

A DARK & STORMY WRITE



A Dark and Stormy Write

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Running
By Jordan Cook

Running.
Eyes forward,
Breath heavy,
Sweat dripping.

Footsteps hard,
And heavy.

Fear,
Rising in the belly;
Crawling up the throat
Clamping down,
Unrelenting.

Running.
Running,
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RunningRunningRunning
Running,
From Death.

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Ashes to Ashes

By Mara Johnson

The Sun's watchful gaze was obscured on that spring morning, by billowing clouds of smoke. They had faded from ink black to a white almost as pure as snow as the flames died down along with the lives of those in the village below, and the small particles which fell from them and blanketed the forest floor could be mistaken for exactly that, if not for the acrid smell that hung in the air. The scent mingled in a haunting dance with the tang of iron from spilled blood, the crimson of which was camouflaged by the little sunlight struggling to reach the ground through the smoke, tainted and tinged red by that which it passed through. It was as if she too, was mourning, as her children did below, for the loss of their home, safety, and loved ones. Her blood red tears of sunlight came from a much deeper sense of mourning than that of mortal life, however; she was helpless to protect her children, devoted followers that they were and continued to be despite the tragedy they faced.

Among the few living people still wandering the grey and red world of rubble was one of the many who had arrived earlier that day hoping, perhaps naively, to save the village and its people. Each step he took was muffled by the carpet of fluffy ash, which swirled up around his feet like powder when his movement disturbed it, and revealed dim orange embers still smoldering below the surface. Without a word he knelt down, passing under a charred and slanted wooden beam which had once been the entryway to a small home. It was the only wall still standing. The others lay in piles, still burning in some places, and he could make out broken furniture and possessions strewn over the ashy floor. He raised his hands to rest in front of his heart as he breathed in, and lowered them slowly with his exhale. At the same pace, what was left of the flames that had consumed the house faded from orange to a deep violet before subsiding, leaving only thin tendrils of smoke like that of an extinguished candle in their place. The man opened his eyes once more, which still held a faint glow the same shade the flames had turned before dying out, which faded after another moment. He knelt down and took a small body, limp and charred, into his arms before rising again. Under his breath he muttered a prayer for the child before he left the ruined house, ducking under the remains of the main wall again to ensure the body was damaged no further. He joined his comrades on the edge of the village and gently placed the body onto a cart which held many more. He didn't know how many. He didn't want to know. What he cared about was another cart, identical to this one, where the few survivors of this vicious attack sat, receiving medical care before they would be taken somewhere safer. He was trained as a soldier, not a healer, and could do little for the living, but it still lightened his grieving heart to see that not everyone in this unfortunate village had been killed, as their attackers surely intended. The activity in the village was slowly but surely dying down as he and his fellow Magi did what they could for the villagers, living and dead alike, and they prepared for the journey home, with the small group of refugees accompanying them.

Day turned to night during the ride. The village which had fallen under attack may have been near to the borders of the Arekanii Empire, but the imperial lands were vast, and the capitol laid nearly at the heart of its ruby red desert. At their current speed, the Sun would likely rise again before they reached their destination. His eyes remained fixed on the stars, not that they were far enough from the looming clouds of smoke for the sky to be clear, while his weary comrades slept beside him. So deep was his focus, that the sound of fabric rustling as another person sat beside him went unnoticed, and they had to speak up to break his reverie.

“Azeran.”

They—she, rather—said his name softly, intent on getting his attention without waking those who slept beside them. Azeran turned to see the familiar face of Idriza, concern clear in her turquoise eyes. Rather than speaking himself, he waited for her to continue with what she wanted to say.

“How are you faring?”

She continued in the same quiet tone from before.

“The same as we all are, I imagine.”

He replied, to which she just replied with a slow and thoughtful nod.

“It was worse this time, wasn’t it? Tell me I’m not the only one who noticed.”

Azeran continued.

“You aren’t. The destruction’s been worse with each attack this year, and there’ve been less survivors. The Order is getting bolder.”

Idriza confirmed, looking down at where her hands were folded in her lap.

“Our people are going to die at this rate.” He said, prompting Idriza to snap her gaze over to him once again, despite him refusing to meet her eyes. “We’ll be erased unless someone does something.” Idriza stayed silent at first, considering the hidden meaning behind his words. They both knew, but refused to say out loud, who he meant by “someone.”

“Our people will *not* die. Even if Ezor is lost, we are more than our land, we are spread far and wide across Tethiira.”

She replied, fierce determination brewing beneath her softly spoken words. Azeran finally turned to look at her with desperation in his sad and tired eyes. He wanted, *needed* to believe what she was saying, but couldn’t. Not entirely at least.

“The only one willing to protect us is the Emperor, and what if we fall from his favor? Are we to just roam the world in hiding, as refugees?”

He asked, earning a sour look from Idriza.

“We were never in the Emperor’s favor, we’re just useful to him, and we happen to know some party tricks.” She said, folding her arms mid-sentence. “You know as well as I do how eager the Emperor is to expand Arekan’s borders, no matter the cost, *except* in the case of The Order. There’s a reason for that.”

“So you think he’s on their side?”

Azeran asked, half exasperated and half sarcastic, refusing to believe that she could possibly mean what she was saying.

“No. I think he’s a rich, powerful man who has interests other than us and our people. Just like any other royal does. It’s not as easy as just taking sides.”

Idriza explained, letting a long and thoughtful silence hang between them once she finished. It seemed like an eternity, there in that quiet, before Azeran spoke again.

“And if there’s no choice but to take sides?” He asked, nearly all emotion gone from his voice.

“Then we can only hope he sees us as the more valuable ally.” Idriza said. She didn’t have to look at Azeran to know that the look in his eyes would betray his neutral tone, and so she refused, keeping her gaze firmly on the Stars. The Stars, for their part, gazed back; their view clear and unobstructed.

Lost Histories

Travis Garraway

Jiri wore a grin on his face. The newly born Republic of Fasalux had given his company, normally part of the Army of the L'horre Valley, the mission to “destroy a remnant of the oppressors.” They thought that the leaders had gone mad.

It did provide a change of pace from shooting down their fellow man. Sure, the new government needed something bombastic to establish legitimacy after the Revolution, but playing hero to a village seemed like a dream come true.

The sun had started to rise. They had started marching only an hour ago, heading to the outskirts of Lasseep-o'er-Bakerad.

“Ready to see a dragon, Sergeant Weld?” said Sergeant Major Arty Weeden. “Count yourself lucky that you got chosen for this mission.

“Lucky? Of course we're lucky,” said Sergeant Penley Lura. “After all, we get to see creatures that were *killed off for the reason*. I heard stories where the fucking pointy-eared bastards *literally transformed* to dragons and ate people.”

