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A Compendium of Stories



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THE CLASSICAL ASSOCIATION

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## Editor's Note

In early 2022, [The Classical Association](#) organised a Creative Writing Competition in honour of its 2021-22 Honorary President – actor, comedian, narrator and author of *Mythos: A Trilogy*, [Stephen Fry](#). The Competition was open to entrants across the United Kingdom and it attracted creative responses from hundreds of writers in three age categories.

Following the titles of each of Stephen's mythology-inspired books, the category prompts were as follows: Junior entrants (aged 11 and under) were encouraged to write a short story of 800 words or less in response to the theme 'Myths'; Senior entrants (aged 12-18) were tasked with creating a short story of 1500 words or less in response to the theme 'Heroes'; and Open entrants (aged 19 and older) were commissioned to devise a short story of 1500 words or less in response to the theme 'Troy'.

This Compendium includes just a small selection of the brilliant stories that were submitted and does not include all of those which were shortlisted; we have selected some of the most entertaining and inventive stories and arranged them under four broad themes: 'elements', 'myths', 'justice' and 'war'. The names of the winners and commended writers in each category can be viewed on [this webpage](#) or, if you prefer suspense, you can read the whole Compendium before discovering which story was chosen as the overall winner!

In late 2022, each of the stories in this Compendium was released as a daily instalment in an audiobook version of *Epic* on [The Classics Podcast](#). A link to the audio-story is available in the subtitle of each story, so as you read you can also listen to a range of voices, all narrators with a close connection to the Classical Association, including award-winning authors of historical fiction Caroline Lawrence, Daisy Dunn and Lindsey Davis.

We do hope you enjoy reading and listening to the stories and that you will lose yourself in the worlds of mythology, adventure and human emotion that our writers have so beautifully crafted. These stories made us laugh, weep, shudder and smile in equal measure. Head judge, the novelist [Edward Hogan](#), and judge of the Junior Category, classics professor [Sharon Marshall](#), share some of their highlights from the prize-winning stories in the preface.

## Preface

### Edward Hogan

It was a life-affirming pleasure to participate in the judging of the Classical Association's creative writing competition. The stories we read took us from bedrooms and classrooms to dystopian quarantine prisons; from a Roman forum to a celebrity mansion; and from a twentieth century Cornish mineshaft to a sofa in the Underworld.

I was so heartened to see the way young writers engaged with the classical notion of a hero. In fact, 'engaged' is probably not a strong enough word – sometimes, they swung a wrecking ball at it. According to these stories, a hero can be a friend, a mother, a victim, a storyteller, or the person who has to stay home. They can be filled with remorse and self-doubt. Often, they want to change, to shed the past, to renounce combat. Some people think they're heroes, and they're really not. Some people don't know they're heroes, and some don't want to be. After reading these stories – many of which are mythological, or set thousands of years in the past – I had a new concept of what a real hero might be, in our future.

So, a few words on some of the winning stories. Madeleine Friedlein's [\*Fate's Engine\*](#), awarded first place in the Senior Category, is just stunning. It cuts between a pit disaster in 1919, and the three Fates, as they spin, stretch, and sever the thread of life. On the one hand, it presents us with an act of heroism, but on the other, it asks us how much control we really have over our lives and actions. These are deep themes. The dangerous work of the early twentieth century miner is vividly realised, and in the mix of epic, poetic flourishes, and earthy detail, I heard an echo of one of my own local heroes, D.H. Lawrence. That said, it's totally original. I've never read anything like it. There's a unique artistic voice here, and I can't wait to see what this writer does next.

In my notes, after reading Madeleine Whitmore's [\*We Are Very Little Things\*](#), the first word I wrote was 'wow'. This story of Persephone's journey back to her mother is full of utterly surprising images. In melding an ironic, sophisticated, contemporary voice with an ancient myth, the writer has created a dark and strange twilight world of their own. It has one of those opening lines which makes you sit up and pay very close attention. You know immediately you're reading a proper writer, and that sense continues throughout. The amazing Lorrie Moore (who this writer might well have read), described the short story as an 'end-based form', and the ending here, featuring Persephone's reunion with her mother, is just perfect.

In the Open Category, [\*The Mother of Heroes\*](#) by Allan Gaw is a monologue from the point of view of the Trojan horse as her timbers decay, a century after releasing the soldiers she considers to be her children. It's a daring strategy, and, as in all the best first-person

narrations, the writer stays true to the voice. That voice is proud and menacing; sometimes it elicits sympathy, and sometimes it provokes unease. A remarkable technical feat. This story, like many in classical mythology, is a tale of invasion and war, but it helps us interrogate these destructive impulses, and makes us consider their human costs. The Trojan horse believes her victories make her immortal, but she speaks those words while her limbs are used for firewood, and so another reading of the story emerges – one where we perhaps resist the horse’s cold, belligerent pride. After invasion, she finds herself lost, alone, and literally falling apart. Like all good stories, it’s a complicated one.

Ian Rory’s [\*Every Night is Movie Night When You’re Dead\*](#) made me laugh like an idiot. It’s the story of comfy, long-term couple Achilles and Patroclus, who are stranded in the Underworld, snarking about the film *Troy* on Netflix. What’s not to like? One of the hardest things to do in fiction is to get your central characters into the same room and have them talk and interact. The dialogue in this story is brilliant, and that’s how we learn that Achilles, in this telling, is a bit of a vain jock (‘I punched a river, once’, he tells us, proudly). The writer uses a mix of ancient and modern language registers for comic effect, and there’s a warmth and joy to the relationships.

As kids, my brother and I absorbed classical mythology from Ray Harryhausen films and illustrated children’s books. To return to these stories now, and see an emerging generation of writers spin the tales in all sorts of new directions, has been fantastic, and I’d like to thank the CA, the other judges, and especially the writers, for this experience.

### **Sharon Marshall**

Most writers would agree that the short story is a particularly tricky form to master, which makes the successes of our junior competition entrants all the more impressive. What struck me most about our winning stories – each with their own particular sprinkling of magic – was the way each one so brilliantly harnessed the power of the short story form to tell tales that feel big and important.

The opening tale in this Compendium, Evie Amira Morgan’s winning story [\*The Aquamarine Immortal\*](#), is a captivating and charming story of an encounter between a small girl and a mysterious water deity that cleverly and subtly shifts between perspectives. It’s a tale of devotion and reward that manages to capture the essence of stories we might have read before – of humble piety receiving just recognition – while being entirely original. It stood out to me not just on account of the originality, but the maturity and vividness of the storytelling.

Second place was awarded to Matilda Parker-Groom’s [\*Aeschylus and the Black Jewels of Hades\*](#), a piece that has such a clear message and point of view on the damage wrought by

mankind, but with a generous dash of sympathy for human desires (who doesn't want to eat strawberries in winter?) and of hope for the future. I really like the way in which this story mirrors what we see in the mythology of the Greeks and Romans who were also using similar stories to think through the big changes they were witnessing and trying to make sense of.

[\*The World Myth\*](#), our third-place story by Amelie Bea Sumner, weaves together seamlessly the mythologies of Europe, Asia, and Africa to tell a tale with a simple but important moral: be kind. Amelie writes with such a distinctive voice, full of character, and her love of mythology shines through. It's no mean feat to breathe new life into such ancient stories, but this feels really fresh in the way it brings together those stories and the cultures they spring from.

Many of the other stories (not all included in this Compendium) had me enthralled through the sheer brilliance of the imagination on display. Some were unexpectedly emotive, such as the redemptive tale of a modern-day Noah turned animal smuggler or the adventures of an orphan boy who overcomes bullying and reminds us that heroism might be found where we least expect it. Others were full of personality, from the revisionist history of how the Leaning Tower of Pisa got its lean, to the story of [how Jupiter came to have a red spot](#), reviving the ancient tradition of myths that explain origins or causes. There were also those that demonstrated a deep engagement with the works that inspired them, such as the moving reworking of the Roman poet Ovid's [story of the nymph Echo](#), written from her sister's perspective.

There is always something special about seeing the world through the eyes of young people, but I could never have predicted the sensitivity and emotional intelligence to be found in these stories that will, I think, bring joy to all who read them.

Brighton and Exeter,

March 2022

## Prologue

### Sing to me a Song of Your Own

Esme Hobbs (Senior Category)

[Narrated by Katrina Kelly](#)

I had always loved tales of heroes. Men raging into battle, bronze shields blazing with light, the clashing of swords and bodies as they threw themselves at one another; and then, a glint in the darkness, that singular, golden figure, lighting the way out of desperation. When I was very young, a bard told me that all heroes curled their hair. He said that they heated their swords like rods at a blacksmith's and wrapped their locks around it. He also said that all heroes wore yellow, so I'm still not sure if any of it was true.

It was quiet where I grew up. Little except sheep, and the light breeze that blew in from the west. I'd originally longed to be a hero myself, you know, chasing down artefacts of immeasurable power, succeeding where all else failed, travelling to the underworld and back, bringing glory home with me, and winning a beautiful maiden along the way, one who loved me above all else, with soft, oxen eyes of a deep brown; long, curling hair; milky skin; and a kind face. Unfortunately, a family of shepherds doesn't exactly make enough money to fund a heroic expedition – heroism isn't cheap! There's the money for armour and weaponry, of course, not to mention the travel costs, ridiculous! What you *really* need is divine intervention, and it's notoriously difficult to gain the attention of the gods. There are three ways: one, be the child of one of them; two, be a rich king or prince; or three, be a beautiful woman, and I am none of these. Also, it's a bit of a dice roll over whether you receive positive attention for these or not, which is risky.

But the bards that travelled to and from our city always had the most wonderful stories. Living on the outskirts of the area was quite beneficial. The views were excellent, and every bard who made his way to the palace of the king to peddle his tales had to stop by one of the outlying houses for a night in order to make the trip. You can't refuse guests, and I never wanted to. I would usher poor men off the roads in the hope that they would have stories tucked under the folds of their cloaks and hidden in the twinkles of their eyes. This was much to the consternation of my poor parents who constantly had to feed these men, although the men themselves were always grateful. We had one who insisted that he was a hero himself, come to reclaim his throne. As far as *we* were aware, our king was off in battle, at Troy, although we did often miss a few important news announcements now that I think about it. He was a good storyteller, although his story had less to do with heroics, and more to do with womanising, which I, as a young boy, found incredibly dull. The cyclops was my favourite

part of *that* tale, I loved heroes that weren't just muscles and divine heritage, probably because I had neither of those attributes myself. They were just more interesting.

Sometimes, I'd find myself a *real* bard. That was always a treat. I'd take his arm, sparkling as the sun does on dew-dropped grass when it rises, glowing over the endless fields on a spring morning, dragging him back towards my house and chattering faster than the birds, begging him to tell me his latest tale. I'd sit, starry eyed, on the floor before the fire, and many bards would indulge my childish glee, thrilled to finally have an audience that wasn't completely sloshed.

These bards would weave their words like glittering mist, rolling over the stones around me, encircling, embracing, caressing my face with their phrases and ruffling my hair with their rhythm. The steady beat of their song soothed my heart of its wanderlust, and paintings burst into life before me with steady strokes, the murmur of the bards' voices rippling like ocean waves, filling me with joy and floating me into the heavens. It felt like a spiritual experience, as a child, and even so now. I wondered at godlike Achilles, the poet-warrior, with his swift feet and roaring bloodlust. I gasped at Herakles, the man of many tasks, who slew a hydra, a dragon, who captured Cerberus from Hades, and pinned the Ceryneian Hind, who wore a shredded lionskin as a grisly garment, plucked from conquest. I marvelled at Jason and the golden fleece, was amazed by Perseus and Medusa, awestruck by Theseus and the Minotaur. These heroes were my lifeblood.

But there was no adventure where I lived. As much as I wanted to be legendary, no quest found its way to my door, stuffed in the pockets of the men I brought there.

I did, however, find a new adventure, a new journey. After each bard had left, with a wave and a promise to remember my name and face, to keep me in his mind, I'd trek up to the top of the highest hill near to my home. At the top of said hill was a tree. Its branches stretched into the sky, grasping at the fleeing clouds and cupping the sun in its fingers. Under that tree I'd sit, as the cold wind cradled my smile, my cheeks splitting, eyes glinting, and padded pink onto my nose with her chilly thumbs, as I sang tales to the sheep that flocked to my feet. Nestled in the roots of this tree, the rams and ewes would be my audience. I'd recite to them the stories I'd heard from my guests, over and over and over again, until the tree was almost worn from where I'd sat and the animals knew to bleat during moments of suspense. I could sing across the fields, hoping my words would reach some far-off kingdom, where a brave

hero could sweep me into an epic adventure. I liked to imagine that the nymph of the tree enjoyed my stories also and rustled her leaves in happiness and anticipation.

