened before, he'd fallen out of a tree as a lad and snapped his arm when he hit the ground. That hadn't hurt. Even when he poked it, it just felt wrong and made his stomach queasy. Then, half an hour later, it'd started hurting and he'd screamed until he'd passed out.

He opened his eyes and laughed as he found himself, Grant and the Green Coated figure all whole.

'Misfire! Misfire!' he shouted, his limbs shaking with giddy energy.

The Green Coated figure turned around. His eyes were dark and smoke curled from his

smouldering beard. 'Shut your mouth and pick your musket up. If you're not on the fire step in thirty seconds, I'll shoot you myself,' he roared.

*Oh shit, green coat, black buttons...* This man was an Alloyaturge, a manipulator of metals, and not just any Metal Mage either: black buttons were only given to the King's Elites, specialist warrior mages renowned for their skill and brutality on the field of battle. Dakin looked at Grant and saw a wet patch spreading from his crotch and down his leg.

Dakin's eyes sank to the Mage's muddy boots and the small pile of shrapnel in front of them. *He's so powerful that he managed to hold the metal in the grenade still when it exploded...*

'Yes, Sir!' he said, dropping his pipe and snapping a hasty salute.

Dakin charged his musket and crouched on the fire step waiting for a break in the musket fire to poke his head up and fire.

'Steady, lads, steady. When I jumped down there were about ten of the bastards twenty yards away. I got the one who chucked the grenade but the others have us pinned down; five are firing while the other five reload.' The mage spread his arms and made his hands into fists, twisted chunks of metal slid out of the dugout wall to hover around him. Dakin's stomach rolled as he saw a gore-covered chunk rise from Knott's ruined skull. 'On the count of three lads. One, two, three!' The mage swept his arms like a conductor, sending the levitating shrapnel hurtling out of the trench.

Dakin heard screams as he poked his head over the parapet. On his left, he saw Grant rise beside him, fire, and crouch back down to charge his musket. On his right, the mage scrambled up and over the parapet into no man's land.

His green coat swirled around him as he charged towards the men, twin Warhammers appearing in his meaty fists.

Dakin looked down his musket's sight at the Nortish crossing squad. Three of them were down and screaming from the shrapnel rain. Another stood clutching his thigh where Grant's shot had embedded itself. All the others were desperately trying to charge their muskets before the Green Coated man reached them.

Dakin tried to pick a target but felt dizzy, unable to focus on a single target. Finally, one man swam into focus and he pulled the trigger. Flint ignited powder, sending a lead ball the size of a small blueberry hurtling toward a red-bearded Nort desperately trying to aim his musket at the green-

coated storm of hammers which was hurtling toward him. It caught him in the chest and he collapsed.

The Green Coat reached the Norts and swung his hammers in vicious, ruinous arches. Blood, teeth and shards of bone whirled around him as he quickly dispatched two men. He looked around for his next target and threw one of his hammers at a Nort as he poured powder down his musket barrel, crushing his skull.

The last Nort standing threw his musket down and drew a rapier from his belt. The Green Coat held out his empty hand and his gore-splattered hammer flew back into his palm.

He said something to the soldier in the guttural language of the Norts and the soldier replied, taking a fencer's ready stance.

The Mage took a wide stance holding his right-hand hammer high and the left low, close to its head. The Nort dashed in with a stab. The Mage parried with the shaft of his left hammer and swung with his right. The Nort back-stepped, causing the Mage to stagger when his blow met only empty air. The Nort seized his opportunity and directed a heavy slash toward the Mage's exposed right shoulder.

The Mage blocked clumsily with his right hammer, sending the Nort's sword slash wide. He followed the movement around with his left hammer which connected with the Nort's knee with a sickening crack.

The Nort screamed and fell onto his back. The Mage dropped his left hammer in the mud, sank to his knee beside the Nort and put a hand on the man's chest. He said one last thing to him in Nortish before ending his suffering with a two-handed hammer blow to his head.

Reinforcements arrived minutes later. A platoon of soldiers in clean charcoal coats with shiny bayonets filed into the trench. Grant accompanied Knott's body back to camp, leaving Dakin cold and alone in the dugout, staring at a muddy red puddle that had been Knott's brain.

'You alright?' the Mage said, lowering himself into a chair beside Dakin, startling him out of his trance.

'Me? Yeah, I think so,' he replied as the Mage passed him a flask. He coughed, fire burned in his throat and warmth spread through his stomach as he drank the liquor.

'That was your pal? The one with...' The Mage gestured to his face.

'Aye. Knott's his name.'

‘To Knott then,’ the Mage said, taking a swig. He grimaced. ‘Well, that’s more fit for stripping paint than drinking. But we’ll make do.’

They sat there in silence for a while as the light faded in the dugout, passing the flask back and forth.

The Mage lit a candle.

‘You said something to him before you killed him.’

‘Your pardon?’ the Mage said blowing out the match.

‘That last soldier. You put your hand on his chest and spoke to him in Nortish before you finished him off. What did you say?’

‘I told him he fought well.’

Dakin took another swig from the flask. ‘Why?’ he asked, handing it back.

The Mage leaned back in his chair and scrubbed at his stubble with a dirty hand. ‘Do you know much about Nortland?’

Dakin shook his head.

‘I thought not. They’re not like us in Kealt. It’s a rough sort of place. Mountains so steep they may as well be walls, plains of soil so thin it won’t take crops and thick, stubborn trees that are more knots than usable wood. The Norts are as tough as Nortland. Tougher most of the time. There’s one thing they’ve come to respect, fighting and dying well. So as a final kindness, I let him know he’d fought well.’

The Mage stood and made to leave the dugout.

‘You didn’t use your magic when you fought him.’

The Mage paused with his hand on the door frame, staring at the thin sliver of the moon that hung over no man’s land.

‘No, I didn’t. Would’ve been disrespectful. When it’s ten on three, I’ll use my magic. If I’m fighting another Mage, I’ll use my magic. Put me against a single man and I won’t disrespect him by tearing him apart with magic that he can’t defend himself against.’

Dakin nodded. ‘That makes sense.’

‘Aye. I’ll be seeing you then.’

‘Wait.’ The Mage turned around. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Toran,’ he said. ‘Toran the Hammer.’ ■

# BEFORE THE GUNSHOT

Susie Dowell



**I**t is three minutes to midnight.

The door swings open at one push of the agent's gloved hand.

Locks already broken.

He glances left at the security control panel.

All alarms disengaged.

Around the edges of the basement, floor spotlights cast cones of golden light up the stone walls. The cones flicker, one by one, as the rubber-soled shoes of the agent slink over them. He slips up a spiral staircase, through another disarmed door, and then down the artwork-strewn side of a wide, shadowy corridor.

A glimpse of a shape beyond the archway ahead draws him closer against the wall, finger ready at the trigger as he lifts his gun into a higher hold.

He steps forward.

It's the body of a guard, blood still rapidly spreading across the glossy wooden floor. The agent steals past; muscles tense and mind alert as he notes this final signal that his quarry is present—and nearby.