“People lie, Sergeant.”

“It's not like we've done anything wrong,” Jiri said, his voice having shifted to a tone of confusion. “The Yellow Code forbids exile as punishment since...”

“The year 47. I've been through the Academy process just like you.” His face suddenly fell as he saw a cart with two cannons on top of it.

The captain of said artillery regiment noticed him and waved with a cheery look on his face. Jiri's captain did not return the sentiment.

“I thought they assigned us to do the dirty work, not you.”

“Of course not. We're here just in case you come home in ashes. This baby...” He smacked the cannon. “This one won us the War. It killed dragons before.”

“And you think it could do it again? Good chance the records were wrong and the old Pantheon of the Five Deities simply landed down and wiped them out by pointing a damn finger.”

The soldiers stole glances. Officers airing their grievances would be grounds for a scandal. Only a few knew full well that their interactions were going as planned; neither felt their honor was under threat. However, even they knew that their mission made their banter even more intense than it should be. The artillery teams had decided to start the loading procedure.

A crowd of peasants had gathered in near the cannons. Women, children, and the elderly folk, who had only heard stories of heroes fighting dragons and saving damsels. Apparently, the news of the Great Revolution had spread rather slowly and had been received with ambivalence rather than the patriotic fervor like the cities.

All eyes were trained on a cave a few miles away. Its entrance formed a weird shape, as if it had grown teeth and dared to mock their misery. The dirt had started to become littered with the bones of its meals. Some foolhardy boys

carefully approached the cave and grabbed the white rods.

“You can ‘eed ya fam’ly for three sco’s with this shite,” said a peasant woman. “The ma’ket gonna auction ‘em off in the morrow.”

Jiri’s captain sighed and shook his head. Steam came out of the ends of the cave. Luckily, they had the sense to start running before a stream of fire burst out. Jiri heard a few screams from the peasant women as the flames roared and soared to bigger heights. Jiri’s captain did not respond.

“Forward, march,” he said, his voice completely deadpan.

#

The light from the entrance faded as the contingent of the company moved forward. What few torches and lanterns they brought with them only did so much to provide vision. Sweat had started to flow down his captain’s skin. Most commanders avoid fighting at night on principle. The majority of battles have been head on clashes between lines of men, each firing a shot before charging forward.

Jiri did not expect combatants that seemed human. Neither did his comrade-at-arms.

The air grew colder as they started walking forward. However, a small glimmer right in front of them.

“Light!” a soldier cried. “There’s light outta here!”

Had they not learned how to run in formation, most of them would have fallen under the heels of their fellow soldiers. The general kept up with them easily. The light had a yellow complexion, far too yellow to have been produced naturally under normal circumstances.

Piles upon piles of gold, enough to fuel the trade of at least four city-states, scattered across the ground. Crowns of fallen kings, jewels of unknown origin, and ornate swords dating back at least six or seven centuries sat on top of these piles.

Jiri looked at the flagrant display of wealth. Forget feeding a family for two scores; splitting this would guarantee that some member of the old mobility would give their daughter to them. He could see some of them snatch a few coins and shove them down their pockets. The captain did nothing to stop it. Why would he? The glory would funnel some of the wealth to his house. *Well, fuck this.* He rolled his eyes and started shoveling the small coins to his pocket.

The temperature around them rose to a suffocating level. The air became stuffy, with a singe of smoke.

Wait, we didn’t bring coal with us. It seemed that the rest of the company had noticed the weird smell as well. Their sweat quickly joined the smoke and steam mixture.

The captain raised a fist. Most of the soldiers started turning the wheels of their guns with a key. A few rookies, taken out of gold fever, found that their legs shook despite their intentions. Jiri remembered that feeling. He had enlisted after he had turned of age, knowing that a life of plucking weeds and planting seeds was not for him. He remembered having to put down remnants of the old regime in his first year. The fear in people’s eyes as they realize they had killed a man from afar. His desire to just leave, only for the promise of a bed, three meals a day, and money preventing that from happening.

Jiri scanned the room. The steam had to come from somewhere. The streams came out in one direction. His eyes followed it until he ended up in front of two holes. These two holes shrunk as air found itself sucked into it. The edges of what seemed to be its lips twitched suddenly before wincing at the unfamiliar scent.

Its golden eyes opened up. Jiri could have sworn he saw flames in its irises.

His captain's face had lost its color. The man who had lead his man into this cave with gusto had come face to face with the creature that he had been tasked with ending its life. Now, he was... faltering? Not exactly like a coward with his tail between his legs but rather a scared boy. He lifted his open hand, but Jiri could see that it was visibly shaking.

“OPEN FIRE!”

The soldiers aimed their guns and pulled the trigger of their guns. Columns upon columns of flames spouted out of the metal tubes, explosions crying out and reverberating in the walls. The lead balls merely scratched the scarred hide of the dragon.

It decided to breathe in. For a second, the smoky tinge disappeared. The captain stood in shock before opening his mouth.

“FIND COV...”

Flames rushed out and filled the room for a short while. It was aimed at a way that it avoided the treasure, but the captain had no such luck. His skin and flesh melted until the only thing that remained was a pile of bones.

Some of the soldiers screamed, but even that was cut short with a swipe. Three of these soldiers flew across the room. They tried to hung onto life but failed.

Jiri looked around. Some of them had started to crack, crouching down on the ground and whimpering. A few of them started shooting their guns... somewhere. It grazed the skin of this creature without so much as a scratch. Lura tried to rally the rest of the privates to battle.

Weeden stepped up. “I'm taking control of this mission. Looks like we came underpowered.”

“Yeah, no shit,” said Jiri as he continued to shoot. “I say we order a strategic retreat, cut our losses, and get the bigger guns in here. We aren't trained for this.”

“And what, damage all of *this*? Absolutely fucking not! With this in the treasury, we can rebuild this country and be regarded as heroes.”

Lura looked at Weeden with a mixture of anger and hurt. “Sir, do you think we'll kill that *monster* with peashooters. Most likely, we'll be its lunch before we can land a scratch on it.”

Weeden did not answer. Instead he grabbed who he thought was the fastest private in his company. “Go to the artillery boys. Tell him plan A failed and plan B is a go. Hurry!”

The boy nodded and started running as fast as he could. The lead bullets had only started to inflict flesh wounds. Bullet holes had started to form on its neck. It was not enough. Its strike had killed many of his own men, along with its stream of fire that either cooked them or turned them to a pile of bones or ashes.

Dammit, why isn't his working? Why isn't this doing anything? Fear gave way to desperation as the dragon continued breathing fire. Half of his company had been bludgeoned, burned, eaten, or some combination of these fates.