So, when I grew old enough, and my parents had borne another son, secure in the knowledge that *somebody* could take care of the sheep, I left. What was it that had fascinated me about heroes? Was it their bravery? Exploits? Romances? Doubtful. Endings? Even *more* doubtful. Or was it the places I was swept along to, the words of bards forming my own little boat, sailing me across the wine-dark sea of story and song, and into the magical outlands of myth and legend. I finally knew. Heroism wasn't for me. I couldn't hold a sword, nor fight, nor form elaborate and cunning plans with the help of a goddess. But I could sing, and I could remember, and I could weave my words like Arachne and form a tapestry of my own style. And, as it turns out, kidnapping every bard within a kingdom-wide radius and wheedling their stories out of them made for an excellent repertoire. So, I travelled the world, for real this time. I set sail across the ocean and made my way into the palaces of every king and queen and prince, and I took up my stool, I tipped my cup, and I burst into a song that pushed every emotion that I'd stored up before that fireplace out into my listeners. It was glorious, that first performance, finally the bard telling the story, and not just the watcher. I felt like the muses themselves, I walked on clouded steps up to Olympus and stared at the world that gazed in admiration. I looked into the eyes of a young child with no front teeth and sparked in her eyes the same joy and sheer devotion that a bard had sparked in mine. I would be her hero. And the heroes themselves travelled through me.

I've always loved telling tales of heroes.

## 1: Elements

### The Aquamarine Immortal

Evie Amira Morgan (Junior Category, First Place)

[Narrated by Sharon Marshall](#)

Dappled sunlight filtered through the weeping willow which dangled above my head like an angel mourning a lost soul. Water raced through the rushes, who whispered grumpily as they were tossed about. A herd of deer milled around the side of the holy river, in which I was fishing, like a heron waiting for its prey. Stooping low, I held my precious woven basket in the surging water, which tried desperately to snatch it away. The basket was very special because it had been passed down my family for many decades. Absently, I gazed at the village where my family was living. It was surrounded by an orange grove and to the east, the holy river in which I was poised flowed playfully. I snapped back into action as I felt a hard jerk from the basket; a large common carp fought desperately against the current, trying to escape my basket. I hoisted it out of the river, while it flapped wildly in the draining water. As gently as I could, I lifted it out of the basket and onto a hard rock. Picking up a large pebble, I delivered the blow to its head, killing it without suffering. With my back to the river, I didn't notice my precious basket being swiftly stolen away.

As I snaked speedily through the sweeping current, a small object whisked past my face. I stopped abruptly and the current slowed. Peering around, I caught sight of the strange scrap. As I looked closer, I saw it was a meticulously woven basket created from the finest hazel. I sniffed it, my tongue flicking in and out while my wide tailfin held it up to my face. On the far bank, a small girl, only about ten summers old was casting about wildly with a large fish in her hands. I ducked into the water, now invisible as I meandered toward her.

*No!* I thought, staring about fretfully. *Where did it go?* Stomach churning, I dropped the carp and rushed to the water. As I glanced downstream, my heart skipped a beat. My precious basket was streaking toward me, against the current! I pelted to the bank, skidding on the wet clay. Reaching out, I caught my basket by the handle, snatching it up in order to not lose it again. Tying it to the floor with rushes, I collapsed, panting heavily from the stress. Heart slowing, I came to my senses. *How was it flowing upstream?* As I pondered, I did not notice the water rising in front of me. I watched the scant being's shocked face as the basket drifted upriver. It stretched out its arm and snatched the basket away. As the human lay down, I noticed something. *It didn't give me my sacrifice!* Hissing, I rose from the river, my body unfurling gracefully as my tailfin shook with rage.

As she rose out of the water, I shifted backward. Her snake-like body untwined, eyes fixing me with a cold stare. She looked like a serpent but was made out of water and had a wide tailfin. *This must be her.* I realised, *It must be Aila, the Goddess of the River.* As I crawled backwards, Aila advancing, I felt something slimy. Yelping, I spun around. There lay the carp, which I had dropped when I rushed to get my basket. Realisation dawned upon me. *I forgot to give Aila the sacrifice! She wanted to trade the fish for the basket!* Acting fast, I seized it, turning around to face Aila. She stopped in her tracks as I kneeled and held the fish above my head chanting,

*“I bow to thee, Goddess of the Rivers, I offer you this sacrifice,  
My first and largest catch,  
Please accept my offering.”*

There was a deafening silence as nature held its breath, the river’s current almost ceased. Even the wind stopped to listen. She leant forward and took the fish from my hands with her forked tongue. Aila slinked back into the river, holding my gaze as she went. I stood there for a moment, utterly bewildered, when hundreds of carp were washed onto the bank. My jaw dropped as they floundered toward the retreating water. Excitement flooded my body as I realised that I must have pleased Aila. I sprinted to the village to inform the elders...

*“Did you like that one, my child?”*

*“Yes mummy, but what happened to the girl?”*

*“She grew up, holding the memory close to her heart. A decade passed and she found a wonderful man who loved her more than anything in the world. They got married and had a beautiful child and named her after the river goddess, Aila.”*

*“That’s my name mummy!”*

*“I know my child, I know.”*

## Every Night is Movie Night When You're Dead

Ian Rory (Open Category, Second Place)

[Narrated by James Robson and Alex McAuley](#)

Across the fields of Asphodel, where dwell the countless dead, the fathomless multitudes whose brief time on Earth has ended and whom Eternity has taken into her welcoming arms, there are some who seek ways to observe those still living, as if seeking some faint memory of the warm blood that once flowed through their veins, and the hearts that once beat so proudly in their chests. With endless time comes infinite patience, and the shades of the dead have cultivated many ways to let their gazes linger upon the lives of the living.

Honestly, figuring out how to get Netflix down there was a big help.

On a rocky outcrop overlooking the great river Lethe, there sat Achilles. Most beloved of all the Myrmidons, he who stood above all others in glorious deeds and who was the mightiest of all those from that age of heroes. Beside him was Patroclus, a valiant-hearted prince amongst men. Their deeds and deaths in the struggle for the great city of Troy ring out across the ages, a song that has been sung a thousand ways by a thousand bards. All songs change over time in their telling, some more dramatically than others. The two of them sat there together, watching as one of the tellings unfolded before them. Achilles' brow was furrowed, and his expression pensive.

"It's not that I'm not flattered," he began slowly, thoughtfully, "Brad Pitt is very, very hot. No complaints here about him playing me. But this is...not what happened. Like, at all."

"I think Brad's doing his best with what he's been given."

Patroclus put his arm around his lover to reassure him. He knew that, even in death, Achilles could get rather...passionate about a subject once he got started.

"Sure, but what has he been given? Are they sure this is Troy? Are they sure that's the story they wanted to tell? Because I seem to recall it being a bit different from this."

"An artist may alter the details of the thing, so long as the truth of the thing remains." Patroclus philosophised as he idly brushed a lock of hair out of Achilles' face.

"Does the truth remain in this telling?" Achilles pouted, a pout that still melted Patroclus' heart after all this time.

"I was there, beloved. We both were. You and I alike felt the heat of the Trojan sun blaze down upon us while we waded through the slaughtered sons of Ilium. You and I alike made wives into widows and made mothers mourn boys buried before their time. We saw spoils and conquest, gained glory in the bloody churn of war, lived and loved and died for one another."

He paused for a moment, deep in thought, trying to find more words to put to their deeds. “I punched a river that one time.”

“Yes, I saw that.” Patroclus patted his love on the head. “It was very manly.”

They continued to watch the movie, Patroclus’ arms wrapped around his younger paramour, Achilles resting his head against him while letting out the occasional ‘tch!’ sound when a scene irked him. It was a hobby of theirs, seeing all the different ways they and the other kings and heroes of their age had come to have their stories told. Each generation taking something from the myths and making it their own, each one finding some new truth in-

“Okay, but here’s what I don’t get.” Achilles began again, “Where are all the gods?”

“Where’s the streetwise Hercules...” Patroclus sang, grinning, “to fight the rising odds?”

“Babe, you know what I mean. They were there! The gods were all over the place in the war! You couldn’t *move* without a god turning up to start something with you some days!”

“I remember.” Patroclus nodded.

War was the gods’ sport of choice – though he understood that they rush the field far less often these days than when he was alive.

“Remember Diomedes? He wounded Ares AND Aphrodite in the space of about ten minutes! Two gods! If you land some blows on two literal gods, you deserve respect in my book!”

“I remember Diomedes.”

Achilles and Patroclus looked up from the sofa to see from where the third voice had joined the conversation. From the mists, a shade approached: Briseis, dark haired and keen-eyed.

“I don’t remember *you* being quite so baby-faced though, Pat.” she smiled teasingly as she beheld their entertainment.

“I knowww.” Patroclus sighed to himself. “Gods, was I ever that young?”

“Not when I knew you.” Achilles chimed in. “You’ve always been bearded and full-grown, strong and wise and all devilish and handsome.”

“Kind, as well.” Briseis joined them on the sofa, kissing Patroclus’ cheek as they shuffled up to make room for her. “Out of all the kings and heroes I met, I always liked the ones who were the kindest best.”

“Stop it, I’m blushing.” Patroclus readjusted himself so that Achilles could rest comfortably against him while the three of them talked. “How’s the family?”

“Ugh, honestly, the way my father still acts surprised that his knees don’t bother him any more now he’s a shade, you’d think he’d died yesterday.”

From across the protective barrier of his boyfriend, Achilles looked at the ghost of Briseis. Her presence always brought conflicting emotions to him. He killed her father. He killed her brothers. He sacked her city and took in her shackles as a slave, a prize for himself.

But he had loved her, in his own way. His way mostly involved killing – a poor method of courtship. But Achilles' time in Asphodel had given him time to think – never his strong suit, he'd admit, but still. And time enough for him to think, one day, became time enough for them to talk, actually talk, and even for him to listen, and to understand. Since then, she'd sometimes joined him and Patroclus for their movie nights, and had actually recommended quite a few paintings and poems about their era to them. Come to think of it...

“Who was that painter,” he asked Patroclus, “the French one, did that portrait of you a while back?”

“Can you be more specific?”

“You know the one I mean! He did a bunch of classical stuff: Jack? Jack David?”

“*Jacques*, babes. Jacques-Louis David.” Patroclus corrected him.

“Yes, him! He did that one of you sitting on some red drapes. See, now *that* was art. More Troy stuff like that please.”

Now it was Patroclus' turn to pout. “I don't like that one. I'm completely turned away from the viewer, you can't even see my face.”

“You can see everything else though.” Even as a mere shade, the blush on Achilles' face shone pale pink as he envisioned the painting in his head, grinning at his love. “You're all *muscular* and *brooding*.”

“I got a print of it for my room.” Briseis chimed in.

“Wait, really?!?” Achilles eyes lit up. “Where from? Can you get me a copy? We've been looking for something for our living room.”

“No. Absolutely not. *Forbidden*.” But even Patroclus couldn't help but smile as he was teased mercilessly from two sides by the younger pair.

They watched the rest of the movie, interrupted only by Achilles' occasional gripes (“That's not even how he died!” “I know.” “His wife stabbed him!” “I know.”). After it ended, Patroclus told Briseis they were planning to watch another one, and asked if she wanted to stay, but she declined.

“I've got plans with Penny later.” she told them.

Penthesilea, warrior queen, ruler of the Amazons, had long been together with Briseis since the day she crossed the Styx. Achilles found that the two of them complimented each other well. Plus, Penthesilea could do handstand push-ups, which even he had to admit was *crazy* hot and which caused Briseis to get extremely flustered every time Penny busted them out.

Briseis wished them well and went on her way, Patroclus sending his love to her family on the way out.

“So that was *Troy!*” he said after she’d left, clapping his hands together as if in summation.

“That was *something*, I don’t know if it was Troy.” Achilles’ snarked.

Patroclus re-joined him on the sofa, his hand idly playing with the young man’s hair again.

“The story of Achilles.” he went on, wrapping one arm back around his boyfriend’s waist, hugging him close, while the other continued to toy with his hair.

“Best and most loved of the Greeks.”

“And of his cousin,” they both laughed at that one, as Achilles pressed himself ever closer.

“Patroclus. Best and most loved of Achilles.”

Patroclus smiled, and drew Achilles into a kiss, and the two of them forgot to watch a second movie entirely. There would be time later: the one advantage that the dead hold over the living is that they, finally, have enough time.