The atrium beyond the archway is lit by the moonbeams which slice down through the grand hexagonal skylight glinting five floors above. In the centre of the atrium, a monstrous clock monument rises in seven tiers of decreasing size, topped by a rusty and solemn bell. On the thick ledge of each tier, carvings of contorted animals plead mercy between the bony embraces of shackled skeletons.

Hidden from view on the third-tier ledge of the clock, the thief shifts position. His bare toes grip the grooves of carved agony beneath him. His gun glints briefly in the moonlight.

The agent, feeling the prickle of unseen eyes upon him, catches a flicker of movement. He crouches back against the side of the archway, head slightly tilted, and confirms to himself that he sees only the swing of the pendulum within the monument. He waits a moment more, listening intently, and hears only a soft *tick*

*tick*

*tick.*

The bullet misses him—just.

It cracks into the wall, and the agent twirls and tucks himself behind the archway just as the thief swings further around the ledge and shoots again. The agent lets the bullets fly by before ducking briefly into the open and returning fire.

*CLANG.*

The thief almost loses his grip as the clock begins to echo a deep, melancholic chime.

*CLANG.*

Struggling to regain his balance, the thief swings down onto the second-tier ledge and fires wildly—*CLANG*—at the agent as he leaps further out from the archway—*CLANG*—and shoots at the hanging thief.

Above the zipping flurry of gunshots, the clock continues to strike the midnight hour.

\*

It is 22 years and three months before the gunshot which kills him, and Max is destroying his older brother. He's holding the rifle up high, close to his freckled face, and firing with confident and gleeful precision.

'You little rat!' growls Ben, eyes desperate.

*Ping.*

*Ping.*

*Ping.*

*Ping.*

The targets collapse one after each other, wooden bottles, cacti, and cowboy hats all bowing down in defeat. Max takes down one last cactus before the rifles power down and numbers bleep up on the score panels.

Player 1 --- 062.

Player 2 --- 104.

'Booyah, sucker!' Max crows, pumping the plastic rifle up and down above his head.

It's an ecstatic victory, because the unspoken agreement between the brothers is that Ben will never, under any circumstances, deliberately let Max win.

'Whatever, crack-shot,' Ben smirks. 'Talk to the hand.' He waves his calloused hand in front of Max's gap-toothed grin, then pushes his palm fully into Max's face, forcing him to stumble

## *Before The Gunshot*

backwards.

‘I’m gonna spend your tickets, *sucker*,’ Ben taunts, tearing the long ticket strip from its Player 2 slot and making an escape in the direction of the prize booth.

Max recovers quickly, dumping his rifle and chasing after Ben’s tall frame through the maze of garish carpet and flashing, bleeping arcade games.

\*

Four years and five days before the gunshot, Max swerves to avoid a bus as it rockets towards them around the corner of the rocky cliff face. Behind him, Lucy laughs with a mix of exhilaration and terror as their scooter hurtles along the outer edges of Cát Bà Island.

‘I’ve got you, trouble,’ he calls over his shoulder, and feels Lucy’s arms tighten around his waist, her kiss on his neck.

He thinks of the ring tucked into the inside pocket of his satchel.

They zip around another corner, and Lucy whoops and cackles as the road plunges them in a curve down towards the shoreline. To their right, the turquoise-jade waters of Hả Long Bay sparkle in the merciless sunshine, stretching away as endlessly as the wispy cloud trails in the pale blue sky.

\*

Two years and six months before the gunshot, Max is being tackled to the ground.

‘I don’t negotiate with terrorists!’ he cries, twisting onto his front and claspings the target of his adversary closer to his chest.

His niece scrambles across his back, giggling as he tries to shake her off. Her chubby fingers clutch his Christmas jumper in a death grip.

‘Cook-kiee!’ she shrieks into his ear.

Max struggles to his knees, the biscuit tin outstretched before him. Lana swings from his neck, legs kicking wildly.

‘Alright!’ he chokes out. ‘I—*gah*—surrend—*gah*. I surrender!’

One defeated moment later and Lana runs, stomping and giggling, back to the kitchen to show off her prize to mummy and Auntie Lu.

‘Where was the backup, man?’ gasps Max, collapsing onto the sofa and dumping his legs over Ben, who’s sprawled at the other end. Ben takes a final puff of his inhaler. He pats Max’s green Grinch socks.

‘I’ve been broken,’ he admits. ‘It’s too late for me. Save yourself.’

Max reaches a consoling hand to Ben, and, failing to reach a shoulder, settles for patting the closest bit of sofa to him.

‘She’s broken us both.’

\*

Five years before the gunshot, Gatwick airport is in full capacity chaos, and Max, unfazed, is eating a sandwich on the floor between his backpack and a newspaper stand.

Eventually, his gate number is called, and about a million years after that, passengers begin boarding. When Max reaches seat 4B, he finds fate sitting by the window, wearing round glasses and a blonde ponytail, and reading a paperback.

He waits until she’s looking out at the shrinking rooftops before he makes his move.

‘Good book?’

She looks around, shrugs, and shows him the cover.

‘It’s one of the James Bond books, off my parents’ bookshelf. James has a friend who’s just described how he kept his wife tied under his kitchen table, like a dog, and James is like, “oh, cool,” so now I’m less keen, y’know?’

Max has no idea how to respond to this. ‘Oh, right,’ he manages.

The blonde smiles and takes pity.

‘So, what do you do?’

‘Er—well, a bit of this, a bit of that.’

She tilts her head and narrows her eyes in mock scrutiny.

‘What, you can’t tell me?’

## *Before The Gunshot*

He narrows his eyes back at her.

‘Nope. You gotta guess.’

‘Fine,’ she says, dropping her book into her lap and tapping her fold-down table with both hands, in readiness. ‘You’re a...plumber?’

‘Nope, you’re cold.’

‘Chef?’

‘Oof, getting very chilly.’

Her cartoonishly-magnified eyes appraise him. ‘Hmm...lifeguard?’

Max rubs the back of his neck. ‘Not quite,’ he chuckles, ‘but warmer.’

‘...Sailor?’

Max pulls a face. ‘Nope. Guess I’ll just have to remain the international man of mystery.’

She raises her eyebrows. ‘Fine,’ she says, making a show of reopening her book.

‘Wait, wait,’ says Max. ‘What if I try to guess your job? If I lose, I’ll tell you mine.’

‘Alright, deal.’

‘Alright!’ He cracks his knuckles. ‘And so begins Round Two of Max versus...?’

Her nose crinkles and she pushes her glasses back up, ‘Lucy.’

\*

One year and two months before the gunshot, Max retrieves his phone from where he threw it across the room. He flips it around in his hands, inspecting it for damage, his surge of anger ebbing away.

All good.

He reopens messenger. The date on his most recent message to Ben accuses him once more of cowardice and neglect.

Max’s thumbs hover over his phone screen. He tries to swallow away the sandpaper in his throat.

At least restrictions are sparing him from a hospital visit—*coward*—but modern technology has stepped in with flawless timing to ensure that the physically isolated remain inexcusably socially connected on more digital platforms than there are Covid symptoms.