Weeden had a distraught look on his face. Jiri's ammunition has ran low and his gunpowder horn had ran low. Morale had been crushed completely. All eyes were on the acting captain of this company.

The two golden eyes was on him. He could barely react to the sight of the beast before he felt a large force pushed towards the side of his body. He heard his bones crack and contort in directions that he thought was impossible.

All the air escaped his lungs as his back slammed against the wall. The claws dug into his skin, deeper than he felt any knife went.

He coughed up blood. The wound has spurting out blood fast. *Lethal. Of course.* On his side laid the head of Lura, his face stuck with a shocked look. He could only hope that he did not suffer for long.

His head started to hurt. His breath hastened as his vision started to dissolve into a blur. The dragon seemed to be starting to move towards the entrance.

Weeden had finally called a retreat. He can now close his eyes, finding comfort that it was over.

#

Through the concerted efforts of the brave soldiers who served in the retroactively named “Doomed Company” of the Army of the L’horre and Company B of the 3rd Artillery Regiment of the Army of Nassai, the dragon was confirmed to be laid to rest in the village of Lasseep-o’er-Bakerad. It’s neck had been forcibly severed via cannon ball. The number of casualties, both military and civilian, had rendered the victory hollow. The latter had precipitated a refugee crisis that strained the already thin resources of the local government.

Forty percent of the treasure found in the cave had been lost, the official reason being that it had been allocated to causes of higher urgency.

It had been long suspected that the government used these funds to buy the silence of both the survivors of the Doomed Company and Company B. In one fell swoop, all records of the “Dragon of Lasseep-o’er-Bakerad” had disappeared. All that remained was a strip of paper containing the words “Dragon sighted over” on top of a pile of ashes.

The First Republic of Fasalux fell two years through a royalist restoration carried out through a peasant’s revolt. King Gauss II of House Brakaena would be crowned a year after.

The rule of House Brakaena would meet its end two years after.

-Excerpt from Historie Fasalux, Lost Chapter.

The End

The Muffin Man

Jake Swaney

Do you know The Muffin Man, the rotten scoundrel of Drury Lane? Of course, that wasn't his real name, but it's what we all call him now. Different tales surround him, none of which are pleasant. I've taken an interest in collecting these tales, and I heard you have a similar fascination. I'd love to share some stories and see which you've heard of, let us begin.

Do you know The Muffin Man, who lured the twins into his bakery? Poor Hansel and Gretel, the promise of sweets were too good for them to pass. They ate and ate and ate, filling their bellies full of baked goods till they became slow and sluggish. When they wised up to The Muffin Man's plan, they tried to fight back. They pushed him into the furnace and tried to make a run for it. Some people say the twins forgot to light the fire; others say they did, but The Muffin Man crawled through it like the devil himself. Either way, the result was the same, the twins were caught and cooked into two plump pies.

Do you know The Muffin Man, the dark sorcerer who gave his cookies life? Preposterous, I agree, but that's a story some folks tell. The people of Drury Lane say he enjoyed the taste of fear his cookies felt; I often wonder what they meant by that. Did the anguish make them sweeter, did their panic make them crispier, or did the Muffin man simply like to torment them? I doubt it really matters, it's far from the truth. Though a story goes that one day, everyone on Drury Lane was woken as someone screamed out to them. What sounded like a child, its innocence ripped asunder, was a small Gingerbread man who somehow escaped The Muffin Man's grasp

"Run, run as fast as you can." Cried the Gingerbread man.

He ran as fast as he could, all the way down Drury Lane. Each step he took chipped more and more off his little legs, and when those were gone, he crawled. He went and went, as he continued to scream till a wagon came by and ran him over dead. There was no blood, but the cookie crumbs flew into the wind along with one last chilling shriek.

Do you know The Muffin Man, who knocked the king's squire off his horse? Poor Humpty Dumpty, a hunchback of the king, is dragged away by The Muffin Man. Knocked off his horse, who he named The Wall, Humpty Dumpty did his best to halt his abductor. His fingers dug into the ground as he tried to hold on to something, anything that could help. But that day came with a nice downpour from above, so the ground moved between the squire's fingers like dough. When the knights pursued, the only thing could find were what little remains the Muffin Man had left behind. All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again. For you see, pieces of him were missing, cooked in baked goods pies, cookies, and little cakes. Afterward, those baked goods were handed out to the unsuspecting folk who lived on Drury Lane. From what I heard, the squire was actually quite tasty. But when they learned of the secret ingredient, people quickly changed their minds.

So I ask you one last time, do you know The Muffin Man? With so many stories and such creative rumors, I wonder if anyone truly knows the man. But they've heard of him, at the very least, and I do enjoy the stories they come up with. You know, I came across some children the other day running about and yelling, do you know the muffin man in some sort of nursery rhyme? How ludicrous is that, a murderous scoundrel, but children sing rhymes about him? I wonder what the world has come to, but I suppose I'm part of the problem, if not the center.

No no no, you did not mishear me. I wouldn't go so far as to say I'm The Muffin Man per se, he's become something else entirely. A legend, a myth, folklore, an idea that has grown far past my limitations. Like a sapling that has grown into a tree far taller than I could ever climb. I suppose I should be flattered, but between you and me, it's

rather disturbing hearing children sing rhymes about a murderer. Let me assure you this will be between you and me one way or another. You've been chasing after the Muffin Man for some time, writing these stories in your little book of tales. But how could you truly understand them if you only have been chasing a legend instead of a man? That being said, it's safe to say you finally know about The Muffin Man, but do you know me?

the professor, by E.C. Spitz

He waded down through the brush, steps tracking sideways against the crumbling dirt. The man's plaid overcoat couldn't stop the valley's chill from curling inside him. The throbbing sun occasionally peeked through the canopy, but the shadows of the Iblei mountains encroached from below. None reached the valley's heart. Ravens stalked him down the slope, flapping from tree to tree. Each bough bent under the weight of the great birds as they settled, waiting for him to reach the next one. He felt their beady black eyes follow his struggle to keep his balance.

The professor reached the clearing at the valley floor and halted at the edge of the ancient sanctuary. He fidgeted with his coat buttons as if tugging their snapped strings could clean up the whole mess. As he started towards the Stone Tree at its center, his eyes flitted over what awaited at the base of the trunk. Kicking a tiny liquor bottle from the last evening, he proceeded across the crumbling pavilion to the dias at its center. As he walked, he ruminated on the day he'd first seen the pillars above the trees. That day he'd tripped over the broken cobblestones twice before he reached the Tree at its center. By then his palms had been bleeding, awaking the stone. But that was weeks ago. This time, he knew what awaited him at its roots, yet he still came.