## Aeschylus and the Black Jewels of Hades

Matilda Parker-Groom (Junior Category, Second Place)

[Narrated by Caroline Lawrence](#)

There was once a man called Aeschylus, who dreamt of being as powerful as the gods. Every day he wished to light up the night, to eat strawberries in winter, to travel faster than the birds. One cold, dark day, as he gazed gloomily at the weather, the goddess Ate appeared to him. "Now listen to me," she hissed. "In the underworld there are treasures that will grant your every wish!" She showed him the way to a dark opening in the earth, where a lonely boat was waiting. "Take this and row yourself across the waters," she told him.

On the far shore, he found himself in a huge, echoing cavern lit dimly by flickering, green torches. Before him stood a table laden with glimmering black stones and a large barrel of black, greasy liquid. At once, Aeschylus rushed forward and stuffed his pockets full of jewels and filled his bottle with the liquid, before making his escape to the mortal world above. With his new treasures he had the power to light up the night, eat strawberries in winter and travel faster than the birds. But soon, his neighbours noticed his powers, and one, dark night another man followed him down to the underworld and also took jewels and liquid for himself.

Soon, many people were stealing the treasures and the gods began to notice and became very, very angry. Notus, the god of the hot, southern wind, increased the Earth's temperatures. Zeus, the sky god, made more terrible storms. Poseidon, the god of the sea, made ocean levels rise. Artemis, the goddess of nature, made animals start to die out. And Hephaestus, the god of fire, made wildfires scorch the land. Aeschylus was horrified! He grovelled before the gods and pleaded with them to make it stop. Eventually, some of the gods felt sorry for him and decided to help, if Aeschylus would do as they said.

First, Apollo the sun god spoke to him. "If you like, you can use my powers, instead of the jewels and the liquid. The sun creates so much energy, that you can use as much as you like, and I will never have any less. In return, you must persuade everyone else to do as I have told you." Aeschylus thanked Apollo greatly and set out to try to do as he had said. Next, Aeolus the wind god offered his help. "You are welcome to use the power of the wind if you want. No matter how much you use, it can never run out. But you must also persuade everyone else to do that too." Aeschylus was very happy and agreed at once.

Finally, the Nereids (the sea-nymph daughters of Nereus, the old man of the sea) came to advise him. “We are known for giving aid to those in distress and you are certainly in need of our help. If you persuade everyone else to do as we tell you, then you can use the power of the waves, for that has no limit.” Aeschylus promised he would do that and began his work the very next day. But however much he pleaded, no-one wanted to stop using the stones or the liquid. He showed them that the power of the sun, wind and waves was just as good, but they were convinced he was just wanting more of the jewels and liquid for himself.

They called him a thief and a liar, and refused to believe that the destruction had anything to do with the jewels and liquid. With time, though, people began to realize that Aeschylus’s new powers seemed to work. Fewer and fewer people used the jewels and liquid. However, humans are not gods and Aeschylus soon became an old man. The gods were worried that when he died, all his work would be forgotten. But not all hope was lost. Aeschylus had a granddaughter called Elpis and she was determined to follow in her grandfather’s footsteps. The gods couldn’t help but doubt this idea.

‘Who will listen to a little girl?’ laughed Zeus. But the ways of man are sometimes even stranger than the ways of the gods and the people did listen and did as Elpis said. Some even marched across the country, blocking the roads, and waving banners until everyone was persuaded. The gods were pleased and gradually began to punish them less. There weren’t as many storms. The sea levels were more stable. Fewer animals died. Wildfires weren’t as common. Years later, when Elpis herself was an old lady, Zeus came to speak to her.

“I am finally ready to forgive your ancestor,” he said. “No- one has stolen the jewels for many years now.”

“And they will never take them again,” Elpis promised.

## The Star's Heart

Pete Ford (Open Category)

[Narrated by Clare Roberts and Chloe Cobbold](#)

“Captain?” What are your orders, Captain?”

Captain Paris opened her eyes. The bridge was silent. Her crew watched her expectantly for her decision, eyes wide with awe and terror. Nobody moved.

Through the viewing screen before them was the splendour of the Achaean Nebula. Its towers of billowing gas and stardust stretched upwards for hundreds of lightyears. Dark clusters of heavy elements formed ramparts in between the towers, protecting the hidden space beyond. It was aqua blue and lava red, violet and vermillion. Some regions proved impenetrable to all their instruments, others were illuminated, the first, brilliant beams of new-born suns. Achaean; the richest, largest nebula in the galaxy, a cosmic fortress for the gods.

She lowered her gaze from the towers, still months of lightspeed travel from them, to the blown-out remains of a ship, drifting dark and alone in its mighty shadow.

“Captain.” Her second-in-command appeared by her side. They feared what was on that ship, feared that the rumours were true. A research ship drifting at the edge of Achaea, she knew what was on it, and she wanted it.

“Everyone out.” She ordered, not shifting her gaze from the vessel. “Out. I need to think.” Slowly, sullenly, her crew left the bridge. Her deputy was last to leave, inserting himself between her and her quarry before he did.

“Think very carefully about what you do next, Captain.” He said, then followed the crew from the bridge.

Alone, she descended the steps to the gigantic viewing screen. It occupied the entire wall of the bridge, with her and her crew facing towards it from behind their control panels. Her heart pounded and tentatively she raised a hand to the screen, to pressing on the tiny image of the ship. Her hand was tiny and pale against the vastness of the screen, alone amidst the nursery of stars.

Except, on *Trojan*, she was never truly alone.

“Hera. Magnify the ship. Scan for entry points to the cargo bay.”

<Yes, captain>

As it always did, the ship's AI responded instantly. In a nauseating blur, the image sped towards the stranded wreckage. In an instant it was the entire screen, the rising towers of the nebula now merely a background haze. The ship had taken considerable damage, its entire starboard side had been ripped open and it now rotated in slow agony. Strips of the hull, blasted free by the explosion, circled it in silence, longing to be re-joined with the ship. Paris felt her blood chill as she saw white figures cartwheel back and forth against the hull.

“Well?” She snapped from her trance and marched back up the steps to her vantage point overlooking the empty bridge.

<Catastrophic damage, Captain. Complete failure of life support systems. No signs of life aboard>

“And the cargo bay?”

<Outer hull compromised. But protected from the main blast. Contents appear unharmed>

Her heart leapt and then fell to her stomach. Euphoria and dread churned within her.

<Captain?>

Hera’s voice had been programmed to be that of a middle-aged female of indistinct European origin. Nobody knew exactly the place or time the accent had come from, but it did not seem to matter, her presence, all-knowing and all-comforting was all that the Captain and crew required.

“Are you sure it is there?”

<As sure as you are, Captain Paris>

Her former ship, Eris, had promised her this prize. As they circled a neutron star, Eris malfunctioned, momentarily dragging them closer to the star’s dense core. As the crew raced to bypass the spluttering AI, she had heard it speak to her, that she, Captain Paris would claim the fairest object in the galaxy. Since then, she had felt its draw speak to her across entire systems, the call of *Helenium*; The Star’s Heart.

<The crew won’t like it. They will try and stop you. Especially Hector>

“He does not understand.” She snapped. “None of them do. It was promised to me, and me alone.” She pressed a button on her control console, and the doors clamped shut behind her. Immediately, the intercom hissed.

“Captain.” It was Hector. “Captain, the doors have locked. What is going on?” The crackle of the intercom combined with the disquiet of her crew, now locked outside.

“The Star’s Heart.” She breathed.

“Shit.” She heard him say, before she silenced the intercom.

“Hera.”

<Yes, Captain> There was a small triumphalism in Hera’s voice at Hector’s humiliation.

“Take us in.”

The fusion drive hummed and they slid forward. Paris clutched the edge of the control panel until her knuckles went white. Hera was a steady pilot, not like some of the other AI she had flown with, and carefully she picked their way through the debris towards the carcass of the ship. Behind her, the crew hammered at the door.

Hera guided the ship to the cargo bay, the hull was pockmarked with damage from the explosion.

<Captain Paris> Neither question, nor command.

“Do it.”

A mechanical claw emerged from the bottom of the screen and stretched out like an elongated limb towards the hull. With finger-like pincers it gripped the upturned metal of one of the pockmarks and peeled it back like the skin of a fruit. Torn free from the ship, the claw released it and it floated away. The claw reached again, this time disappearing from Paris’ view into the dark of the cargo hold. The hammering on the door behind her grew louder.

“Hera.” Paris said, “Do you have it?”

<Almost>

The hammering turned into a sulphurous, fizzing hum. Someone had retrieved a laser cutter from the armoury and had started to slice into the door. The metal glowed yellow, then orange, then red. Paris watched it dispassionately; it was a trivial, mortal concern, she was now dealing with the workings of gods.

<I have it>

Her claw began to retract and slowly came into view. It clutched a dark, oblong box, about the size of an Earth automobile. From a distance it looked unremarkable, but as the claw brought it closer to the ship, Paris’ eyes began to fill with tears. Its dark sides shimmered like water on rapids; silver to white to blue to silver. It formed contorted within the claw’s grasp, it grew and shrunk, extended and retracted, all in the blink of an eye. For a moment it lost its hard edges altogether, extending out into a perfectly smooth shape, like that of a silver teardrop. Even the thick casing of lead struggled to contain its power and beauty. *Helenium*, the most beautiful substance in the known universe. It was the smallest drop of dark matter, forced into the material universe by splitting open space-time and capturing it in the very heart of the Achaean Nebula. It was, Paris thought, tears rolling down her pale cheeks, something divine.

“I must have it, Hera.” She said. “Do you hear me?”

<Yes, Captain>

The claw was withdrawn and the cargo doors of the Trojan shut behind it. The Heart of the Star was aboard.

“Set a course for Priam.” Paris said, and instantly the fusion drive powered up once more.

<To the Priam ship, Trojan. This is the Agamemnon>

The AI of the ruined ship burst through comms lines all over the ship. Behind her, the laser cutter fell silent.

<You have stolen from me. You have 10 seconds to agree to return what you have taken or you will be destroyed>

Trojan's sirens began to scream. Behind her, the laser cutter started up within renewed urgency.

"Hera. You said there was nothing onboard." For once, there was no answer. Hera was silent, marvelling at what now lay in the cargo hold.

<5...4...>

Behind her, the door crashed open. She heard Hector's shouts as he scrambled through and onto the bridge. He was screaming at her to stop

<3...2...>

Paris closed her eyes, she could feel the Star's Heart, its warming, transcendent beauty fill every corner of the ship, every corner of her soul. She would never surrender it, not even for the lives of her crew.

<...1>

A single pulse of brilliant white light consumed the viewing screen. In an instant, Paris and her crew were deleted from the universe and Agamemnon took its vengeance from beyond the grave.

The Trojan floated through space, drawn into the heart of Achaean. Memory could be a fickle thing, Hera thought, especially for an AI. She had a memory from an eon ago, a memory reconstructed and retold so that she was no longer sure what was true and what was not. She was then as she was now, all-seeing and all-powerful. Then as now, the Star's Heart, its beauty unmatched had seduced and then betrayed. Then as now, Trojan was destroyed. She did not know what it meant, but it did not seem important. She gave a laugh, a little giggle that would echo through the galaxy for a thousand years, and allowed the nebula to draw her in.

## Manatimer and The Great Red Spot of Jupiter

Eva McTurk (Junior Category, Commended)

[Narrated by Arlene Holmes-Henderson](#)

Not many people know the story of the goddess Manatimer and her younger brother, the flying god, Kinculos who lived in ancient Oea. Manatimer loved to race Kinculos and it is with one of these races that our story begins.

Three thousand years ago, Manatimer and Kinculos were enjoying a race through the forest to the kakos-berry patch. Manatimer was running as fast as she could and Kinculos was flying just above her head – it looked like it was going to be a tie again. All seemed well in the forest. The trees were calmly swaying in the wind, the stream was gently bubbling along and the creatures that were grazing looked up as Manatimer and Kinculos sped past.

They heard it before they saw it. It was a loud, rumbling sound that rattled their bones. They came to a sudden stop, looked up and barely dived out of the way before a giant meteor hit the forest floor. It was just where they had been racing moments before. Manatimer and Kinculos were blown off their feet with the force of the shock wave.

The air was filled with smoke. Manatimer covered her face with her tunic and frantically looked around for any sign of Kinculos. He was lying on the forest floor, covered in dust and dirt. She crawled over to him, shook him back into consciousness and wrapped her scarf around his face to protect him. Fortunately uninjured, they stood, looked around and tried to find a way out of the smoke.

Crack! The meteor split and through the smoke, they saw a small, shivering, baby Peagle (healing panda eagle, kind and strong). It was curled up in a ball. Manatimer picked it up and it looked up at her, through big, scared eyes. What Manatimer and Kinculos didn't know at this point was that Sarlix, the god of death had been awoken by the aftershock of the meteor hitting Oea.