But the way Ben looked in their last Zoom call—the tubes—the hack of his cough.

Max swipes away his tears.

Ben isn't allowed to look weak. He stops being Ben, and becomes...someone frightening.

Ben *isn't allowed* to be *weak*.

And nor is he.

Max presses the camera icon and has his smile ready before Ben's video pixelates into view.

\*

Four days before the gunshot, Lucy is beaming at him over her morning smoothie.

'You like the new mug?' she asks, as if she's telling a joke.

Max looks at the plain white mug from which he's just sipped his coffee.

'It's...a good size?' he hazards. He's been caught out before for not noticing things which are glaringly obvious to Luce.

Lucy nods wisely, sipping more smoothie. Good—answer accepted. He returns to his guess 3 on Wordle, missing the glance which Lucy gives to her phone, propped facing them on the windowsill.

Max drains the last of his coffee, puts the mug down, frowns, picks the mug up again and peers inside.

'I'm pregnant,' he reads.

There's a silent beat where Max continues to frown into his mug and Lucy waits, toes dancing in her socks, beaming on at him.

Then—'You're pregnant?' he yells, jumping up in joyful disbelief.

\*

Seven days and 6 hours before the gunshot, the sun streams down through the leaves, casting dancing shadows on the pavement. Max grins at this sight beneath him, one of nature's multitude of momentary art displays.

## *Before The Gunshot*

‘Slowpoke!’ he hears Ben tease from up ahead. ‘Giving up already?’

Max’s uniform has been growing a little tight in undesirable areas, and regular exercise helps strengthen Ben’s lungs, so here they are, sweating and stinking and Being Active.

Max pulls his shoelace knot tight and runs out into the full blare of sunshine.

Glorious.

\*

Four hours before the gunshot, Max stretches his shoulders out, shaking off his latest wave of terror at the prospect of affording a baby. *One day at a time*, like Luce says. He takes a deep breath and feels his sense of joyful excitement returning.

He flicks his locker shut and slips his torch into his duty belt. Leaving the staff room, he passes the day guard in the hall.

‘Extra shift, Max? Don’t usually see you on Thursdays.’

‘You know me, Jeff, I can’t keep away.’

The older man scoffs good-naturedly. ‘Aye, well, it’s all clear and quiet for you. Try no’ to break anything, eh?’

‘No promises!’ Max jokes, plodding up the spiral stairs to the galleries.

\*

Two minutes after the gunshot which kills him, Max can no longer feel the cool of the wooden floor against his cheek. He’s no longer crawling to find his phone, which the masked figure snatched and threw. His shaking hands are no longer strong enough to press against the bullet wound in his stomach. His heart thuds. It hurts.

Why is he on the floor?

What’s that?

Spillage.

Max goes to fetch a mop from the cupboard in his childhood home. He tells Luce to be

careful, Lana has spilled something, don't slip. Got to keep an extra eye on her now, keep her and the baby safe. He collects the mop, but when he comes back, he finds that he hasn't actually moved.

Why is he on the floor?

Movement—what's that?

Max watches two black objects pass by, light and swift. Cats? Rats? No.

Shoes.

Someone's shoes.

Someone has gone by.

Max doesn't hear the gunshots.

He's dead before the clock strikes its first midnight chime. ■



The background of the cover is a solid black field. It is decorated with intricate, glowing patterns of light. In the upper half, there are wispy, yellow-gold lines that resemble smoke or ethereal energy. In the lower half, there are more structured, branching patterns in shades of red and white, resembling a complex network or a stylized map. The overall effect is mysterious and dramatic.

# THE KNIGHT

Robert Gibson

Dawn arrived with a fine mist that clung to the fields, and the brigands approached the temple at a steady pace. There were seven of them in total, enough to make Ser Alistor grimace beneath his steel helm.

‘Goddess protect us!’ a priest uttered behind the knight.

If his body wasn’t shaking as the adrenaline coursed through his veins, Ser Alistor might have laughed at that. No matter the towering steeples of Merixia’s temple and the neat burgundy robes of its priests, there were no gods to be found here. In place of the divine, there were men, and the mercy of the faithful was not kindled in their hearts. Not all of them, at least.

‘Brothers, hear me,’ Archpriest Maribald pleaded. ‘We need not fear the work of these lost souls. They come to us in need. Let us welcome them with open arms. Let them see what faith in Merixia provides to us common mortals! There is still space in her halls for those that seek it.’

There was much debate upon Ser Alistor’s arrival at the temple. It was not the priests who sought his services, but the townsfolk. The threats of brigands were not to be taken lightly, after all. Edrea was a country plagued with believers who cherished the sanctity of their temples, and for such sacred places of worship to be profaned by devils who disregarded their vows to the land and their fellow men, was to unleash the darkest of omens upon those who allowed it to transpire. Despite this, it soon became apparent to Ser Alistor that not all of the priests at this particular temple shared such sentiments.

‘When the day is done, priest,’ Ser Alistor began, his voice muffled by the helm’s visor, ‘the townsfolk will need to find space in your graveyard if you pursue such folly. Men like those who walk your fields openly bearing arms do not merely come for your temple’s possessions; they will have other treasures in mind.’

‘And what treasures would they be, ser?’ Maribald turned on the knight, the priests who surrounded him hanging off every word that had the unfortunate effort of slipping from his sneering mouth. ‘We are but humble priests, whose possessions are the word of Merixia.’

‘The slaughter of the innocent, devout or accursed, is a treasure to many. You would do well to heed my warnings and barricade yourselves inside, before they are upon us, and your fate is no longer my burden to bear.’

‘Our goddess decides our fates. Not you, ser. They are predetermined. Do not presume to

command *us!*'

It took much to truly anger Ser Alistor. He had been a knight for many years, seen combat in two foreign wars, and was even anointed under the blessing of Merixia for his feats in battle. Through all of the death, pestilence, and political corruption he had witnessed, it was often the conviction of a stubborn man that inflicted a sharp bite upon his sanity.

The pace of the brigands had not slowed, and as they drew ever closer to the temple, Ser Alistor's grip on his sheathed longsword grew tighter. Only a few minutes remained before the time for decision-making would be over, and the chaos of bloodshed would let fly its merciless torrent. Even the prospect of holding off seven men alone was a dismal one, but guarding the priests who refused to stay indoors was utterly hopeless. Ser Alistor knew this, yet it was his duty to stand his ground, nonetheless. The decision was plain.

Without waiting for another word, Ser Alistor moved forward and grabbed Archpriest Maribald by the cuff of his robes. The clergyman sputtered and protested, even lashing out at the knight, but it was pointless. And the other priests simply watched, the idea of challenging a fully armoured knight far from their immediate desires.

'What in all the hells are you doing? Release me at once!' Maribald shouted helplessly.

Ser Alistor tossed him through the doors of the temple, where he landed roughly on the stone flags. As the man recovered from the sudden treatment of their protector, the other priests swiftly retreated inside. Two of them tried to help Maribald to his feet, but he pushed them away and stood up far faster than Ser Alistor might have supposed he could.