He stopped when he found himself before the three cracked steps that encircled the tree. Attempting to still his trembling muscles, he lowered to one knee before it, and waited as the ravens quieted their whispering wings. Then, it spoke.

I have waited long for you to return. I wonder, are you now afraid of me?

The Stone Tree's words grated, dry and faint, and he felt the question scrape at his skin. He always felt raw before the Tree, but the question hung in the air like a barb before his chest.

Thank you. You have surpassed my dearest hopes. You have shown your true worth.

The professor's lungs cried in relief as he took in the words like water, letting them fill him. He welcomed it. "I will always return to you. I need you." It was true. He yearned for the Stone Tree's love, as if there were no other reason to live in the world. And there wasn't.

You have made me proud. This triumph belongs to us both.

He clung to its praise, but doubt grasped at him from below, and its eyes were brown.

"Does it?"

I have had many acolytes, few have held the faith to accomplish what you have.

The professor knew that the strength of his loyalty was pure, now. No more distractions. He hungrily waited for it to continue, trying to ignore the suffocation of the stagnant Sicilian air, stinking of decay. He remembered the comfort that the humid blanket gave last night, enveloping them as they drank, cradling them both in the grim dark as they walked together. He wrapped himself in the memory. He tried to pull back as the memory's sharp edges pricked him, but it would not let him go.

Caged in petrification, my spirit has remained restless. Since this valley was first touched by man, my power has lingered, in the corner of your vision, a whisper in the howling winds. It was not I that created my pavilion. This place was crafted by mortals. My branches are your roof, my roots are your path. I live on in this valley due to humanity's unyielding devotion.

The professor struggled to focus on the words, but rosy recollections continued to violate his mind. He tried to push away the soft memory of her hand in his, the squeeze of assurance she'd given him as he had led her. The way her nails seemed to turn into knives as they had clawed at his coat. Despite digging at the site all summer, her hands remained smooth, and the scent of her lotion lingered. He wished that it didn't. He kept his eyes downcast.

Your obeisance has always been a comfort to me in my loneliness. And now, you have liberated me with it. Before long I shall walk amongst you.

Wasn't that what Kennedy wanted? More unbidden memories resurfaced. A sunny morning, light filtering through hotel curtains. She reclined and stretched amid the pillows, giving him a yawn and a kiss, and declared that she had decided to join him upon the path. She had only glimpsed then, but she yearned to share the meaning that he found in each fragment of pottery, every minted emperor, and now, every word from the Stone Tree. She wanted to experience it now herself. Was that the same path she now followed? A raven snapped its beak, finally freeing him from his reveries.

Through centuries of imprisonment, I have watched scholars flock to these mountains, ripping up the roots of wisdom itself. Grasping for answers, you steal fortunes and lives of the transcended dead, yet I remain untouched. Even blind writhing worms can recognize a boot. I have been left in this rigid carcass for too long. I must live as before, free to call on my awaiting followers. Without them, the false liberty you have brought me is worthless.

"False?" The word had escaped his mouth before he could catch it. The ravens blinked. His breath held for a moment before continuing. "I thought that once you were unbound, it was finished. I thought all you needed was, was..." Her. "I gave you what you asked for."

He was not sure if the biggest raven's cackling response was real or imagined.

The mortal form can only endure so long after death. If you could look at me, you would have noticed. Even now I am rotting from the inside out.

Death. The finality made him shiver. Was this regret? He blinked through blurring tears as he tried to distract himself from the source of the acrid stench below the Tree's naked branches. The ravens' wings thrashed, and the largest heavily swooped down to an exposed shoulder. It screamed at him, forcing his eyes to trace its path to the corpse where the raven now perched.

Caramel curls still framed her face, but the delicate flesh of her arms parted for the roots that had dug into her bones. He could follow the gentle curve of her cupid's bow as he used to, and it might even feel the same-but for the warmth that had left her body. Even her dark eyes were clouded by death's fog. The raven's claws had torn into her shoulder, yet drew no blood. Mascara stained her cool cheeks where tears had made tracks the night before. The roots that had pulled and pressed the body to the trunk were unmoving now, but the professor recoiled as he saw the red ruins they had made of her once unmarred legs. Realizing what had been done, he was glad to have fled with the others. The skin of Kennedy's face cracked like chalk as the Stone Tree smiled through it. There was blood between her teeth. The professor flinched when he saw her tongue stained red as it spoke.

I can still feel her warmth. There is room left in this heart for kindness. When your students return to witness the aftermath of my ascendancy, I shall show them the way, as I did you. You cannot restore this woman, but you will never walk my path alone. This is our gift to you.

The Stone Tree's voice began to build, rising above the body's first deathly rasp.

We will share and celebrate our unity as we should have last night. Goblets of posca have turned to cans and smoke, but through the centuries my worship was never forgotten. I now need time to remember how to walk, and talk, and more faithfals to do it in. Your students are the beginning of what we will achieve together.

The Stone Tree's voice pressed on him from all sides, from the eaves of its canopy to the cracks in the white trunk, as it used to be before his violent offering. The professor felt himself buckle inwards as it continued to grow.

Mortals will seek out my absolution once again. There will always be those who gather. As my first acolyte, I am giving you the joy of guiding my new disciples to enlightenment. Stay by my side, and you shall never be lonely.

The praise of the Stone Tree was a welcome weight on his trembling soul. He couldn't imagine living without this blessed euphoria. He once thought he'd found intimacy in Kennedy, but he'd never known communion like this. Soon he'd share belonging with others, Faithfuls. He needed his students to join together, they would all keep each other safe. They would have to. He knew the Stone Tree was vulnerable within the corpse. The Tree trusted him most of all, and he could not, would not, abandon it. Neither would his students.

Soon you will no longer squat in the dirt to steal the history of others, but serve to create mine. Your pupils will realize that there is peace in service, as you have. If she knew of the future you've gifted her fellows, your beloved would thank you, and beg to be given to me once more. The pain of joining quickly turns to bliss, if only you had stayed to see it.

The last comment skittered across his chest, breaking him from the voice's embrace. "I wish I had been holding her hand." The ravens were certainly laughing this time. Her face had tilted down, murky brown eyes piercing him beneath long lashes. The professor caught a low chuckle. "I wish that I had stayed."

Your beloved left this world when her mind ceded this body to me. My children will remember her as the original offering, and the first in a line of saints. Her sacrifice will be honored. As will yours.

The voice coming from her shell caressed him, yet did nothing to banish the pain. He was confronted with the memory of his students' horrified eyes as they had fled from him. They could not watch her die. *Neither could I.* How quickly he'd forgotten his lover's violent end. Tears fell, blotching his trousers.

The girl's ear tilted towards a sloping shoulder, eyes groping the professor's face.