Sarlix realised that the Peagle was back! He had banished the Peagle many years earlier because, despite the Peagle having healing powers, it had failed to cure his last remaining family member of a deadly curse. In fury, Sarlix had encased the Peagle in a rock and with all his strength, had hurled it towards the sun in the hope of 'explodinating' the Peagle. Now that the Peagle had returned, Sarlix was filled with a rage that consumed him.

Having almost been crushed, Manatimer and Kinculos headed towards the safety of their home, trying to think of a name for the Peagle. As they watched it curling around in Manatimer's satchel, Manatimer exclaimed "I've got it! I'll call her Philios."

Having been confined to the meteor for so long, Philios suddenly leapt from Manatimer's arms. She spread her wings and flew into the trees, she had forgotten how good it felt to fly. All of a sudden, the forest started turning black. It took the form of the biggest Leokinas (lion, viper, evil) that Manatimer had ever seen. It grabbed Philios in its cavernous jaws and just as the Leokinas disappeared into the undergrowth, Manatimer came to her senses, grabbed Kinculos and dived onto the Leokinas' back, pulling Kinculos with her.

Manatimer awoke in total darkness. Relieved, she laid her hands on Philios, picked her up and found that she was thankfully unharmed. Manatimer felt around for something, anything. She found some sticks which she lit with her breath, an ever-lasting flame erupted into life. Looking around the now dimly lit cave, Manatimer saw Kinculos in a fierce battle with the Leokinas.

Manatimer heard a sound, and saw Sarlix. She recognised him from the stories that their father used to tell them. He was staring unblinkingly at the Leokinas. Manatimer realised instantly that Sarlix was controlling the Leokinas. She ran at Sarlix, leapt and performed the Liupinoosos, the ancient art of stopping and removing all dark magic. The Leokinas disappeared and Sarlix was weakened.

Kinculos flew over to Manatimer and they started to encircle Sarlix. Manatimer ran with Kinculos flying fast above her head. They got faster and faster until Sarlix was just a blur, encased in a cyclonic movement of air. Manatimer threw the torch with the ever-lasting flame at Sarlix. With a cry, the flames grew bigger, the cyclone spun faster and Sarlix was propelled through the roof of the cave out into the skies of Oea. Sarlix ended his journey still spinning on the planet, Jupiter. Today, he is no longer known as Sarlix but as the Great Red Spot, an eternal storm, in the atmosphere of Jupiter.

Manatimer and Kinculos escaped through the hole in the cave created by Sarlix and rode Philios home through the skies of Oea.

## The Song of Aenea

Anne Elicaño-Shields (Open Category)

[Narrated by Gráinne Cassidy](#)

The heavens are collapsing. The dark indigo sky that blankets our planet, a Troy deep in slumber, is veined with fiery fissures and cracks. My heart gallops roughshod over what remains of my grit. What will the Achaeans be unleashing over our heads – a hail of laser fire, radioactive waste, blood rain?

The enemy star vessels are so close that the wind picks up the smell of iron from their metallic underbellies. And that's how I know. The once invincible force field that has been protecting our world for three hundred years is faltering. The Achaean forces are bearing down with the full force of their might.

How could this happen? The force field is powered by Neptune and Troy's three suns. It's the reason why no foreign force, no alien invasion, has ever succeeded in subduing us. My husband, Creus, will have the answers. That is, if he turns up. When he does, he'll be met by an assembly line of worry: me, our son, and my father waiting beside our star vessel.

Father speaks in slurred singsong, his rheumy eyes wide and wild. He invokes a muse and natters on about the wrath of some demigod. The old man makes it sound like a fairytale but there's nothing epic or heroic about the wretched chain of events that got us here. This had everything to do with taxes and trade, imperialist Achaean warlords, and a sex scandal involving the feckless elite. It had bugger all to do with ordinary Trojans, people like us. For once, I'm thankful for the alcoholic haze that's cushioning my father from reality. I'm thankful that Ascan, whose inky curls tumble over his sling and onto my collarbone, is too young to be captivated by his grandfather's tale.

I whisper into my son's ear, precious and curled like a tiny seashell, as the clouds writhe with artificial thunderclaps. The words that cascade from my mouth don't form an epic. Rather, a lullaby. A story about how his parents fell in love.

"Once upon a time", I say, "the King's bastard, a young boy, was given to caretakers and exiled to a remote farmland. His hair was the colour of rocket fuel and he was, to me, like a fallen comet from a much brighter corner of the universe. He mucked in the mud, toiled under the glare of three suns, and all living things thrived under his care. His name was Creus and he was my best friend."

“Your mother was an urchin who scavenged for scrap alloys to survive. Creus called me a stinging hummingbird. Small. Scrappy. Hungry.” Ascan’s cherubic cheeks wobble as if he understands.

I skip over what happens next because it’s not fit for my baby’s cowrie ears. There were too many violent details in this galactic war that forced a girl child to grow up fast. I was only fifteen when the Achaean hegemony barricaded the space corridors and tried to starve our planet into submission. While scavenging, I strayed into a smugglers’ den where they sussed out my small, bony body and decided I was better suited to flying Cometfires than luring men. A Cometfire is the size of those star crop duster jets that farmers like Creus use for irrigation. It was inside my Cometfire where I truly transformed into a stinging hummingbird.

Fast, nimble, and deadly, I dodged Aegian and Trojan star vessels alike. I plotted routes through wormholes, those shortcuts in space and time, cruising largely unnoticed. I flew past the barricade three, four times a week to transport bales of wheat to Azim, Hiraë, and other neutral planets. I smuggled everything from explosives to chocolate from the Samona galaxy into Troy. At the end of each mission, I’d find Creus and tell him how dangerous and thrilling my adventures were, exaggerating without shame. One evening, over a stolen bottle of beer, he told me he was being summoned back to the palace. When Creus left, the aftertaste of his kiss lingered in my mouth along with dregs of caramel malt. I’ve always been the independent type but no amount of glorious adventure was enough to fill his absence. Creus became the missing star in the constellation of my heart.

“I didn’t see him for five years.”

My voice trails off and joins the warm stream of our breaths in the cold night. This part of the story is where my lullaby and Father’s tale converge. Hector and the entire pantheon of Troy’s princes were trotted out to fight on the frontlines of space. Their daring, their shining exploits were immortalised in songs. News about the enemy side also came in trickles. The domestic dramas between Achaean war chiefs, stories of ego and vanities, would have been entertaining had they not contributed to the Trojan body count. When it came to Creus there was only the lonely silence of deep space.

Creus finally found me in a back alley, where I was attempting to sell a botched shipment of endangered iguanas on the black market. Although shrouded in a cloak, my voice gave me away. Light and deft as a butterfly knife, he said, and just as cutting. Creus took the iguanas and I came along too.

Considered too lowborn to fight in the heavens, the King had tasked Creus with building a star vessel that would transport people and specimens unique to Troy's ecosystem to a new planet. The idea of the force shield failing was so preposterous that the King treated "Plan Z" as an afterthought rather than a viable exit strategy.

Creus and I worked together, designing a new star vessel that resembled a blue whale. Ilium II was enormous but sleek, nimble yet mighty, built to harbour human, animal, and plant life in her belly. Sometimes, in between talk of fuselages and wormholes, we also dreamed of a new Troy. Not just the nuts and bolts of settling into a different world, but our aspirations too. Together, we dreamed of a planet where bastards are considered equal to all, where urchins wouldn't have to scavenge to eat. It wouldn't only be a peaceful planet, but a kinder one too. A suitable cradle for our child.

The time for stories and lullabies is over. I'm standing by the shadow of Ilium II and can hear her engines hum as she awaits pilot and commander. I scuff my right boot because Creus is half an hour late. Ilium II was supposed to have taken off five minutes ago but I'm digging my heels into the ground, feeling invisible roots claw into the soil, just as Father says: the sky is about to fall.

There's a loud thud.

The hooves of a pegasus are as quiet as Death's footsteps so it's the sound of a sack falling off its back that startles me. I realise that it's a cloak unfurling, my cloak, unravelling in the muddy field to reveal Creus. He's alive but barely, and the scent of scorched flesh crawls inside me, holding my lungs in a cruel grip.

"Whatever hasn't been killed or burned in Troy is inside Ilium II. Lead them into Latium, my love. Rebuild our world."

Creus' lips are barely moving but his voice commands. A dying prince's last wish. "Promise me, Aenea."

I nod fervently but, when he closes his eyes, I'm ready to renege everything. I prepare to fling myself on top of my husband's body, on the funeral pyre that is Troy. Ascan opens his eyes and wails, jolting me back to what needs to be done. My baby's cry is the supernova boom that clears the dead stars and illuminates the nebulas of my universe.

I drape Father's arm across my shoulders and use my right hand to hold Ascan tighter. Together, we enter Ilium II.

## The Mountain Is Angry

Zoe Walters (Senior Category)

[Narrated by Jasmine Elmer](#)

### 23 August

The girl had come from the mountain, they said. She had eyes grey like embers, hair red like the dark flames of the Underworld. Some said she was a child of the Gods.

Her name was Echo, and Arete had seen her once, in the forum. She had flipped a coin and caught it with two fingers before striding out of the city with her skin glowing like gold in the sunset.

Arete stood in the street in front of her father's villa, looking out across the sea. The sun paved a rippling silvery road across the water. A rumble shook the ground slightly, and she caught her foot on a loose rock and slipped, grazing her palm on the street. She looked up at the huge foreboding shape of Mount Vesuvius, with a small cloud dancing around the peak. *mons iratus*, the townspeople called it.

"Do you need help?" said a voice from above her.

She looked up to see the girl from the mountain looking down at her with soft grey eyes.

"Thank you." The girl pulled her to her feet and looked up to the mountain, a faraway look in her eyes.

A look of wisdom beyond her years.

"The mountain is angry." she said sombrely. "Ash will flow through the city like water."

She looked at the girl in concern. "Do you believe the gods are angry with us?"

"No." The girl looked back at her. "My name is Echo."

"Like Echo who fell in love with Narcissus?"

"Just like that. I have already faded into merely a voice. My words are all that hold the wisdom of knowledge forbidden to the people here. But none of them will listen to me even when I speak the truth."

"Why don't you think so? Most people do."

"The gods are not angry. The mountain is angry."

Arete looked at the girl in apprehension. "We must ask the gods' forgiveness." She said, turning to go back into her villa.

"The gods will not save you!" she called after her, but Arete ignored it.

Once she was sure the girl – Echo – was gone, she felt safe in leaving the house again. She stepped into the bustling, crowded atmosphere of the forum, and immediately spotted Echo again.

She was gesturing wildly to the mountain, but her eyes looked so calm – no, that wasn't right. She looked *defeated*.

She dodged towards a young man selling spices and pulled out her coin purse. "I'd like that one, this one, and the red one."

As the man shook the spices into bottles and she hunted for the right coins, he looked up at her. "Have you felt the anger of the gods in recent days?"

She nodded solemnly. "I fear something terrible may happen."

The man gestured to Echo. "You're not the only one with that opinion."

She sighed. "Mine may be a little less extreme than hers is."

"Has she spoken to you then, too?"

"She has. Rivers of ash." Arete shuddered. "It's horrible. Perhaps we will make a sacrifice to appease the gods."

"I'm afraid we may be too far gone for that to make a difference. The gods are not easily swayed by mortal voices."

She took the spice and dropped it into her bag, handing over her coin purse. She could see Echo leaving the forum to walk up the mountain, her red hair shimmering in the sun as if she really wasn't of this world and was some creature of those beneath.

Why would she walk up the mountain if she thought it was angry? Arete jogged slightly to catch up to her. "Where are you going?"

"Up the mountain."

"But... the rivers of ash? Aren't you going to leave before that happens?"

"I am."

She paused, trying to shake off the ominous feeling that the Gods were watching her very, *very* closely.

"When is it going to happen?"

"Soon." she replied. "But not yet."

They walked up the mountain in silence.

A tremor shook the ground and Arete stumbled backwards, and she would've slipped and gone skidding down the slopes if Echo hadn't grabbed her arm and pulled her back onto solid ground.

Breathless, she dusted the dirt off her skirts and took a step back from the other girl. "Thank you."

"It wasn't any trouble."

“You might have just saved my life, you know.”

“It’s not as if you’re someone who *matters*, is it?”

Arete felt her temper flaming up. “Sometimes you seem like a genuinely good person, trying to warn everyone out of truly wanting them to live. And other times you seem like a condescending little-” She took a deep breath. “A condescending person who thinks she’s better than all us worthless mortals because she came from the mountain.”