'I am an Archpriest of Merixia!' Maribald erupted, pointing his wrinkled finger at the knight but making no further attempt to leave the boundaries of the temple. 'You will adhere to me or find yourself damned for eternity.'

By now, all of the priests were inside, out of harm's way. That was all Ser Alistor needed. He went to the entranceway, grabbing the studded doors of the temple and slowly heaving them shut. They were heavy, enough to deter some poorly equipped brigands, for a few hours at least. Before the priests were out of sight, and their archpriest had stopped cursing him, Ser Alistor concluded their brief dialogue.

'Pray that I live, priest. For if I do not, I'll await your arrival at Merixia's gates.'

As the doors shut, a deep breath awaited the knight's solitary guard of the temple. The world stood still for a moment, and all to be heard was the faint whistle of the wind. No birds could be heard singing, and before long, the inevitable sound of steel on steel would grace the fields like an old friend.

Turning, Ser Alistor assessed his situation once again. The brigands were about a hundred paces from him now, their formation spreading into an arch. They meant to surround him, but at whatever cost Ser Alistor couldn't allow that. If he were to survive this sordid affair, the walls of the temple must remain at his back. From this distance, it was clear that his assailants were poorly equipped. Only three of them had anything that actually resembled armour, and it was all so mismatched it would make little difference to the knight's freshly sharpened longsword. Their weapons would be an issue, though. Ser Alistor counted four axes, three short-swords, and one mace. He knew it would be essential to focus on the man that wielded the mace first.

Ser Alistor walked forward, the plated armour clinking in his ears. He took three short breaths. Slowly, the steel longsword was drawn from its sheath. It glimmered silver, and demanded to paint with red.

The brigands stopped ten paces from the knight, standing in a line. There was a stretch of silence, where all the world came to a pause and awaited what happened next. Even the wind seemed to cease.

'We come for the temple's tithes,' a brigand wielding an axe said, spitting on the ground harshly. 'We have no quarrel with you, knight.'

'Alas, my sword awaits you,' Ser Alistor replied.

The fear in some of them was palpable, Ser Alistor could see that plain enough. But would they succumb to that fear and flee? Or must they die afraid? It wasn't certain yet.

'Do you desire death so keenly?' another said, his voice wavering somewhat.

'Only for those who stand against me. Approach, or do not. It makes no difference.'

For a single second, which seemed to exist independently of everything else, Ser Alistor thought he might be spared the effort of combat. Then the certainty of slaughter broke loose, and the world breathed.

The knight stood alone. His plate armour ran slick with blood. Around him, the ground was littered with bodies. But they weren't bodies anymore, not really. Limbs were strewn across the grass. Entrails splattered upon the walls of the temple. Everything that made those bodies human was cut to pieces.

'You are a *monster*, ser!'

Ser Alistor was panting. It took him a few moments to hear what was said, and he sheathed his longsword, wearily removing his helm. The light greeted him harshly. Upon turning, the priests stood in the doorway, their faces pale, stricken with fear and disgust.

'The temple is safe, as are you,' Ser Alistor said gruffly, spitting some blood; he'd burst his lip.

'Safe?!' Archpriest Maribald scoffed. 'You have desecrated these grounds, spilt blood in a place of worship. Seven souls have been ruthlessly torn from this world!'

Ser Alistor examined his work. It had been challenging, the most difficult fight of his years as a knight. He'd earn no reward for it, and by the looks of it no affection.

'I denounce you,' Maribald practically screeched, his voice trembling with fury. 'I curse you! All will know of what transpired here. Ser Alistor, the *butcher* of men. May it haunt you the rest of your days.'

Midday had arrived, and the morning mist had finally dispersed. Ser Alistor left the temple, making his way to the nearby town on foot. Upon his arrival, the doors that once welcomed him were now closed, and the bruises beneath his armour cried out for relief. Though the knight would find no solace here, nor for many miles, where the roads would lead forever on to the damnation of one who must choose who lives. ■

The background is a solid yellow color with decorative white starburst and sparkles scattered across it, particularly concentrated in the corners.

# A USURPER'S LAST CONFESSION

G. Less

You asked me what my first memory was. I told you it was drowning. You laughed. Such a beautiful laugh. A taste of Apotheosis. Your smile divine.

You told me yours were of God. Devotion. Love. Sermons and incense. And always to holy prayer. You were always so faithful. I was not.

You told me what people say about me. Villain. Ruination. Bastard. An abomination that you should stay clear of. I asked why you did not heed their warning.

You just laughed.

I told you it was true. I was born from trickery, incest and violation. I was born wrong. You frowned and said we were all born with original sin. But the Lord's son died to save us. You were born by God's grace. And God doesn't make mistakes.

I snapped back, I do not believe in your god. I was born as a curse, as an abomination. As a punishment. It is my destiny, and I cannot defy it.

You gave me your small, beautiful little smile. You who followed the old ways, but the old ways and my God gave us free will. Your life is yours to determine.

I should have reminded you that destiny, in the old way and the new, was impossible to defy. Like your Lord's son was destined to die and be betrayed. And the angel, it was destined to fall. I was stuck to my destiny, surely, as you were stuck to yours.

But I could not burst a bubble of that god you pray to. Every morning, noon and night in the castle chapel. That you starve and suffer to come closer to its divinity.

It loves you so much. It knows you so well. It had a plan for you.

## *A Usurper's Last Confession*

And if you do not do what it wants, you will burn.

At least mine is honest enough to tell you upfront what you are. And you do not have a choice in the matter. It doesn't give cruel hope.

Destiny, your destiny was grand. To become the best of the best. The Siege Perilous. You hurtled towards it. Hypocrite. For the glory of it. Your holy quest. Forgetting what your destiny meant, a dangerous siege.

But you told me to defy my destiny. That you would help me. You told me you do not believe I could do what my destiny demands of me. The highest crime. Patricide. Regicide. And even so, you will be there to guide me away. But you were dead. I am glad you were, so I could not disappoint you.

I remembered our talks. In your chapel, the holiest of holy places for you, where they speak the conqueror's tongue. They take the little wealth of the common folk and use it to create an unnatural effigy and decorate it with transfixed art, for you were praying to a foreign god. And in my forests, where the spirits of old are still alive and well, the old customs still needed to be obeyed. The beauty is natural and ancient. The wise trees whisper. An old, holy place.

The stories we shared. I told you about the Romans; their cruelty and evilness. How they destroyed our land, the language, the magic dead. The rape and pillaging. The blood spilled when they occupied, and the dark age after they left.

You would argue back to me, they gave us the aqueduct and the road. How they civilised us and the rest of the world, and most importantly, gave us faith. I would ask you at what cost? And you would remain quiet.

We talked about our fathers. You are proud of yours, but you hated him as well. His



faithlessness and betrayal of my father, his best friend, and his wife, your mother. He was beautiful and so good, like you were. You were always better.

I told you about my father and how I loved him. Because I did love him, despite what the court and the knights thought. Even at the end, I loved him. I wanted to be like him, loved and adored. I wanted to make him proud.

And you would smile against my ear and whisper about God. And I loved you for it.