Your grief shows plainly on your face. Do you regret what you have done?

"No," he lied, "I just..." His throat ground like sandpaper as he grasped for an excuse "She changed her mind when you...reached for her." his voice cracked, "I held her there, I thought she'd understand once you had joined her, I thought she would still be there. I didn't realize--"

Before he could finish, there was a deafening crack. The ravens took flight as a bough fell, smashing the cobblestones, narrowly missing the professor. He cowered from the shards of stricken stone, and through his fear he realized that the bare canopy had crept above him. *When did that happen?* The voice snarled from its twisted mouth.

Do not regret obeying me. You ran, and you hold responsibility for your cowardice, but never question that what I did was righteous. You want to know why she died? Why I am forced to find another host?

The head cocked to a shoulder at an unnatural angle.

She fought me. She denied me. I could not permit her disobedience, nor will I endure yours.

The Tree's shadows deepened and grew, reaching for the professor. He wrenched himself back, desperate to escape its wrath.

If I destroy you here, what do you think will become of your students when they seek out my temple without your guidance? Do you think I would not harm them? I have no need to lie to you, so know that I do not need these mortals. They are not important, nor are you. I can always find more servants. More bodies.

The advancing dark swallowed the corpse and grasped for the desperate man. He could no longer tell where the voice came from, it was all around him.

In the end, your students will serve my purpose, as you have always known they would.

Abruptly, the threatening darkness stilled. After a pause almost like an inhale, the voice slithered out from under the somber dusk that had settled over the mountains. The professor was more frightened than he had ever been.

Answer me, Andrew.

He felt his own heart pounding in his chest, and after a few beats he composed himself, facing what was left of the woman he might have loved one day. Placing both knees on the stone, he pressed his hands to the cobblestones and lowered his head. He felt the skin of his palms sting from the shattered rock. He bled, and he ignored it. He lifted his head, eyes full of tears and wide with despair. *If I had a choice, it might be a problem.*

“I will bring them to you, if you ask it of me. I will never turn from you again.”

Warrior Gods Champion Book 1 - The Hunter and his Beasts - Excerpt

By Kyle Maniaci

Rolf stumbled out of the bar some time past midnight, drunker than he had ever been before in his life, and that was saying something. He and Stanley had wandered around, going from bar to bar all night and he had made the foolish mistake of trying to match the massive bastard drink for drink. While he was no slouch when it came to alcohol the Hillsman was on an entirely different level and all that he had accomplished by the time they had reached their fourth bar was making the entire world swim like he was looking up at it from the bottom of the ocean. Meanwhile, the only sign that Stanley was drunk was the fact that he had started wobbling a bit as he walked. Rolf had stuck it out though and eventually, through sheer dogged determination, and accidentally spilling a large portion of his drinks, he had managed to wear the big bastard down and get him to admit defeat. Of course, all this meant in practice was that he complained of being a little tired and left Rolf to go check up on that Kiralian chick he had kidnapped and apparently gotten quite close to, despite the fact neither of them could really understand a bloody word the other was saying, but Rolf knew a surrender when he saw one and had declared victory. He had celebrated this victory with another set of drinks before realizing what a mistake that was and was now paying the consequences as he heaved up his guts in one of the Capitols more dirty alleys

He had just about finished and was preparing to go and see if Almithara had taken him up on his offer to use his crappy place by the docks as her home for now, when the sound of weapons being drawn from their sheaths behind him suddenly sobered him up right quick. He turned around instantly to find a dozen men brandishing weapons and blocking the exit to the alley. Cursing his stupidity at letting the celebrations allow him to forget just how dangerous the Capitol could be, he drew his own mace and dagger, having learned far earlier in life to never allow them out of arm's reach. This did nothing to deter the men who advanced steadily onwards, feral grins covering their faces.

Realizing that they were not going to back down, he tried intimidation, putting on his best warface and assuming a ready stance. "OI! I don't know who you lot are or why you're doing this, but know that I just spent the last of my money and am not in the mood for any games." He wanted to wince at the way his words came out somewhat slurred but managed to keep a straight face.

The lead man of the bunch however, simply chuckled darkly at his bravado. "Oh don't worry, we aren't here for your money Rolf, merely your life. Tallarn is tired of you all prancing about the Capitol like you own the place, and is hoping that your death might send the appropriate message. So just relax and I'll try to make it quick."

With that announcement he sprang forward, intending to end him in one quick blow with his axe. This was not the first time Rolf had seen that sort of move though and he easily sidestepped the overhead swing, letting the blow continue until the lack of resistance to his strike caused the man to stumble forward, whereupon Rolf, in a single, swift motion, brought his mace around to brain the man over the head. The man instantly crumpled to the floor, his brains spilling out across the cobblestones and the rest of the men hesitated, unnerved by his quick execution of, presumably, their leader. It was only for a moment though, then the next three men all howled and charged him simultaneously.

Each of these men had cutlasses and the ones on the side swung them horizontally while the one in the middle thrust, trying to block him off and prevent him from dodging. So instead of retreating, Rolf stepped forward into the thrust, shifting so that it passed under his arm instead of into him before smashing the man's outstretched wrist with his mace. The man immediately dropped the weapon and staggered backwards screaming as Rolf moved to the left, catching that man's slash on his dagger while avoiding the other slash and, using a move Almithara had taught him, twisted his arm, redirecting it into his screaming friend, silencing him instantly. As the man tried to remove his weapon from where it had stuck in friends throat, Rolf slammed his mace into his side, breaking his ribs and probably a lung or

two as well. As the man went down wheezing he instantly spun around and leapt for the guy on the right, catching him by surprise and ducking under his hasty slash in response before plunging his dagger into his throat.

Withdrawing it with a nasty slurping sound, he turned back around towards the others to find another bunch coming straight for him. Luckily the alleyway prevented them from all coming at him at once and they were forced to attack in groups of three. This group had been a little further back and before they could reach him Rolf threw his dagger, catching the rightmost one in the stomach and doubling him over. He then darted right, waiting for the middlemost one to reach him and swing with his axe before catching the man's wrist with his now free hand to stop the blow and shoulder charging the man into his friend and both of them into the wall. He heard something snap in the one wedged between his friend and the wall but took no chances, yanking the first man around by his wrist and down to the ground before smashing his face in then turning and pulping the other man's head against the same wall. Spinning in place he turned to face the others, only to find them a bit further back than the others, watching him instead of attacking. Rolf was almost grateful for their stupidity when he suddenly noticed there were only three of them instead of five and something made a noise behind him. He whirled around as quickly as he could, but not fast enough as a sword ran him through from behind. There was a moment of shock as he stared down at the piece of metal sticking through his stomach and the grinning face of the man holding it before the pain hit.