The girl didn’t look at her, instead gazing out up the mountain stoically.

“Are you even going to *answer*?”

“You have a lot of nerve talking to me like that. Most of the townsfolk are too afraid to even tell me to leave.” She couldn’t tell if the other girl’s voice was approving, amused or angry. Maybe all three.

Arete sighed angrily before turning to walk back down the mountain. Echo’s fingers grazed her hand as if to stop her, but then neither of them said anything as she descended down the slope.

That night, she dreamed of rivers of ash, rivers of blood, and the girl from the mountain standing amidst all of it, red hair like fire.

## **24 August**

It was around noon when the people first started shouting in the streets.

She had been trying to forget about the look on the girl’s face when she talked about the rivers of ash, but she couldn’t. And then with a gentle boom, a huge dark cloud began to appear over the mountain, as if the Underworld itself was breaking free. She half expected to see Hades himself rise from the ashes.

The people were running around, trying to collect their things, to run, but not Arete. She was looking for Echo. The only person who had any chance of knowing what was happening.

A tremor shook the ground as the mountain spat more smoke. There were citizens crouched on the streets, praying, children and adults alike. *Mons iratus, calm your fury, mons iratus.*

She had to focus.

She dashed through street after street, coughing hard. The air didn’t taste like usual. Eventually she found the girl, sitting on top of a villa, her legs hanging off the edge of the roof.

“*Echo!*” she screamed.

She looked surprised to be spoken to, but climbed down on seeing Arete.

“What- what’s happening?” she said, stumbling over the words.

“The mountain is bringing fire and ash into the world. More than there should ever be.”

“Why are you still h-” She was cut off by a coughing fit. “Can’t you stop this?”

“I’m not a God.”

“You can’t do anything? But- but the Gods put you here for a *reason*. You have to have some sense of purpose. You’re a hero!”

“Heroes save everyone, not just themselves.”

“Even one person is-” Another coughing fit. “Worth saving.”

The mountain gave a great rumble and fiery ash began to run down the slopes towards the town. People were piling into full ships as smoke and flames rose above the town.

“Fine. One person worth saving, then that person’s you.” Echo grabbed her hand and pulled her towards the sea.

“Wait! Look, there’s a child there!”

“You can’t save everyone, Arete!” she yelled. “You’ll kill yourself!”

“I have to *try*,” she said, and dragged her hand away to run back towards the mountain.

Echo swore under her breath but followed.

When she finally caught up with her, she found her crouched on the ground, coughing, the body of a dead child next to her.

“I tried,” she began, but her voice broke. “I tried but I couldn’t save her.”

“I know.”

“We’re going to die, aren’t we?”

She waited a moment before answering. “Yes.”

“Why did you come back? You’re going to die too now-”

“You came back to save her. I came back to save you.”

“But we couldn’t save anyone. I failed.”

Echo bent down to sit on the ground, wrapping her arms around her. “I know. Trying was the heroic thing. I wouldn’t have.”

“You came too. You came to save me.” She coughed violently once more as the stream of ash rushed closer. Her eyes were full of fear.

“Don’t look.” Echo told her, turning her face away. “Don’t look.” She stared defiantly up at the smoke as it rushed closer, as if she were staring into the face of the Gods who allowed this to happen. Just before it washed over them, she closed her eyes.

The ash rushed up and then they were gone.

And in the empty plains of the Underworld, two girls held each other in a sphere of darkness.

## The River

Holly Smith (Open Category, Third Place)

[Narrated by Michael Scott](#)

The next thing I remember is a shrill piercing ringing in my ear.

Blinking, wincing at brightness.

Why is my back so cold? I try to lift my left arm to shade myself from the glare but only pain shoots through my arm I hiss sharply intake breath blood in my mouth it moves into my throat I'm choking spluttering writhing digging my heels and fists into the water and mud beneath me

the water and mud beneath me –

I am on the riverbank.

Everything smells of muck and manure, earthy and wet, but there's rust in there too. I crane to see the bank and, sharp as the sword that caused it, I feel the wound in my collar and across my shoulder. The cut that should have ended my life. My head and arms and legs ache pulse my head sinks back into the mud can I move my arm I think my ankle might be broken

Broken by that savage, Achilles. I begged him for my life. Pitiful. Why beg an unstoppable force, a furious horse foaming at the mouth as he champs at the bit?

But maybe the gods heard.

Another chance at life. By Apollo.

As quickly as my warm gratitude rises it is dispelled by keener, crueller, louder panic. Where is he? I can hear him now, and another thundering voice I don't recognise. Who is that? What is going on? If he sees me alive, he will hunt me like a boar and skewer his spear into my side as I writhe and groan. My brow crumples. Will anyone hear me die? How far am I from Troy? I twist my neck towards the sound, but the pain is excruciating, and I clamp my eyes shut and stretch my mouth wide into a scream, but the noise is lost. Shallow breaths. As the pain passes, I try to move by placing weight onto my left arm instead.

I can't turn far, but it is enough to see the beast that I fear. Achilles is a way off, he is flashing his spear and leaping the waves of the river as another warrior defends his own. Is it the strain on my muscles or the sight of the man that makes my arm quiver? In the distance I can see the walls of Troy.

I'm holding my breath in so tight my chest aches. Safety is close. I am so close to home, the citadel that can never be breached, if I can just make it back –

Who is the other warrior, will he help me? I turn back and squint into the battle. A towering defiant defender, flowing robes and beard, is bellowing, violently pitching great floods of water against the shoulders of Achilles, ripping the tides out from under his feet and pushing the water back against his knees so he can barely stand. It can't be a warrior – no human could create such unbroken streams of attack. But Achilles is relentless.

Panic. Panic. My shield, my helmet, my spear, where are they? I slowly spread my fingers through the water beside me, but instead of metal and wood there is something soft beside me. I recoil instantly in fear.

Who is lying next to me which brother whose son I can't bear to look, I can't bear it, my eyes plead to the sun as I reach out tentatively for what has brushed against my hand. A short gasp and slow low whimper escape my lips as my cold hand slips against another. Tears stream delicate ravines through the mud on my face as I turn to look into the open eyes of my friend.

Asteropaeus. Ares give me strength, fix your keen glare fiercely upon my fate and give me strength, I need to know that I am strong enough to dispel this bleak terror from my mind. My eyes sting. "Asteropaeus." A question or a whimper? "It's me, it's Lycaon, come now we must get back," I speak softly and try to shake him, but I already know, "Asteropaeus look at me, we must get back, we have to get away."

Metal rattles against metal and leather.

"Stop," I hiss, "please," the crack in my voice is the sound of a dam breaking, and tears are stinging my eyes. His armour is covered in blood and mud, I can't see his wounds for the dirt and gore, but we're lying in the earth and water together and maybe that's where he was meant to end, back in the river that's in his blood, grandson of a river god.

His open eyes are glaring into the sun.

I try to stretch my good arm to close them, but I can't. The effort is exhausting and frustrating and painful. Why try? Achilles will find me. Why did his sword not find its mark in my heart? I didn't die fighting Achilles like a hero – I grovelled. I begged for a few more moments alive after fearing his cruelty for nine years. I've known nothing but fear for nine years. I don't want to be remembered like this. I'm terrified.

I look up at the broad heavens and salt tears run into the river water as I imagine myself lying by the riverbank without a proper burial, food for dogs and birds. Without a burial, how can I cross the Styx?

Then – I don't know why – I take hold of Asteropaeus' hand.

I need to get back to Troy, if only so that I can return with coins for his eyes.

The water is lapping further up my body now; the fight is moving.

Achilles is screaming to the sky – “Zeus! Father! How has no god brought himself to pity and preserve me from this River!” – and the river starts to rise across the plain. The glints and gleams of the spear catching the sunlight feel like new wounds across my body and I flinch each time I catch movement in the corner of my eye.

I feel Asteropaeus’ body begin to lift. The water is steadily rising. A flash of lightening splits the trunk of the tallest sycamore –

This is my chance.

The rising water will make moving easier. It’ll lift my body and I can move towards the city. I need to turn myself over again.

Bile rises in my throat and I gag viciously as I slowly flip and drag my floating body through the water with my right forearm pushing against the mud. It’s not a river at this point, it’s the graveyard of my friends. I can’t stop retching. I try not to look around me as every glance away from the city walls leads my sight into the eyes, the bodies, the floating hands and legs of my friends. Mnesus and Thrasius and Thersilochus and Aenius and Mydon and Astypylus and Ophelestes. Only determination will get me through this, Ares, hear me, I will come back for them, the flames of their pyres will be seen for hundreds of miles and fill our enemies’ hearts with fear

everything is so blurry. There is so much blood in the water. I can’t tell what’s mine. There is so much blood. I’m going to be sick. My chest hurts. My foot hurts. Is my body dead already and I’m dragging my corpse home?

High above the high walls, the dazzling sun appears to burn brighter. There is one cloud in the middle of the sky. I can only breathe when I look towards Troy, the only thing bringing me hope.

The cloud is growing across the sun, dimming it gradually like an eclipse, and my eyes don’t wince so much from the glare. Its shadow is growing, moving closer and there is a dark shape in the centre. It’s morphing – is that the form of man? As the cloud comes faster towards me the joy that floods me suddenly swells and surges and lifts me

I am saved

“Aphrodite,” I whisper, “Apollo, Ares, save me.” I close my eyes towards the sun and let my body relax into the water. “Take me home.” Would I feel a warm touch on my shoulder? Would it be a bird that lifts me over the walls of Troy? Should I look into the face of an immortal god?

Curiosity fuels my heart; I open my eyes so slightly. All that is between me and Troy – home and safety and strength – is the murky cloud, blocking the ferocity of the sun. And in the shadow stands a man, a dark glare covers his eyes, and I can't make out his features beyond a deep brown beard, but I know his gaze does not fall on me. His weight is heavily loaded on one side, and on the other side he carries a smith's hammer. My gut wrenches. He raises the hammer before him

and flames erupt across the water.

## 2: Myths

Echo? Echo? Echo?

Emily Nicholson (Junior Category, Commended)

[Narrated by Sharon Marshall](#)

Dear Diary,

Today started off just like a normal day. I was playing with my friends in the stream beside the woods, when Zeus appeared. He had told me that I am the prettiest of all the nymphs. It's so amazing! I mean, the King of the Gods, and he likes ME!!!

Anyway, Zeus and I were chatting in the woods, when Hera appeared, in her chariot pulled by peacocks. This was not good, seeing as Hera is Zeus's wife, and she hates him having other girlfriends. I remembered the stories of Semele, Io, and Alcmena, among others (all these women were girlfriends of Zeus, who suffered thanks to Hera) and did not want that kind of thing to happen to me.

Hera was by the stream, just through the trees. She would have spotted us, had it not been for Echo, my sister, who (literally) saved my life! She popped her head out from behind a bush, right beside Hera, and started to distract her. When Hera asked if Zeus was nearby, Echo told her that he wasn't here and was in Thespieae today. Hera looked so embarrassed being caught out looking for her husband and disappeared.

Echo skipped happily off into the forest, and Zeus left me for today. He said we should wait before meeting again, so Hera wouldn't catch us. I think he's right. I would not like to face Hera's rage!

I can never thank Echo enough. I sped off to find her and let her know how grateful I was. We both laughed and ran off to play with the other nymphs.

Dear Diary,

Echo is missing! It has been two days now since Hera came to look for Zeus, and this morning she had vanished. She is probably mooning after Narcissus, but what if Hera has found her? I can't bear to think what would happen to Echo if she was discovered to be lying to the Queen of the Gods!

Oh – who is Narcissus, you ask? He is the most handsome youth in all the land, probably in the whole world too. Many people have fallen in love with him, but have all been rejected. Echo has no chance of Narcissus falling in love with her, though she is very pretty. Oh, I do hope that Echo has stayed out of Hera’s way. What would my life be like without my sister?

Dear Diary,

Echo has come back! However, she is acting very strangely. Our conversation went something like this:

Me: “Where have you been?”

Echo: “Where have you been?”

Me: “What do you mean? I’ve been right here!”

Echo: “I’ve been right here!”

Me: “No you’ve not! I’ve looked for you all morning!”

Echo: “All morning?”

Me: “Yes, all morning! Were you with Narcissus?”

Echo: “Were you with Narcissus?”

Me: “No! I don’t even like him!”

Echo: “I don’t even like him!”

Me: “What’s happened to you?”

Echo: “What’s happened to you?”

Me: “Nothing! Wait a second, did you see Hera?”

Echo: “Did you see Hera?”