I whispered secrets of the court in your ears. The first of the king, the queen and their knight. And their twisted love. That will bring ruination. The princess who was forced to marry for unity and peace. But risk that for love. You would give me a sad smile.

You were always smiling. Love makes us do selfish things. I hated that about your smile. Always smiling. At every insult. Bastard, they whispered behind your back. And you smiled. Prayed for their enlightenment. They would doubt your skill with a sword. You would smile and beat them soundly. And prayed for their well-being. Always so kind, always so positive.

I did not know how you could take it. When they caught me, I cursed them. When they doubted me, I threatened their secrets and what they hold dear. When they hurt me, I hurt them back threefold. They called me cruel, malicious, and I just laughed.

You never called me cruel. You never doubted me. You told me I could be a good king. A ruler the world had never seen before. A good man and a good king. As there rarely has been both.

My father was a good king. A legendary one that stood the test of time. He loved his people and land. But he was a bad man. And a worse father. But my grandfather was too. At least my father tried to be good. His sins were arrogance, trusting, and forgetting the past informs the future. But there are some things we do for reasons, even if it's lost to history. And forgetting what we are and

## *A Usurper's Last Confession*

what we survived. Striving to make a country alike to that empire that destroyed us. Arrogant enough to believe that people would support him. The Golden King would have such butchery.

Your father was a good man. A good knight. A good father. Even though you might disagree. You were born similar to how I was, a violation, and given a destiny to surpass him. He should have hated you. But he raised you far away from the viper nest. Freely taught to the one who was to surpass him. He was ruled by passions. Love for his King and Queen. And his love for you. Betrayal was anathema to him. Loyalty engraving.

But not blindly. He was not blind, your father. Beautiful, kind, heroic, but not blind.

Willing to forsake himself against his love, his king, his everything, to protect his realm and the others from his planned butchery. You denounced your father as a coward and morales. I wish you could have seen his integrity.

Then we got older. And you became the better Knight. The best fighter and chaste. So beautiful that chastity was wasted on you.

And I became secretive. Learning secrets of this fair court and the world.

To twist and bend it to my will to serve my father. It was always to serve my father. When I was little, I always thought you were so naive, seeing the beauty of the world. Memorialising it and praising your god for it.

Ignoring the cracks. But you saw all of it. Didn't you?

You saw the decay of our city, of our keep, of our court. The petty squabbles. The boorish knights. The misery of it. You thought to bring glory once again. You would make it chivalrous once again.

I still thought you were naive. Believing before was better. Like we were not starving, killing our neighbours for a piece of bread. Like there have not been stories of the Lord or Knight invoking the barbarous right of the lord for years. Believing we were great or good or glorious. When we were always just surviving.

What was the need for glory? As the people who were glorious according to our history were savages and cruel. Destroyers.

You were kind. Kindness might not be glorious. It's needed. More than anything. But kind people are seldom remembered.

You should have become a priest. Praying to your god that loves you. Teaching and guiding the people you wanted to protect. But you had a destiny. A glorious destiny.

But at what cost? I knew your destiny was to become the best of us. The greatest. I hated it. The greatest die young. Achilles, Alexander the Great.

You laughed at my worries and whispered in my ear. I will be the best of the best. I will serve you, when you become king. We will be just like our fathers, which caused me to smile.

But you were a liar. You told the sweetest of sweet lies. You said you would be there to guide me. Be at my side. That we would be like our fathers. Alas, it was my fault.

I kissed you.

You smiled until you realised what you had done. And told me it was a sin. And I forgot that, as kind as your god was, your god was so cruel. To deny passion and lust as if they are not human desires. To decry love as sin. And I had to watch you fall apart from grief and guilt. Because you had

## *A Usurper's Last Confession*

sinned. And I made you lose your innocence like Enkidu and Shamhat. The snake and Eve.

And you removed yourself from my side. And gave me a wound I have forever suffered. But you were kind about it. Praying to your god to deliver me and I knew you were doing the same for yourself. Deliverance from something natural.

And when your god was not delivering you from that, you left me for your destiny. That accursed cup. And my father's godforsaken quest.

That was the only moment I truly hated him. My father. My king. On that round table, once the future king proclaimed it was his destiny to unite the world, but they were the heir of Rome. But this will take lifetimes, and they would need a symbol to unite. Both could be achieved if he got his hands on the holiest of things. That cup, the grail, the son of your god drank from before he was betrayed and crucified to give your god's grace. And you laughed at me when I said your god was cruel.

And to do this mission, you had to send the best of the best. And it was always going to be you. You who are so beloved by your god, you who had won one hundred duels. You who surpassed your father, the greatest knight of the land. I would have chosen you, too.

You left. And I waited and waited.

That cup returned, for the court and king celebrated. But you were not there. Your father told me what happened. You touched that cup and died like one of those saints you asked to intercede. And they were celebrating your death as glorious, sanctifying and holy. And I hated them.

But my dear, my love, my brother, it wasn't worth it. I am happy you are dead, so you did not see what came next.

You did not see your king, using your faith, your god, to become emperor. To become a bad

king, as all emperors are bad kings. You didn't see him justify betraying that princess we talked about so long ago in her Kingdom. Because your god told him to conquer and unite. You did not see his plans, oh, his plans.

You did not see him burning down trees. You did not smell the acrid ash, the rotten decay. You didn't hear the spirit screaming and wailing. You didn't taste the soot.

I think you would be mad about what I did next, but you have no right to judge me. You followed your destiny. I had to follow mine.

They will say that I hated my father, but I did not. You knew that. I loved him more than anything. I loved him more than myself. And I truly thought I could defy fate. I truly thought I could. You see, I had a plan. To stop him. To stop his madness, his greed, his rampage. It was a tricky twisting of the law. And I was always quite good at twisting. You knew as well as I do, a king is nothing without its seat. And my father was always so arrogant. Arrogant enough to believe that if he left his seat unprotected, to occupy and pillage, nobody would claim it.

He must have forgotten about me. But I was always so devoted to him. Scared of my destiny. He did not think I would claim it.

To be stained with the epithet usurper. To prove the court right. To become the villain of the story, because I am the villain of the story. And forevermore, I'll be the villain. But I did, and I did not regret it. I will not feel shame for it. And I would do it again if I had to.

I refused to accept the kingdom and God you loved to be used in such a way. I refused my father, the king, who dragged us out of the dark ages the Romans left us in, to be heir to that very unholy empire.

I refuse to inherit a kingdom that was inflicted with hurt and pain, that was passed down

## *A Usurper's Last Confession*

generation by generation to inflict the same pain onto others.

I do not want to pay the cost of glory and civilisation in my people and others' blood.

I think my father hated me in those final days. As I sat on his throne, with his queen and knight by my side.

They called us betrayers. They told of how the Queen was in love with the Knight. Like my father wasn't in love with him too.

They called me heathen, jealous thing, usurper. When the foreigners called a King butcher, slayer, destroyer, thief.

They too hated me more. The prodigal child who saved them. As I broke the natural order of things, a child who stole from their father. He did it first. He betrayed his friends and enemies. His wife and companion. For glory.