It was horrific, worse than any other pain Rolf had ever felt before and it took everything he had not to just simply collapse from that alone. He had been stabbed before, though not as badly as this, and it did not hurt nearly as much, so he wondered what the man had hit to cause it before gritting his teeth, grabbing the blade with his free hand and holding it in. There was a brief moment of panic on the man's face as he saw that Rolf was still moving and tried to extract it before Rolf, roaring in both pain and fury, brought his mace down and removed any expression from the man's face forever more.

His companion moved in to try and finish the job, swinging his own mace at him, but Rolf, running on pure rage and adrenaline now, simply met the man's swing with his own, smashing the two lumps of metal together and halting them in midair before stepping forward and headbutting the man. As he staggered backwards Rolf kicked him in his crotch, causing him to double over, then brought his mace down his back, shattering his spine and watching as he collapsed like a ragdoll. The sound of footsteps behind him alerted him to the approach of the rest, but instead of trying to turn to meet them like last time he instead simply tossed his mace as hard he could in that direction without looking, hoping to get lucky, before trying to kneel and pickup the other man's mace and collapsing as well on top of him instead.

That saved his life as the blows meant to cut him in half instead sailed harmlessly over his limp body. As he struggled to right himself, Rolf saw that he had indeed managed to get lucky and one of the three was further back clutching their obviously broken leg, the bone sticking out as they rolled around on the floor screaming, leaving only two hovering over him for him to deal with. Scooping up the man's mace he lifted himself up off his lifeless body and swung it at the nearest one only to watch the man dart backwards and avoid the sluggish blow. Realizing that he was running out of whatever it was that was keeping him going, Rolf opted not to try and attack again, instead kneeling there waiting as the two men left circled him warily, trying to find a good moment and angle to strike. As they did, Rolf fished around the bodies and blood in the area trying to find another weapon, managing to grab one right as the two of them finished circling him and charged from opposite directions. Rolf turned towards the closest one, spitting a mouthful of blood into his face and blinding him momentarily before suddenly turning towards the other and swinging in a wide arc with both of his weapons. The sword missed as the man dodged to the right, but caught the mace right in the side and Rolf was too weak to maintain his grip on it as it embedded itself and they both went tumbling to the left.

It also wasn't quick enough to fully stop his blow as the man's sword continued its arc and dug into his left shoulder before being yanked out again as he fell. Rolf barely noticed the blow though, simply grunting in pain before

turning to face the last man who was still wiping the blood from his eyes. Once they were clear, the both of them stared at one another for a few moments before the man struck, double handing his sword as he brought it down in an incredibly powerful blow. Rolf brought his sword up to block, but was too weak to fully stop it and could only watch as it knocked his weapon down, the block only blunting the blow, before it glanced off his face and skull. Instantly half of his vision went dark and his head started ringing like a bell as explosive pain ran down his body. Before the man could recover, Rolf summoned the last vestiges of his strength to position his sword straight at the man's chest, grabbing it with both hands as well, and stood up, using the motion to drive it through his heart. The man let out a single gasp before the light faded from his eyes and he collapsed to join the others, leaving Rolf barely standing in a pile of bodies. Instantly he collapsed back onto one knee, and as he knelt there, struggling to breathe, he felt a strong desire to simply let go and fall down amongst them unconscious. He might have even done so, if it wasn't for the thought of Almithara finding him lying there amongst the rest.

Summoning even more strength from this image, he managed to get back onto his feet and staggered out of the alleyway, the sword in his back giving him terrible pains every time he moved. He knew better than to remove it however, as it was likely the only thing keeping him from bleeding to death. Outside the alleyway, the celebrations were still going strong even this late at night, the noise from it having concealed the sounds of combat from the alley, which explained why there wasn't already a crowd around the area. His wounds were a lot less easy to conceal however and he drew many a startled and terrified look and gasp as he stumbled down the streets, bleeding the entire way. Several people tried to help him but he ignored all of them, the only thing in his mind reaching his home before whatever was empowering him finally gave up the ghost.

He had no idea how much time had passed when he finally did arrive, the entire journey just a blur in his head as he collapsed against the door of the crappy little shack at the docks that was his home, shaking the entire structure with the impact before sliding down the door, too weak to even raise his hand and open it. As he lay there he heard a voice come from behind it as footsteps approached. "Honestly, you sure kept me waiting all night didn't you. And now you come back too drunk to even open the door." There was a click as the door unlocked. "I don't know why I expected anything diff-" the door opened and Rolf collapsed onto the ground behind it to a startled gasp. "Are you so drunk you can't even stand?" came the response and Rolf managed to wheeze out a pained chuckle as he stared up into Almitharas face. There was a pause as she took a moment to process what she was seeing before she rushed down to grab him. "BY THE GODS, ROLF!? WHAT HAPPENED!?"

Rolf ignored this, instead reaching up to touch her face before giving her a smile. "I love you. Glad I got the chance to tell you." He said weakly, before everything went dark.

El Hechizo de la Viuda Laura

By Sofia Orea

A soft candle enlightened the little room. Her braid flew back and forth, as she threw her ingredients into the soup. Chicken? I asked, trying to peek into the Barro negro, “Chicken no pendeja!” The woman exclaimed, leaping back to the stove, her little feet kicking above the ground. She poured dark blue goop from a black jar with one word scratched on it: . I curled back into my blankets and closed my eyes, smelling the comfort of spice. Homey with a mix of warm thoughts. And Chicken.

A sudden clatter of metal colliding with the kitchen tile startled me back to the food. Pots and pans flew everywhere knocking down her brooms and nearly missing my face as she crawled her way into the little cabinet under her sink. “Dona do you need help?” I called, watching her little leather shoe disappear into the wooden cupboard. “Dona?” I asked again tiptoeing to the sink, but before I could even bend down she was gone. Peering inside I saw nothing. No pots, no pans, and more shockingly no Dona.

“No te asustes Viuda Laura”, she echoed back. “Siéntate y ahorita regreso”. With that I left the cabinet open and wrapped myself back in the blanket. The cold was unsurvivable, spreading through my entire body in pulses to the very tip of my head. Sliding my hands together quickly I leaned down to breathe warm air into my palms, but nothing came out except a couple snowflakes. Shivering to ice I managed to shuffle my way back onto the old worn out chair la Dona had in the corner. Dona had always been a strange woman, but was also known to be the wisest from the pueblo. She could make anything possible, women flocked to her house to drink her pregnant potion with the same enthusiasm the men did to keep their hair.