Me: “No, that’s why I’m asking you!”

Echo: “I’m asking you!”

I was suddenly struck with an awful thought. Was Hera responsible for this?

“Has Hera done this?” I asked.

“Hera done this.” Echo confirmed.

I felt sick. So, Hera had cursed my dear sister Echo to forever repeat the last part of what people said! I had thought Hera was unkind, but this was downright evil. Echo loved to talk; this would be torture for her. Also, it was not for herself that Echo lied, it was for me, so I would not be hurt by Hera. This is so unfair.

Dear Diary,

It has been half a year since Hera cursed Echo. She has been ridiculed and teased by everybody (not me, though), just because she can't speak, and can only repeat things. To make matters worse, Narcissus fell in love with his own face, and killed himself a few weeks ago, because his true love was only a reflection. Echo has lost nearly everybody, except me. I would never make fun of my sister.

But I seem to be losing Echo. She has been spending a lot of time in the temple of Aphrodite, her favourite goddess, and seems to be turning into a ghost. I put my hand through her by accident this morning. Apparently, she prayed to Aphrodite, asking to be freed from the curse. Aphrodite could not lift the curse, but took pity on Echo and removed her from her body, meaning that only her voice remained. When I went to the temple of Aphrodite and called for Echo, I could only hear her voice, repeating me. Oh, Echo! My darling sister Echo!

## Oedipus Again

Caelan Landers (Senior Category)

[Narrated by James Renshaw](#)

### Oedipus Again

The borrowed sword fell to the floor, faltering the cold hush of death. The last traveller stumbled in the distance, and once more, clawing through sandy odours and broiling heat, retired to a smudge on the horizon. The longest day of the year, Oedipus thought, watching the peculiar man fade out of sight. His lungs heaved in the dry air – back towards the sun – his throat burned with prophecy.

It was not unusual for one like Oedipus to find himself prone to fits of snobbish hostility. Being raised in Corinth, the young prince delighted in humbling friends and philosophers alike; reaffirming – as he liked to phrase it – an Athena-esque intellect. And yet, until this day, he had never killed. It was a queer sensation. His hands swung for him, melded to the blade, they were not his. *Ours*.

Not sure as to why, he remained fixed for a while, his body searing in the feverish heat. Maybe he awaited some punishment; some God to set him ablaze. The sounds of long dead bodies moaning, and horses pleading blended into the same words that had tormented his mind for some time now. He wanted the punishment. *But it was not time*. So, he walked on, past hollow gazes from dying eyes, resolved, at last, to continue his journey away from that forsaken place.

Extricating the horses from their chains and salvaging any water he could from within the chariot, he regarded his victims one last time. The eldest – a man of fifty perhaps – watched him closely; and Oedipus could not help but stare back. The one who had provoked the altercation now seemed to him inexplicably close. A distant feeling of intimacy, like one formed in mutual bereavement, washed over him. Fool, he thought, breaking away from his gaze and, at last, advancing towards the hilt of the three-tailed crossroad.

He mused – as was becoming a habit for him – for a while on the journey ahead. Deeming it unwise to follow the surviving traveller he was left with two options. *One fate*. And retrieving one of his last coins from his satchel, he decided a coin toss would suffice. “Owl side up,” he affirmed aloud. “I’ll go left.”

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The road to Daulis was a long one – too bare in night, too fierce in day. Time passed in riddles and thought; words blending in the mist of sand above. It was not long before the leather from his sandals had lost their grip to the dust below, and his feet, constantly shifting, paled into a mess of slits and ash. It must not be long now, not too long, he decided, unaware of what distance he left behind – or that awaited him.

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Two days hence, Oedipus arrived in Daulis. A divine exhibition of Greece. The town swelled high into the azure, crystal columns dancing with the clouds, and songs of nightingales lulling the tumult of cognition. And there stood Oedipus – the mountain of the world past him; the voices of Moirai tempered by the river’s breath. He stepped through Elysium’s soaring gates and *followed the path*. It led to a palace just as golden as the rest of the province – a Daedalic contraption – Oedipus determined to venture within. An introduction would suffice, he smiled, beaming with a vanity only granted to nobility.

Within, Oedipus was quickly presented to the resident King, Tereus. An ageing man, the King sat aloof on a remarkable throne. His face had already begun to wilt under the folds of time, and yet, Oedipus could feel an enormous strength within the black pretences he stared through. A forgotten warrior, he thought, a bear chained to an ebbing frame.

“My gracious Lord,” Oedipus bowed. “King of Thrace. I am Oedipus of Corinth, son of the virtuous King Polybus. I have travelled through the depths of Tartarus to find myself here, and I now humbly beseech your grace in granting me a place of residence during my stay here.”

“Polybus huh?” his voice cracked through the hall, deep and ringing, actualising the history Oedipus had presumed of him. “I’ve met him. A good man.” He paused. His eyes betraying his tongue. “Your presence is embraced here. I will provide you with a room fitting of your status. You shall be held high, my son.”

Those words rung discordantly through the hall. And so did they in Oedipus’ head, fusing into figures of a prophecy *he had almost forgotten* and eyes *that had almost died*.

“I am forever in your debt, great King of Thrace.”

“Tereus, my son.”

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Life was *almost* perfect there. Oedipus had gained the trust of the Royal family, with the King's wife, Procne, taking an especial affinity to the gifted prince, flaunting him through the town as mother does to son, introducing him to Daulis' esteemed young women and adorning him in garments only spared for royalty. Oedipus returned quickly to his old ways, drinking, parading, and cruising through the streets of the fantastical town, making friends and foe in each passing day. Time was faster here. Life was easier here.

*Almost.*

Oedipus' nightly stroll took him out of the walls of Daulis and into remote nests of giants. The mountains breathed a life into the night sky that no other deity could parallel. Lights flitted in songs of myth, following trails of the heroes dead and the ones yet to live. The air was clearer here, Oedipus ruminated, resolving now – since he had dismissed it for a while – to pray to the Gods. *I pitied him that night.* It was deep into the night when he concluded his ritual, arising with a tranquillity akin to that of the velvet curtain above. It was now – in a sigh of peace – that he glimpsed a momentary flicker in the distance, a flame. It was not usual for another to be out this late, and seized by a juvenile curiosity, he pursued.

Drawing closer, the silence of the night was slit with a cry – a screech deafening to nature. The giants cowered below. And at the peak of the mountain, he was there. The Bear – unchained. He stood frozen, his body searing in the feverish chill. Cruel and grotesque, he took the form of a wraith, his eyes lit up only by scalding intent. And beneath him, a woman, pale in the face of death.

“Tereus...” – as he was now acquainted to calling him – “*You.*” His voice fumbled into the growing wind. The King was silent, his breath composed, his chest climbing and falling high above the howling of the wind. His hand melded to the blade dripping with the fate of the men below him. In a flash, he had already pounced at Oedipus, swinging, with that animal furiosity. But the prince was quick – trained at duelling from a young age – and danced around the ageing man, retrieving a blade discarded by a watching corpse. The bear launched again; swords grunting for an honour long forgotten. *But the fight was already won.* And soon, the warrior King fell at the hands of the prince.

The borrowed sword fell to the floor, once more, merging with the screams of death. Attaining a note concealed in the satchel of one of the men, and retrieving the near-lost woman, Oedipus returned to Daulis. A silence – now awful – returned to the night.

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The woman, Philomela, had turned out to be Procne's sister; the two men, guards, accompanying her to Daulis on command of Tereus himself. A harrowing ordeal. Daulis now felt, to Oedipus, as haunted a place as Corinth, the walls a barricade, the palace a dungeon. It was time to leave. *Fate seemed, to him, an unusual companion.* Procne had not ceased to shower him in thanks since his return and was appalled to hear of his resolute departure. But he was not welcome here, *the Gods decided so.* Reluctantly, Procne sent him in the direction of Thebes, the home of her dear friend, the beautiful Queen Jocasta. A letter of the highest praise was awarded to him; and, with a mind lost in the faces of dying men, Oedipus abandoned the forlorn town, and set out for another.

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*The story, rest, has been foretold in stars  
And fear, in fate, has marked itself with scars  
Those eyes too dark to feel the pain I brought  
I pity him, so lost by that he sought.  
A tale, that must, I tell myself, be told  
To men that seek to plague the world they hold  
But through that mist I see myself again  
And hear, in me, a mother's cry in vain.  
I would not be, I tell myself,  
I would not feel the crimes  
And yet I stay, a god of none,  
As the lyre stops sometimes.*

## Looking for Ulysses

Louis Nicol (Junior Category, Commended)

[Narrated by Arlene Holmes-Henderson](#)

Once upon a time, there was an orphan called Scatcratch who was born in Troy without any family. Scatcratch is scared of everything. One day, as he is walking in the street, an old man gives him a book. He stops and starts reading. It is the story of Ulysses.

As Scatcratch reads, he forgets his loneliness and sadness. He's going to find Ulysses! The Earth need Ulysses to come back — there are lots of baddies and Ulysses is the only person who can help. Secretly, Scatcratch hopes Ulysses might be his father.

That night, Scatcratch is on the streets and six bullies are chasing him. He runs away from them, but he suddenly has a vision of Zeus.

“I'm Zeus and I can show you how to find Ulysses,” Zeus shouts. “If you complete my six challenges, I will send Ulysses back to Earth.”

“Ok, Zeus, I will do it,” Scatcratch replies.

He turns and to his surprise the bullies ask if they can help! Scatcratch is happy. He thinks they want to be his friends. But this isn't true. Really they just want to get gold and treasure from the land of the Gods...

After one day of travelling, they arrive in the land of the Monster. They have to defeat him. He has sharp teeth, three terrifying heads and two poisonous tails. One of Scatcratch's companions runs away because he's scared, but the monster chases him, catches him and eats him! Scatcratch has an idea: he sees a big rock at the top of a hill. Two companions lure the monster under the rock, then three of them push the rock onto his heads. He's squashed and everyone is happy.

After another day of travelling, they arrive at the Terrible Sea. They have to cross it. Zeus gives them a raft, but it's broken. One of Scatcratch's companions falls into the water. He shouts for help but they sit on the raft knowing they can't do anything to help. After this, they cross the sea.

They climb for two days to get to the mountains. They need to get the magic apple from a cave in the mountain. One of Scatrch's companions shouts and is captured by a big, hungry giant. They pass the giants' army without being seen, because Scatrch distracts them and makes the giants fall down the mountain. They get the apple and are very happy.

The fourth test is to climb the Mountain of the Gods, without being touched by the singing monsters, which have three heads and a huge dog. After two days of hard walking, they are getting close to the top of the mountain when the singing monsters burst out. One of Scatrch's companions is lured by the singing and is captured by the monsters. Scatrch thinks— "we don't have cloth to stuff in our ears like Ulysses, and if we're captured we're dead. Start talking as loudly as you can to block out the singing!" The trick works and they get to safety.

For the fifth test, Zeus tells Scatrch they must cross the desert with one camel, one bull, 10 apples and 2 gourds of water. At night one of Scatrch's companions eats all the apples! They are going to starve. Scatrch and his last companion are desperate. Then Scatrch remembers the bull. They kill it, roast it, and eat it. And new energy, they cross the desert.

For the last test, Scatrch and his last companion have to climb a mountain covered in gold without being tempted to pick up any of the treasure on the ground. Scatrch's companion thinks Scatrch is silly not to take the gold and sneaks some into his pockets. In the morning, Scatrch wakes and find his companion is dead — the gold was poison! When Scatrch arrives on the desert, alone, he finds Ulysses. He gives Ulysses a hug. He feels happy. Ulysses tells Scatrch he doesn't need Ulysses to come back to earth:

"Scatrch," he says kindly, "You're the hero the world needs now."

Scatrch finds he feels okay about this: he's not sad anymore. Ulysses says that because Scatrch won't be granted his wish to have Ulysses back on earth, he can have one other wish. Scatrch thinks of all the nice things he could ask for. Then he takes a breath and asks for his six companions to be allowed to come back to earth again.

Scatrch suddenly finds himself back in Troy surrounded by his six companions. They take him on their shoulders, cheering: "This is our hero! And we're going to call you STARCATCH now!"

## Heroes... And Heroines

Chloe Defriez (Senior Category)

Narrated by Gráinne Cassidy

It was the height of summer, and yet here I was, sitting in a stuffy *chiton* and wincing under the sun's bright glare. My husband had gone ahead on horseback, as normal, and I was to stay with a friend of his who lived about an hour's ride from Olympia. As a married woman, I hadn't been allowed to watch the games for a few years now, but in my youth I had loved the excitement of the crowd and the magnificence of the spectacle. Now I was forced to wait far from the festival for my husband to return, laughing, recounting the day's tales with a grin on his face.