I am the villain for doing it for kindness, for compassion. I am forsaken for doing it for love.

Even with all this, I tell you, I thought I could defy my fate. I believed in your cruel God's hope. His grace. I did not think it would come to this.

I tell you now that you and most people won't believe me. I did not want to kill my father. I did not think I could with his sword and scabbard, the knights who would ride with him to the end of the world.

I would have thought we would be united. Either for us to be together if my beliefs were right and true, or you would watch me up in your divinity while I was in eternal torment, but at least you would be there.

The Lesser Sin of Filicide would be committed, I would be a sacrifice to my father, so that he could return from his madness. Because I still loved him, and he was still my king. A good king.

Alas, destiny is a bitch.

My father's dead, and I lie dying. But I do not regret what I did, love. ■



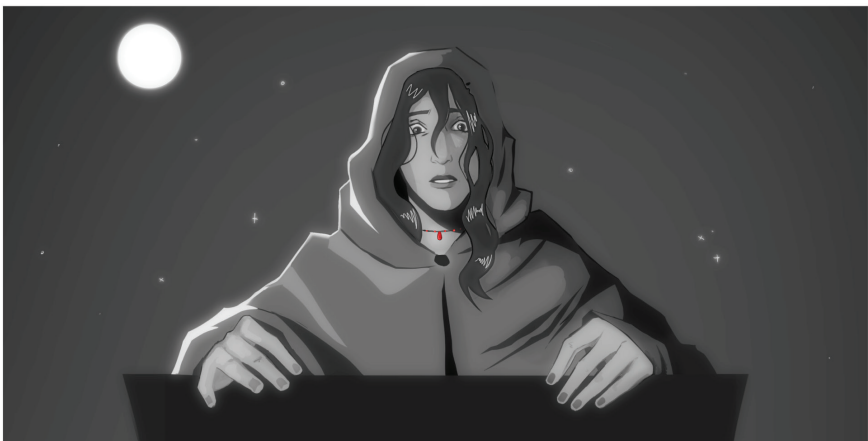
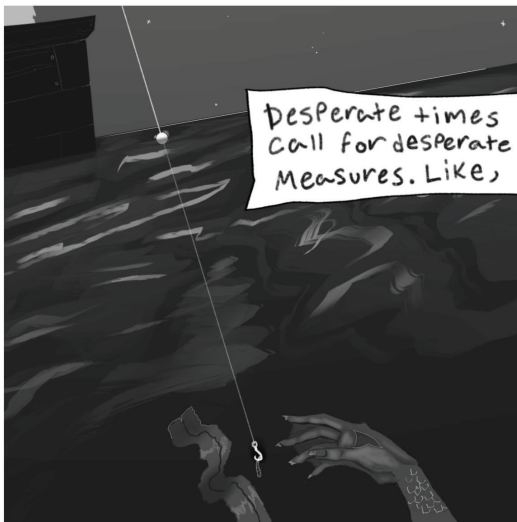
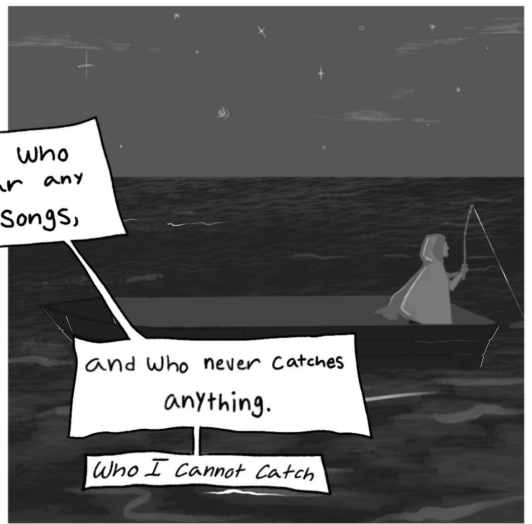
# PEACE OFFERING

Marie McCrory





The one who won't hear any of my songs,



# KNIFEWORK

Ross McWhinnie

You cannot be squeamish about this.

Not in this line of work, because you will not last. You will not last and you will do your job badly and we will suffer for it. None of us work here alone.

Growing up as I did your squeamishness left you quickly anyway. It drained out like blood from fresh hung meat, warm and soft and thick. You kept a few drops for colour, deep in the flesh, but the rest you let sink into blackening soil as you moved. You did not stand still and you grew up fast. You grew up fast or you died young.

A pig will squeal. Sheep too, and cows will bellow. They know, you see. They know the way all living things know when they are pushed together too tightly to move, when their fate is no longer theirs to make. In that cramped pen, pressed against more life than they have ever felt, in that restless clot of others they know they are alone and they squeal.

A pig has no soul but I do. They aren't burdened by thoughts of never seeing Heaven, of what else could await. A better soul than mine will not worry of a pig's pain, but I'll not see my cloth stained by an animal's needless suffering. That fabric is dark enough already.

So you do it quickly; the boy sees your nod and the gate is open for a single beat. The pig is through, and for another beat thrills to returned freedoms, until the hammer stops it. Two more beats and the boy has its back legs bound and by the fifth the pig hangs from a hook, throat prone to the blade. You find the artery—if your blade is sharpened right you need only trace the trembling line down—and you let the animal go.

\*

One cannot be squeamish in this line of work.

It is a most particular occupation, to be sure, and not one which is entered into if one is sentimental. Grand ideas are best left to those of nobler spirits, unencumbered as they generally are by the tedious day-to-day concerns which afflict lesser persons in lower places. One can afford truth and faith when one can afford a wine cellar.

Entering the world where I did put an end to faith of all varieties at an early age. Milan's patchwork bowel of lanes and alleys is renowned for spitting forth the occasional tough little shit and I was one such hard-headed nugget. Never big (though with a saint's capacity for suffering) I relied on

a brain possessed of a goblin nimbleness, becoming useful to those who could otherwise have left me a pretty corpse. I saw patterns and made plans which would help their dull, day-to-day thievery and they tolerated me like a sort of pet.

Down there in the dark one looks up for whatever light one can find and framing it always were elevated places, towers puncturing the miasmatic fog the rest of us sucked in, salons in the sunlit heights of palazzos. If I kept any faith at all it was in the worth of a little ambition.

My father had been a man who knew sheep. Occasionally I wondered that he might know them a little too well, but his death of something-or-other contagious while I was a boy of nine was a stroke of luck well beyond the simple removal of regular beatings from my life. My mother, one can only imagine how, had me apprenticed off to the secretary of Archbishop Sforza—dear, plump father Leo. She is dead now, I think.

\*

There's more than salvation to it though. Butchery is skilled. Professionalism demands things done right. Hit it too hard you'll kill it. The heart won't beat and you want it beating the blood out until it can't, filling the pudding-pale as the girl stirs it free of clotting, preventing the hams from stiffening. Serve the Sforzas worried meat and you won't serve them for long, and serving the Sforzas is serving Milan.