“Aquí, esta Viuda Laura” Dona echoed as she shot herself out of the darkness, “This is what you need”. I approached Dona and peered into her enclosed palm. A soft light flicked through the crevices of her wrinkled fingers. Delicately opening her hand, she revealed to me the most beautiful shell I had ever seen. It looked to be made of glass and the pearly white coral showed thousands of me inside. “Dona it’s beautiful”, I cupped my hands unconsciously as a pull beckoned me to take this delicacy, only for Dona to close her hand back up and open to reveal the empty lines of palm. Tsk Tsk Tsk, she clicked with her tongue, giving me the same condescending look my father used to give me when I tried to go for a swim in the river.

“Before I tell you my condition I must ask again. Are you sure you want to go through with your wish, bending the law of nature always comes with consequences”. Dona was one to condescend, but I was never one to back down, especially when this could be a matter of life or death. “Please, Dona I need this, I can’t marry Ramiro. My husband hasn’t even had his year of passing and already I am being traded like a troubling commodity. But! If I were to be pregnant. It would buy me time. Years! I could leave. Please Dona I don’t care anything you want, I will give you anything”.

Dona studied my face, reading every peck and line until she finally seemed to harden with a decision. “Fine”, she declared “You want child, I give, but let it be known that I warned you well Vidua Laura you must remember this”. Looking down to her palm she clenched it again and released her fingers to allow the rare shell to shine. I relaxed and bit as Dona got back to work with Purpose. Filling a bowl full of broth from her pot and walking back signaling for me to hold. She then lifted the shell in the air and allowed the wind to lend her strength as she chanted for my wish, never minding the rattling of the house as she lifted the shell from her palm and made its way to my bowl. It scooped up a bit of the broth and brought it forward to my lips, asking and I accepted. Scope after scop until there was nothing left, but my hope and a glimmerless shell. For the first time in four months, I felt warm.

The weeks that followed were agony, it began with the rain. As I was walking home after my visit with Dona, I was content with my decision, smiling down at my stomach like a fool. Nothing could ruin my precious day, but as I reached the end of Dona's street, a bolt of lightning struck the tree in front of me splitting it in half as splinters ricocheted every which way. Rogelio from the tienda in front got a splitter straight through the heart. Blood mixed with rain turning the street red. I rushed to him but it was too late. Holding his hand I wept, when he suddenly opened his eyes and grabbed my arms with the strength of iron. "They're coming" he coughed, blood slipping from his mouth and onto my dress. I tried to call for help but it felt as if the blood was falling from my mouth and not his, as I drowned in this iron grip. Pedro from the house across made his way to that and in an instant Rogelio was back on the floor and I was a choking mess of a person.

My mother insisted I stay inside to heal from the shock, but I knew she was most concerned about my escaping the marriage preparations, not that I cared anymore. Ever since the lightning and Rogelio, the rain has not stopped. The town became engulfed with water to the point people were talking about moving to the mountains for fear of being drowned. The roads became rivers and the farmers turned to carpentry, readying little boats to travel for food. Rogelio's dying words stayed with me the entire time. They're coming.

I was afraid to let my mind wonder what that meant. Pacing became my daily routine, I would walk the floor of my confines daily trying to maintain my sanity. One morning when I again took refuge in my room and paced over the sound of the rain thrashing my window, I felt a sharp blade rip through my foot. Screaming out in agony I fell to the floor crying out for my mother. She made her way inside in a hurry to find me crying on the floor in pain. "Mama! Mi pie mi pie!" She bent down and delicately inspected my foot. I waited for her cries of panic as I must have stepped on broken glass. Instead she looked up to me confused. "Mija, there is nothing here, did you get a cramp?" she asked, beginning to massage my feet, but with every touch of her fingers I felt a thousand sharp pins enter my heel. "No No Stop! Stop, please it hurts!" I yelled attempting to kick her away. Hearing the cries from the front door, Dr. Hernandez let himself inside to find nothing himself. Gently he touched my mother's shoulder and beckoned her to the doorway. "Please Dona, don't be alarmed I am sure it is still the shock of Rogelio, I'll help her into bed and you will see this will pass". I watched Mama leave nodding more to the empty hallway than the doctor. He closed the door behind her and wordlessly set his briefcase down and lifted me into the bed. I gasped as he covered me with blankets until the rim of my chin and pressed down tightly on either side of the blanket, locking me up.

"Your theatrics will not work with me Laura, no matter how hard you cry we will be married come march, and you will straighten your act". I tried to claw at his hand but they were lost among linen. "Ramiro please I need help, it hurts!" I pleaded one last time only for him to laugh in my face and finally release me, as I coughed for air. "Sure it hurts Laura, but don't worry. Once we're married everything will be fine". And with that I was left in the darkness again.