The cart offered no shade, and I had no company save for the driver and his son, though they sat far in front and kept well away from me. To them I suppose I was the spoiled woman, the master's wife. Nothing but a pretty face with black curls atop my head. They hadn't realized that I had listened to them through these many hot days, to the driver recounting stories of our greatest heroes to his son. He had talked of Heracles and his 12 labours, of Perseus and Medusa, of Achilles and his heel. I had wondered at their admiration of these men, so called 'heroes' who went out seeking fame and abandoned families. And not once had the driver spoke of Atlanta! Atlanta had always been my favourite hero, from the day my mother first told me of her. A woman who refused to marry, proved her worth as a female, who was the fastest mortal on earth. Now that was a heroine who had earned her title.

It was another day in that blazing heat before we neared Olympia. Although the games officially started tomorrow, the smell of burning sacrifice was thick in the air, and the horses started to become skittish as the trail became busier and busier. Soon the air was filled with the muttering of travellers and the cries of cart-drivers, and we were slowed to the pace of those walking. Just behind me strolled a group of boys accompanied by their father. They were grinning excitedly, laughing loudly for all to hear.

"I wonder if we'll see Polydamas,"

"He was one of the strongest men I've ever seen,"

I shook my head. They were talking about Polydamas of Skotuassa, a champion of the last Olympics. My husband had come home marvelling at his strength, and rumours of his many amazing feats had since spread throughout Greece.

“Is it really true that Timon’s going to compete in the boy’s race?”

“Yes! And I’m going to win,” one replied. The others just chuckled and waved him off. I had once been like that. At my first Olympics I had told everyone I was going to be a champion in the Stade, back before I understood. But I still ran sometimes when no one was watching. The feeling of the wind in my hair, the grass under my feet, the sun on my skin, always calmed me down.

“We’ll be passing through Olympia soon, mistress,” the driver shouted back to me over the clamour of the crowd.

“Might we stop for just a second? I mean to seek out my husband and let him know that all is well.”

The cart ground to a halt slightly off the trail. I pushed myself onto the dirt path and thanked the driver.

“Could my son accompany you? It is a large crowd, and I’m not sure the master would like you to go on your own,” the driver asked.

With no reason to delay, I nodded my agreement, and his son soon strode alongside me. I could still remember clutching my sister’s hand, never having seen so many people, or indeed been so far from home. I remember the roars of outrage, of triumph, of loss. But that had been a different life.

Mount Kronos was within sight, as were the walls that enclosed the site of the Olympics. The crowd was starting to push and shove, several men shooting less than pleasant glances at me. If there was a good time to head back, it was now. But I was caught up in the excitement of the crowd, the urge to reach the glorified stadium aching within me. Pushed forward to a fast walk, we were soon through the gates and into the grounds. I tried to extract myself from the crowd, move of my own free will and go where I wanted.

The crowd had other ideas. On one side of me, the driver’s son muttered an apology as he was pushed onto me, sending half of the crowd careening towards the stadium. We had no choice but to march with the crowd, half of whom were staring in awe at the size of it all. At the first opportunity he had, the driver’s son pulled me out of the stream of people onto a small patch of grass.

“Perhaps it’s t-” he started to say, interrupted by a dark-haired youth limping towards us.

“I can’t race. Look at my leg!” I recognized his voice from the boy who’d been boasting on the trail only a few hours ago.

“What will the people think? What of my honour?” an older man shouted from behind him.

“I’m sorry, Father. I can’t. The next games, perhaps,”

“You’re certain, Timon?” His father appeared, a red-faced man who was evidently used to getting his way. “Cyrene needs a representative. Our King won’t be happy!”

“You!” I looked up hastily, and the driver’s son moved protectively round to my side. “You look the spitting image of Timon. Can you run? Hello?”

I nodded.

“Hurry to the track! And if anyone asks, you’re a Cyrenian.”

I looked alarmedly to the driver’s son, who hesitantly glanced between me and Timon’s father. He hurried after me as the old man dragged me to the racetrack. Now was the time to tell him I was a woman. But... perhaps with my hair up I looked like a young man. No one would know the difference. The crowd deafeningly cheered the names of their favourite athletes. We all concentrated on the hand of the man at the starting line. In the distance, drums pounded. They were going to start the race! I should inform them now. Someone would find out; I would be punished if I didn’t... And then the man’s hand came down, the drums’ pounding reached a climax, and the crowd was screaming to run.

So I did. They left me little choice. As fast as I ever had in my life. I kept level with the pack, putting every inch of energy into the pounding of my legs. The pack tired quickly, and I knew that it was now or never. Screams of ‘Go, Cyrene!’ faded as I raced over the finish line, meters ahead of anyone else. Someone screamed ‘A woman?!’. I started to pant, reaching for where my hair had been piled up before the race. Where it still had to be now. The crowd stared in shock as I combed back loose strands with my fingers. I froze in horror as four men approached.

“Wait!” a regal voice commanded, catching the attention of every single spectator at the games.

“Demeter has spoken; the girl is to receive no punishment,” Her staff echoed on stone as she pounded it thrice. “She must be crowned victor. It is Demeter’s will.”

Shock and outrage ran through the stadium. Somehow I didn’t shrink from the spotlight.

A spectator yelled ‘But she’s a girl!’, another ‘the Goddess has spoken!’.

A chant started up: Chloe of Cyrene, Chloe of Cyrene, Chloe of Cyrene...

The four tall men reappeared behind me, carrying the typical Olympic victor’s olive wreath. Surely, they didn’t mean it for me. My fellow competitors muttered as much, and I wished I could make them see. But this was a world full of heroes, heroes who would never understand their privilege. For whatever cruel deed Fortune had brought me here to pay for, now was the time to pay the price. I would pay it gladly for such a reminder of my place in the world.

At his podium, the chief judge raised his hand to astonishing effect. The crowd faded into tense silence, a 40,000 strong crowd, all awaiting his verdict. My head was spinning, yet I remained grounded. Breathe in, breathe out. His voice boomed as he announced the winner, and the twisted olive wreath was gently placed atop my head. A crown of vines for the first female Olympian.

“All hail, Chloe, first Heroine of Olympia!”

## The World Myth

Amelie Bea Sumner (Junior Category, Third Place)

[Narrated by Barbara Bell](#)

Far, far away, where the Kaggen tree stands, lived a boy called Alvaro and a girl called Alexene. They lived in an enchanted land, where mischief often took place. In their world lay bright, green meadows, bordered with blooming, exotic flowers. Everybody was very happy and extremely joyful, for most of the time anyway. Alvaro and Alexene both loved their surroundings but hated each other.

The magnificent, ancient Kaggen tree stood in the centre of an unusually busy field. In fact, the tree was constantly surrounded with animals - cows, pigs, chickens, geese, bunnies, any animal you could imagine. There even lay a gold chiming frog. The tree branches were thick, wonky, and covered in moss that looked like the colour of a swamp. On the trunk lay rough, dark bark. The tree trunk wasn't massive, or anything like that, it just looked ordinary. You wouldn't expect anything odd out of the Kaggen tree. But what's on the outside doesn't always relate to what's on the inside.

Every day, thousands of people gathered round this tree, taking pictures, having picnics, and just admiring it. Of course, the Kaggen tree just looked normal, but the tree held a great secret inside. The branches on the great tree were huge, long and extended. Every so often, the branches would suck people up and take them to different places. The animals loved it because it was a nice shelter for them. But the people, the people indeed, crowded around the Kaggen tree hoping to be one of those people that were pulled by its branches. As much as everybody loved their land, everybody wanted the excitement of being plotted in a different place.

So, around this Kaggen tree lived Alvaro. Alvaro was a very good flutist, he enjoyed playing, but what he enjoyed the most was showing off, especially to Alexene. Alvaro was tall enough for his age, he had brown, swishy, glossy hair. He covered it with a bright orange woolly hat. The truth is Alvaro loved to brag. Alexene had blonde, glistening hair and a kind personality. Alexene played the violin. Unlike Alvaro, Alexene didn't like to show off, she just liked to put a smile on people's faces. Alexene and Alvaro detested each other.

One day, when Alvaro and Alexene bumped into each other, they decided to settle their squabble once and for all. Who was better at playing their instrument? When people heard of

the contest, they and the animals all started to gather round. Alvaro was extremely confident that he was going to win, but Alexene just wanted to be friends. Eventually, during the contest, both started playing joyful little tunes. The crowd couldn't decide who was better, they just said they were equally as good.

Alvaro got frustrated at this point, so he decided to up his game. He tied himself to the Kaggen tree and played upside down. He was sure he was going to win, but all of a sudden, he disappeared. The Kaggen tree had sucked him up! Alvaro screamed, not knowing what was going to happen to him. He felt dizzy and his brain was all fuzzy. Sometime later, Alvaro was on land again. Standing in front of him were two people fighting. They spotted him and immediately stopped. 'Hi I'm Goodwill.' 'Hi I'm Badwill.' 'We're brothers.' 'I'm Alvaro,' he said whilst stuttering.

'I'm the good one here,' Goodwill spluttered.  
'And I'm the bad one,' said Badwill.  
'So, what do you like to follow? Good or bad?' questioned Goodwill.  
'I, I don't know. My brain got kind of dizzy whilst the tree brought me here.' 'I can't remember,' said Alvaro. 'I just remember I want to be nice'  
'Well, it's settled then!' Exclaimed Goodwill. And, with that being said Goodwill grabbed a bit of mysterious dust and sprinkled it over Alvaro.

Alvaro felt kind at once. He felt kind! Alvaro ran to the tree and as soon as he knew it, he was back in his homeland. To his surprise, Alexene was standing right in front of him. 'Hi, I'm sorry for what I did earlier,' said Alvaro sorrowfully.  
'It's ok,' Alexene muttered.

'Want to play our tunes together?' Alvaro questioned.  
'Yes,' Alexene spluttered. With that sorted, Alvaro and Alexene were soon smiling whilst playing and being applauded by the crowd that had regathered because of the peaceful sound.

## A Ballad of Melancholy

Matilda Jenkins (Senior Category, Commended)

[Narrated by James Renshaw](#)

*You must protect me.*

The whispers you guide me with echo through my mind, fighting with the destructive impulse to turn, to see. Are you there, behind me? Are you following in my wake? To look would kill you for good, but with your death, mine would become a mercy. I only have to rescue you from the clutches of Hades, your soul taken from this world too soon, and then perhaps our minds will find quiet peace together. The whole world knew of my grief when I found your broken, lifeless corpse; my ballads of melancholy would reverberate through the fibres of every living being. But not yours, for only in my mind did you continue to live.

How do I protect you?

It was my foolishness that sent you down there to begin with. If only I had seen the signs sooner, noted the spiderweb of scars growing inside your heart and on your arms, then we wouldn't have to be like this. You wouldn't have to be smothered by the shadows, and my faith wouldn't be being blindly tested with every passing second, every silent footstep. You would always tread softly, afraid to make any imprint on the lives of others, but I could never be sure who you were trying to protect. How can I know that you will follow me across the hills and valleys of my life, when you couldn't even bear to climb your own?

*Trust me, my love, for I will never leave you again.*

The days and nights I spent searching for you were the most torturous hours of my existence, navigating the complex web of caverns that led in a seemingly endless, spiralling descent through the mountains, down into the underworld. Despite my physical pain, though, trying to imagine the agonies you were suffering under Hades' rule was an all-consuming anguish. His tricks, lies, and cunning deceit, borne from your own brain; a master of self-sabotage. His words were the snake venom that intoxicated your body, until there was nothing left but sallow cheeks and glass eyes, a frozen heart whilst mine beat incessantly until it was bruised and bloody. No one else knew of the lies you would tell yourself, over and over and over again, a fatal mantra of daggers, aimed at your own chest. You had hidden it from us for so long, yet you couldn't fight the mental turmoil yourself. No one can, alone.

How can I trust you?

You rejected my love before, when my arms were spread open wide for you to fall into, as the tears fell from your troubled eyes. We were both scared then; perhaps we both still are. Your terror was undefined, uncontrollable; a boat cast adrift with no anchor and torn sails, so that no matter how hard I tried to navigate the treacherous waters, we would only end up further from the safety of the shore. As a phantom, I followed you, haunting your every moment with my presence, my only concerns revolving around you. They still do, as if you had remained here for me to care for. Meanwhile, I had become merely a figment of your imagination, a character you had created only to leave him tucked inside a sheaf of papers, strewn carelessly across your floor.