I built this city, as much as any man did. There was a place called Milan before my lord Sforza, sure as shit, but shit was all it was. I was born in the gutter with nothing, but I lived and many didn't. When you're born poor, but strong, there are options for you, if you've sense. You can bully and thief and for a while feel important enough not to shrink from your own reflection, but there's always someone hungrier. Quicker.

\*

I beheld little mud after I entered the Archbishop's employ and, largely due to the great guilt Leo felt after every occasion he entered me, I was able to see that he educated me in languages, law and whatever else took my fancy over the years. He showed me the value of politics, and how the game was played. I practiced successfully on my peers as I grew to adulthood, bringing the choirboys to civil war on more

than one occasion.

My tastes were already quite beyond my means when, as he once more sat sobbing on the rug before the fireplace, the regular cycle of satiation and regret approaching the window where I could lay out my latest demands, Leo had the temerity to die. After a decorous period of mourning he was replaced, as was I—my reputation beyond Leo's offices being somewhat tarnished by rumours I had generally started myself. I was out on the streets again, out in the effluvia and reek. But this time I smelled opportunity.

\*

I fought for my lord Sforza instead, long before he became Duke. He gave me a pike, a leather tunic and a shield which was useless for anything but the bearing of his colours. The pike was an honest tool though, and I used it well. When I pushed at a man's guts or chest I pushed hard, we all did. That was our job. When I felt the poor bastard I'd spitted going to the ground I'd twist him off the blade and go again. You needed a strong back. I didn't see faces.

\*

The law is one of our great myths. It is an imagined thing, quite apart from the real world we have cluttered around us, but that does not mean it isn't possessed of worth. Imagine, if you will, a new Duke seeking to show he can bring order to his city—that he is different. Now, he knows that the city is evil, untameable, that it is a wild thing charging at the mad gallop towards whatever future it decides and it suits him that way. He also knows that, fundamentally, the great families whom he needs to retain his throne are afraid of nothing so much as the poor and the criminality they are supposedly soaked in, so! In lieu of enforcing the law he will appear to enforce the law and for that he needs criminals dangling from gibbets. This is where I come in.

I am an informer. I report criminal activity to the authorities and stand as a witness. My testimony is as invariably damning as it is untrue and I pocket half the dangling man's wealth as soon as he stops twitching. My lord Sforza wants the light of the law shone into the darkest recesses and, since he absolutely does not wish to go there himself, he makes it worth our while. The public believe there are fewer criminals on the street and that is enough for them to laud their new prince, whilst the ones who end up meeting the hang-man are probably guilty of something. Which of us is without sin?

\*

We killed until they ran, and they always ran. My lord Sforza played the game well, kept most of us alive. We'd advance over the fallen and occasionally the dead, though most had plenty of dying still to do. Sometimes we'd help them along with the spiked butt of our pikes as we passed, sometimes not. If you fought you were paid enough to buy a business, provided you didn't drink the money. I proved a fine negotiator.

This city was dead. The stone of her walls was bleeding out into the fields, becoming folds and byers. The fountains were dry, the chapels rotten. Her people were becoming too cunning.

\*

My lord Sforza has found me so efficient that he has recently begun to entrust other matters to me. Matters of great delicacy. The Duchess, who dwells in the city only occasionally, recently reported that some items of jewellery had gone missing from her rooms. She wanted the whole household thrashed to excoriation but was placated when the Duke promised her I would investigate, the tacit implication being that someone would swing for her losses.

I could, of course, have picked a housemaid and sent her on her not so merry way, but what then if the situation were to repeat itself? My reliability would be in question—perhaps even my very work ethic. No, instead I waited until the Duchess was away and began to patrol the palazzo after dark, inside and out. I achieved nothing for weeks when, on one such cold and forlorn-feeling patrol, I noticed a lit candelabrum by an open window. I slid into a nearby alley and watched as a small bag was thrown to a waiting man on horseback. He clutched it to his chest and blew an over-affected kiss back at the window. My eyes followed its fluttering, imaginary course up to where, clear as day, stood my lord Sforza's mistress, the lady Ippolita.

\*

Nobody steals bricks now. Florence and the Pope write to us with honour. There's plenty of scum who never lifted a blade in anger will criticise my lord Sforza, but now there's order and there's respect. We left

plenty of those from Naples and Venice in the dirt to get it. Their sons' wine made our fields rich.

Once the pig is bleeding out you turn and give the boy a nod and he'll pick the next one. Behind me the lads start on the butchery, slicing out the guts before shit creeps into the blood, stripping out the organs before they start with the saw. Nothing's wasted, ligament to tongue.

\*

My lord Sforza sighed and rubbed his eyes as I told him. He gave the impression this was mere confirmation, not revelation, and that he was wearied by it as a tired father might be wearied by a strong willed daughter, rather than enraged. He asked me if I was sure and I said I was. He looked away for a few seconds then, eyebrows raised and speaking slowly he fixed me with his dark eyes. He asked if I was truly sure, firmly kneading my shoulder with his right hand for a few seconds as he did so.

\*

I do the slaughter. It's my knife that gives all the others their urgency. The next pig will be hanging before the last one's dead and on and on until the squealing is finished and there's sawing and cutting and mockery instead.

\*

So here I am, lurking in an alleyway that stinks of rat piss, the starless sky spitting at me. And there it is, the lit candelabrum. In a few minutes Ippolita's latest low-class plaything will pass and she will throw him a bag of jewellery stolen for nothing more grand than mischief. She could throw him a bag of her own coin but there's less symbolism in that and this is all about the poetry. She knows she'll be seen, that I will reveal she has been in the palazzo, that the Duchess will rage. She knows the Duke will not see her hanged or flogged, that he will not send her away from Milan. He will be forced to protect her, she will exist in plain sight, and the Duchess will be diminished as surely as Ippolita's star waxes. More pertinently, my lucrative attachment to the house of Sforza will certainly be at an end.

No. Better someone else is guilty this time.

As they work I load the next delivery for my lord Sforza's household. I'm his master butcher now. There's expectations. I'll rise to deliver in person, just before dawn. It's quiet and cold and there's less filth in the streets then. The palazzo can still be lit, still be noisy. You can hear how much wine has been drunk those nights. There are stories but we don't deal in stories and if any man has earned his pleasures it's the Duke. We take the carts to the rear entrance, unload and are paid. We say nothing unless asked and we are rarely asked.

We leave as quietly as we come. The boy should have sharpened the blades by the time we return. We'll breakfast together and then it'll be time for men with knives to set about their work again. There's always work in our business.

Early on in my nocturnal tours I had noted that the household's meat is delivered to the palazzo every few days before dawn. When the carts arrive the door is already open for them, a mark of the professional esteem in which the master-butcher is held by the household, I'm sure. Stoic fellow, well marked by his service, doesn't say much. A little investigation revealed he has quite the brood to feed too. His last visit corresponded to the last theft and, like the good soldier I'm sure he was, there he is again, right on time.