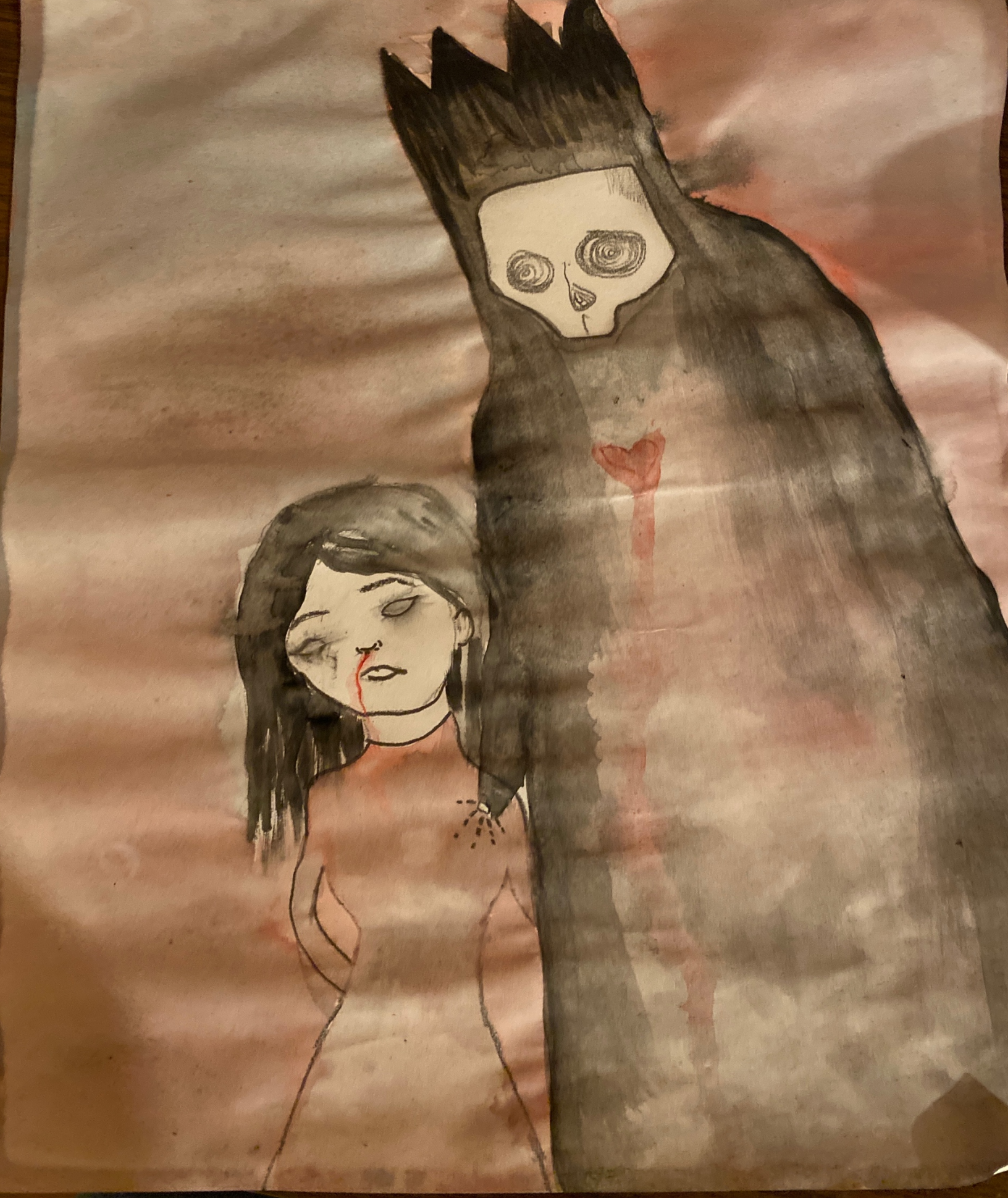
There was no way in hell I was going to end up married to Ramiro. I planned to stay faithful to my family and faithful I will stay. I shoved all the blankets off my body and forced myself to get out of bed. The moment my feet hit the floor, it felt like I had steps on glass, and with every step I gave the pain grew worse. Not even my comfiest shoes make the shards leave my nerves. But I knew there was one person who could make this go away. Fuck Ramiro and taking everything away, I had nothing in my room save for a bed and four walls... and one high window. Despite the pain I got to work pushing the bed underneath and climbing on top. I could barely peek outside the top, but it was manageable. So I readied myself, digging my feet into the knives of my making and jumped, grunting as I pulled my stomach onto the window sill and threw myself on the other side. For the first time since my visit to Dona I thanked god for the rain as I landed in the created river on my street. I was engulfed by mud and trash, as ice spread through my veins forcing me to sink, but I strived to swim. Kicking my legs as hard as I could, I thought of the future and how I didn't want to die in a puddle of filth, how I was so close to my dream, I couldn't give up. A sudden current broke my

transe and threw me to the surface, knocking my head on a floating tree. The trunk became my life raft as I guided myself towards the Dona house.

Upon reaching it I saw that unlike the rest of the town her little cottage was void of the flood. Rather than the flood, there was not rain in sight. It reminded me of one of those snow globes my husband bought me once and how I envied the happy safe that was always smiling inside, playing in the snow. Now it was going to be my turn. A pull glided me toward the house and I was as light as a feather. Floating down from my kind tree. Everything looked the same, yet the enthusiasm I had when I had first arrived was long gone, and replaced with regret, and anger. Anger at the world for taking my husband, anger at Dona for tricking me into her maldad, and anger at myself. For disgracing the life I had and taking for granted what was yet to come.

Dona came outside of her house, and met me in her front garden. Flowers blooming as she walked. “Welcome Viuda Laura, I’ve been waiting for you”, she seemed to walk on water, transforming into this beautiful young woman before my eyes, elegant and graceful. “I am not with child am I Dona”, shaking her head she looked at me pityingly. “I’m sorry Viuda no, you are not with child, but you shall receive one like promised. I am a woman of my word. You have been kind enough to grant me the life of my dreams and it is time you receive yours”. One delicate hand reached toward mine. “It is time Laura come, let us both be happy”. I accepted.

The rain stopped, the lightning retreated, and the rivers returned to their homes. The people of the town did as people usually do, they moved on and rebuilt from the mess. All except one Mama, who mourned the loss of her daughter. She could be found weeping on her tombstone. Laura, loving daughter, loving wife, and an amazing mother.



About the Authors



Jordan Cook

Jordan is on her way to getting her Bachelor's so that she may finally move onto the next step in becoming a SpEd teacher. Growing up, her and her sister were military brats until their parents settled the family down in Temecula around 2005. Plenty has happened in her 26 years of living thus far, though not enough has happened at the same time. Her goals include traveling the world and one day finding an amazing gnocchi recipe that won't involve turning the kitchen upside down (she makes it possible). She enjoys nights in the climbing gym followed by anime binges in bed—never without a snack spread bound to leave a few crumbs.

Mara Johnson

Mara Johnson is a graduate student studying history at CSUSM, who enjoys creative writing and hopes to one day complete a novel set in the Ashes to Ashes universe. She was inspired by Professor David Cowper at Palomar Community College to put her ideas on paper and embrace her creative side.

Travis Garraway

Travis Garraway is an undergrad student in CSUSM. He likes to write whatever happens to pop into his head, which just so happens to be mostly fantasy. When he isn't screaming at the top of his lungs, begging that his code should work properly for the umpteenth time, he can be seen working on some novel that might or might not be published in his bedroom or at a random coffee shop.



Jake Swaney

I was born in 1999 in Southern California and have always loved literature and storytelling. Ironically, I hadn't started writing until I began high school when I took my first creative writing class. Since then, I've only continued to improve, and now close to the end of my college journey, I'm happy to begin sharing my work with you all!

Sofia Orea

My name is Sofia Orea and I am a student at CSUSM and am working on completing my BA in Literature and Writing. Some of my hobbies are reading, watching true crime documentaries, and webtoons. In the future I hope to become a librarian and continue writing to my heart's content. Hope you enjoy the story!



Kyle Maniaci

My name is Kyle Maniaci and I am a student at Csum. I am currently in my final semester, preparing to graduate with a BA in Literature and Writing and am also in the process of publishing my very own novel, titled the Hunter and His Beasts. My hobbies are writing, reading, video games, and tabletop games. I hope you enjoy this excerpt from my book!



E.C. Spitz

Corinne Spitz is a San Diego native, and serial book binger. The accomplishment she is most proud of is reaching her goodreads yearly goal 7 months ahead of time. If seen in the wild, approach with caution, she's easily startled. Can be found on her bookstagram account, [@corinnesthestoryhoarder](#)

Art by Rhyleigh Maldonado