He'll deny it, of course. Why wouldn't he? He hasn't done anything, after all, but that's hardly the point. Innocence and guilt are just commodities to be traded, like salt and flesh. Her guilt is worth much less than his to my lord Sforza, and so to me. My accusation will be enough, that's clear, but they'll want him to admit it publicly and he won't. He'll put his faith in the law, in honesty and all those other fairy-tales men are prone to cling to, and assume the truth will out.

Unfortunately my lord Sforza is not accustomed to waiting and he will wish to write to my lady Duchess soon so he might give her the gift of a butcher's guilt to accompany her shining new stones. By sunset, I suspect, his patience will finally be exhausted and it will be time for men with knives to set about their work. There is always work in their business. ■





# THIS VIOLENCE WE CALL HOME

K. C. E. Harrison

*This Violence We Call Home*

As I sit wrapped in blankets, I watch the tumult of the tempest unfold through my window. I see your figure cut through the rain, greeting the storm like an old friend, arms reaching, begging to be struck, a plea for something I do not understand. I watch in silence. Captivated by how my love desires such violent things.

Always, I am the witness. Separated by glass, my body safe from the bedlam you embrace. Yet, even at this distance, the tempest leaves its mark. Memory is shaped by what we see, and I have watched you seek destruction as though it might save you.

I cannot judge. I can only watch, helpless as you and the storm collide. And in my stillness, in my refusal to move, I feel complicit, bound to the chaos by my inaction, as though this storm is mine too. ■

# CONTRIBUTORS

**Emily A. Crawford** is a Scottish-born writer, editor, and creative with one too many projects in the works. While a bit all over the place she's most at home in worlds of fantasy.

**Daphne Artola D.** is a Spanish History student, classics and mythology lover, trying her best to combine getting a A++ in Greco-Roman Archeology and building a fantasy World based in Ancient cultures. Currently working on her first novel, inspired by Greek history and mythology, she is always plotting her world-building and the love and intricate politics within the story.

**Charlotte McDonald** is an Atlanta-based author who loves reading and writing Southern Gothic, uncanny, or anything drenched in spooky.

**Samuel F. Evans** is an avid reader and writer of fantasy fiction who pays his bills by working in data protection. Sam spends most of his free time watching TV, attempting to finish his novel "The Gunpowder Oath" and playing with his two cats, Buffy and Willow.

**Susie Dowell** uses the lemons which life pelts at her to add a lovely bit of zest to her writing. She loves stories that connect us and keep us going, and she hopes her first novel will a) get finished, and b) carry that power.

**Robert Gibson** is originally from the Lake District, now based in Glasgow. His work ranges from realist pieces to genre fiction, where his stories are driven by the complexities of people at their core.

**G. Less** is a London-born and Glasgow-based woman formally diagnosed with dyslexia. She probably also has ADHD and autism and is hyper-focused on fantasy books and audiobooks. Fueled by caffeine, she's attempting to write a fantasy book, but it's very slow going due to the aforementioned dyslexia and ADHD, as well as her day job as a scientist.

**Marie McCrory** is a Creative Writing student, chronic doodler, and casual drag performer at Agnes Scott college in Atlanta, Georgia. They have contributed to Agnes Scott's AURORA lit mag, the fanzine Memento Mori, Sorry!zine, 7th Circle Pyrite and post art under @spicyspell on Bluesky and Tumblr!

**Ross McWhinnie** is an ASN teacher, recovering history teacher and one time classicist who occasionally gets accused of writing. He likes myths and words and people and the places they meet.

Graduate now training to qualify as an architect. **K. C. E. Harrison** is an artist who explores the interplay between memory, place and storytelling. Connecting the visual and written word drawing from experience in urban planning and community narratives, when not creating she enjoys travelling and life drawing.

# THE GLYPH. TEAM

## **Rach Macpherson (Editor-in-Chief of Heroes and Villains & Social Media):**

Rach is a writer with a love for mythology, fantasy and cosy romance. Always on the hunt for her next book boyfriend, you can usually find her surviving on caffeine, up a big hill or hunting for fairies at the bottom of her garden.

## **Giovanni Sebastian Cardillo (Editor):**

Giovanni is a German-Italian writer who abandoned both of his native languages to write in what's left of the King's English. His prose and poetry are influenced by the shockingly mundane experiences and encounters he made while meandering across the globe.

## **Eleanor Grace (Editor & Graphic Designer):**

Eleanor is a writer who switches literary genre as frequently as she changes her hair colour (read: often). Currently—though for how long we're not sure—she's trying to write the perfect villain and is meticulously plotting novels with colour-coded post-it notes.

## **Sofía Artola Díaz (Editor & Web Editor):**

Sofía is a Spanish writer who finds being bilingual means struggling both in Spanish and English. Obsessed with commas and emotionally unavailable characters, she finds inspiration for her writing in her daily battles against energy companies, spiders, and heights.





Team GLYPH. at our Foreign launch in February



A candid one - both photos taken by @tartanportraits

# RECOMMENDATIONS

*This issue we asked our writers who their favourite heroes and villains are...*

*The Stormlight Archive* by Brandon Sanderson—some of the best heroes ever written and anyone who's read the line "honour is dead, but I'll see what I can do," will understand and agree with me!

– **Samuel F. Evans**

I absolutely love to hate Eva Ibbotson's villains, especially Dr Lightbody in *The Secret Countess*. A passionate lecturer in eugenics, Dr Lightbody is pathetically mundane, and all the more evil for it. There's an excellent passage where, hours after the death of his neglected wife, Dr Lightbody talks himself into attending a costume party instead of planning her funeral. When Ibbotson was a child in the early 1930s, she and her family fled the nazi regime in Austria. I think this experience echoes on in her villains, and particularly in Dr Lightbody. He's just an ordinary human who is ridiculous in his behaviour and deadly in his beliefs.

– **Susie Dowell**

I'd have to pick one from a video game rather than a book cause I come back to their story every time—and they're actually the same character even though they are both hero and villain. The character(s) is Noah and N from *Xenoblade Chronicles 3*. Both characters are incredibly dedicated and loyal to their love interest despite the fact that she doesn't have very long to live. However, Noah takes every moment with her as being a gift, wanting it to last forever but never pushing or imposing that wish onto her. Whereas N literally gives up everything, including his own family and people, murdering them all, in the hopes of preserving his time with his love. I think it's such a great dichotomy, showing the reality of it's like to love someone and how easy it is to fall to darkness when their life is on the line. Both characters would do anything for their love, but only Noah actually listens to her—he listens to more than his fears of losing her.

– **Emily A. Crawford**

Rodion Raskolnikov (*Crime and Punishment*)—A fascinating character who depicts the desperation of proving oneself. I found his entire struggle around justifying his crime something really compelling, and many points of the novel had me seriously grappling with his morality, to the point I would think about it for days. One of the first novels that had me fall in love with classic literature.

– **Robert Gibson**

For favorite heroes, I would say Patroclus and Diomedes (Especially in the *Song of Achilles*) and for villains, I'd say Maleficent, Voldemort, Davy Jones (*Pirates of the Caribbean*).

– **Daphne Artola D.**

# GLYPH.

*The literary magazine for the casual writer.*

## Issue 4.

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ISSUE 3: HEROES & VILLAINS

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