*Do not fear, for we will be together again soon.*

Like a childhood memory half-forgotten over the years, the upper world gradually appears in the distance, a land of light and joy and life. And you, once more, with me. Your skin will be rich and vibrant again, not the translucent pallor of the ghosts of lost souls as they endlessly wander the obsidian hills under burnt burgundy skies. Reclining in his throne of shattered glass atop the tallest peak, Hades bore witness to my desperate pleas and sorrowful tune, my lyre tarnished and dull in the smoky grey light, the notes hollow without my muse. Even so, the lord of the underworld agreed to revive your soul, but on one cruel, twisted condition: that I were not to turn around. Testing my faith in the gods, I thought initially, but now I realise that the true test is of the measure of my faith in you.

How will we stay together?

We finally reach the end of the darkness. Beyond these caves, woven like a labyrinth through the ragged peaks, sprawls the vibrant plains of the living. Verdant fields, speckled with bursts of colour from the wildflowers, continue far into the horizon, but at this moment, I care for the ghost that lingers behind me far more. I take a step onto the grass, absent-mindedly running my hand against the overgrown bush that conceals the cave's entrance from view, its branches laden down with perfect midnight orbs. Suddenly, my muscles lock. You're not there, are you? You were never following me to begin with, and why would you? You chose to send yourself into the depths of Hades, so why should I think that you would want to return to Earth, to me? We're here, and yet there are no carefree laughs. Your arms aren't flung around my neck in unbridled ecstasy, your words don't thank me for rescuing you. You didn't need this hero to come to save you, did you? With a sneer, I turn around, expecting to be faced with the mocking emptiness of the winding passageway, but instead, my indignant glare lands upon a pair of misty eyes that gently vanish into nothingness.

*Like this.*

All traces of fury seep out of my body as I sink to my knees, horror-stricken at my error. I never did trust you to let you shine your own light onto yourself. Mine was meant to be bright

enough for both of us. For one final time, I raise my lyre to Apollo, now gleaming golden like an insult to the charcoal dust of agony that had settled into my bones. The indigo berries are crushed between my fingers, the juice staining my fingertips deep purple, reminiscent of the ink on the scrap of paper you left pressed against my pillow. I don't have anyone to tell about this, so the words remain unsaid in the rivers meandering across my palm. Surprisingly, my hand doesn't tremble as I raise it to my lips, kissing the fruit with calm tenderness, the way I wish I could still kiss you. Maybe now I can. As my body collapses to the ground, I watch from above, noting how the twitches soon cease, and the lines on my forehead suddenly fade. I look peaceful, lying there, simply basking in the midday sun. With only a thought, I glide back to the cleft in the rocks, where the faint outline of your figure emerges from the shadows.

I join you.

*Forever.*

## Relics

Marnie McPartland (Senior Category, Commended)

[Narrated by Jessica Dixon](#)

‘You’ve landed on Athens! That’s mine! That’ll be 500, please.’ Artemis squealed, her fists punching the air in celebration and narrowly missing my face. I rolled my eyes. The girl got ridiculously excited over anything remotely competitive. I patted my perfectly coiled hair and sighed demurely.

‘For goodness’ sake, keep your hair on. I’ll pay’. I handed over the Monopoly drachmae, leaning over Ares. He was picking his teeth again in what I’ve informed him countless times a very unattractive manner.

‘Stop that nasty picking, Ares!’

‘Shut it, Seph. We all know you just hate it because it reminds you of the rattle of the skeletons.’ He snickered, his wide grin marred only by the grimy finger firmly stuck in his mouth.

‘That’s not true. And you know I hate that common nickname. Persephone is a perfectly elegant, perfectly sophisticated...a perfectly suited name for someone like *moi*.’ I preened and extracted my little gold framed mirror to check my complexion.

The game continued around me. A fierce argument was struck up between Athena and Dionysus (cries of ‘Get those bloomin’ owls OUT OF my face!’ and ‘It’s your own fault, you miserable old drunk, you know they like the smell of wine’ floated across the hall). I rolled my eyes. Again. Life nowadays seemed an endless tirade of bickering and subsequent eye-rolls. Back in the old days – oh, I know, no one now, especially my family, wants to hear about something so raw and painful still, but it’s the only thing that grants me pleasure anymore – back then, we were revered. *Adored*, even. Incessant sacrifices, laments, prayers – we had so much attention being directed at us, we didn’t know how to manage it! Of course, no one thought to much about me, but I did get my own share of people begging for me to help their olives or wheat or grapes survive.

I obliged, of course. It was nice to feel wanted. Needed. And gods like Zeus or Poseidon received such a slew of offerings that they employed great halls of workers to field prayers and give prophecies and the like. Now – well. The last time any of us got even a crumb of attention was ten years back. Some has-been in Detroit convinced himself – and a not inconsiderable number of friends – that he was Hades reincarnated. That was shut down pretty quickly by the police. And now? Nothing. We sit in the palace all day squabbling, playing excruciatingly awful family games, and honing powers that are now useless. The sad truth is that no one needs us anymore. We're defunct, out of fashion, a trend that 'went out' centuries ago. While children used to grow up praising us and creating infantile pictures of our (handsome) profiles, now they gawk over their electrical boxes and transmit inane pictures of themselves to their friends. They ignore us. In an ever exciting and faster paced world, like never before we are the outsiders looking in.

I excused myself from the uproar that Zeus caused by striking Hera's game token, a tiny silver set of wedding bells, with an equally diminutive streak of lightening, and hastened up the sweeping staircase to look for my husband. Where once handmaids had carefully strung garlands of flowers around the bannisters, they were now bare and chipped. Gods! It was brutal. If I had to be immortal, surely I should be out in the world, going on thrilling adventures, exploring the world ... I never really did that even when we were popular. I hated living in the Underworld; the gloomy corridors of the palace, the murky scenes of far-away fires and rivers, the cries of the tortured, the sleepless look in the glazed eyes of souls left alone for millenniums.

And Ares had been right – the rattle of the bones of the skeleton guards had repulsed me. It all went against everything I stood for – light, growth, satisfaction. Yes, it was best that the entrances to Underworld had been closed. People had stopped believing, so they went to different parts of the Afterlife. Nowadays, with so many non-believers, most just floated around the world, little wisps of soul gently haunting their loved ones. Those already in the Underworld carried on as normal, with any disturbances being reported to Hades.

I had neared the top of the stairs. I was out of breath. I really must take up some sort of indoor exercise – I am loathe to leave the palace most days. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a door at the end of the landing. Could Hades be skulking around in there? There are so many rooms in the palace that I couldn't even remember what was behind the door. It creaked open, revealing nothing. It was shrouded in gloom and dust. I could just make out some sort of structure in the middle of a huge hall. I stepped inside and fumbled for the light switch. Light bloomed slowly (the electrics were dodgy after so many years) across the room. My husband was standing in the middle at a marble table, engrossed in moving figures around.

‘Hades! What are you doing? You do know it’s family time?’

‘Oh, Persephone. It’s you.’ He turned, and I could tell from his eyes he’d been drinking again. No more power over the dead equalled no more purpose, apparently. Hades had descended into a major depressive slump over the past few decades, and no one apart from me seemed to care.

‘Come on, let’s get you out of here.’ I led him back along the corridor and into his own room, where he sat obediently in front of the TV (another handy modern gadget).

I closed the door quietly, and then paused. What had he been doing in that room? I needed a closer look. Back at the table, I could see that he had been playing with the old figurines of heroes. I picked one up. It was Perseus, Medusa’s head aloft, his sword gripped in his other hand. I remember we had been gathered round this very table. Athena had of course tried to show off by giving him a reflective shield. Hermes offered a pair of winged sandals, and Zeus had taken Hades’ helmet of darkness. Hades was raging about his lost helmet for weeks. We had watched Perseus defeat the gorgon and rescue Andromeda. To live happily ever after. At the end of his life, he was immortalised in stars. A much more romantic ending for him than the rest of us.

Ah, Theseus ... still armed with his spool of string and trusty dagger. Minos had been becoming rather an annoyance, so we had prompted Ariadne to help him. Eros had been dispatched to send his gilded arrow into her heart as she watched the prisoners disembark at the port. When the happy couple left Crete, we thought our work was done. Then it all started to go downhill, and we descended into bickering. Dionysus had to rescue Ariadne from the island Naxos, and we all tore our hair out when Theseus’ father King Aegeus killed himself believing his beloved son was dead. Oh well. We can’t control everything. Gods have flaws too, you know.

Speaking of flaws, here’s Achilles tucked behind a miniature Pegasus. What a bellyache the Trojan War was! The family split for over ten years – all because of a silly boy’s stubbornness and a ridiculous contest. Notice how *I* never got involved. What self-respecting person would want a useless apple anyway, no matter its colour? Aphrodite’s still got it hung up somewhere in her room. What a show-off. Anyway, I was stuck in the middle of all of that. I was, and still am, a pacifist. Personally, I can’t see what was heroic about slaughtering Hector and parading him around the city. Vindictiveness is not an attractive trait in a hero. In this situation, I remember, I was on Apollo and Aphrodite’s side. They preserved Hector’s body, and guided Paris’ arrow to Achilles’ heel – his fatal flaw. What a fool Thetis was! Just dunk the baby on both sides, you halfwit. Anyone with an ounce of sense could tell you that. I was glad when Achilles was killed. Now, I remember thinking, we would finally have some

peace. Ha. So much for that. It was another ten-year slog of guiding Odysseus to Ithaca before we could unwind.

But this was all a very long time ago. Heroes simply don't exist anymore. It's just us. The remnants. Left over from an era of glory and honour. People just don't care. They're so pandered to, so spoiled. They can waltz into a supermarket and pick out anything they want. They can buy food, clothes, furniture – and have it turn up at the push of some sort of switch. They talk to people through boxes, even when they're not there. It's magic by itself. Why would they need us?

Daughters of Artemis

Ash Bond (Open Category)

[Narrated by Mai Musié](#)

## **Iphigenia**

Her name is Iphigenia.

Roll your tongue like you have rubies

in your mouth:

*If-i-jen-eye-a.*

Quite a mouthful

of stones,

that only a king could afford

to

throw

away.

## **Howling**

She sleeps in the room next to

mine, a thick cold wall

between us.

Mata put us close because  
that's what sisters want to be,  
right?

Close?

But we are not sisters.

Not really.

Not blood,

not friends,

not anything but

close.

Close enough so I hear her

when she

howls.

Her cries split the night

and my eyes snap

open.

Two whole moons blinking in the black.

I pull the blanket

tighter to my chin, and will her

to just stop

screaming.

I do not go to her.

I am not unkind,

but she would not want me to know

that she still feels

the flames.

In the mornings after she is casual, but

dark pools smear her perfect cheeks as

she stalks the house,

then returns to her room

with a SLAM.

She turns from her chores and

ignores the plaintive whines of the

dogs.

So I feed the dogs,

I cut the wood,

I prepare the kills.

I do not mind.  
This was my work  
before it was  
ours.

## **Unwanted**

Mata is a collector of lost things:  
of strays, of stragglers from the flock.  
Of the unwanted.

Ortygia is full of us foundlings.  
Or-tig-ee-a,  
the rocky isle.

We have all found our way here,  
or been brought,  
one way or another.  
The goats, the geese, the hens,  
the hounds.

Even the women – only women –  
that come to join the hunt.  
Fleeing husbands, war  
or simply a life that is empty  
of wonder.  
Like swift-footed Cara,  
Mata's favourite companion.

But the hunters are their own pack.

Wild and beautiful,  
and free.

And then there's me.

I am Ori.

Imagine a mouth full of moss:  
Ore-ee.

## **Star**

The beasts appear at dusk as always.  
Drawn by her, to her.

The padding of their paw-steps  
drum out a beat  
to Cara's hollow flute-playing.

It sounds like wind blowing  
through a cave-mouth,  
or water thud-thudding  
into a shallow pool.

I breathe fire into a nest of twigs.  
It is old magic. Good magic.  
The flames spark  
in a metal bowl.

The creatures move closer,  
closer to the woman

who crouches near me,  
flexing her long dark toes in the dirt.

She glistens with her own light.  
Inhuman, immortal.

Made of different matter  
than the fire.

I pull at her wine-dark cloak and plead again.  
'Tell me of my first day.'

'You were but a babe.  
As breakable  
as a bag of egret eggs.'  
Her voice is harsh and wide: a ripping tide, a falling  
stone.

'Where was I?'

'You were atop an ice mountain.  
I found you and carried  
you here.'

'How did you see me?'

'Because you were shining.'

She pulls me close,

kisses my ear and whispers,  
'Like a star.'

I nuzzle, breathing her in.  
This is home,  
in the arms of the one  
born with a bow in her hand.  
In the arms of my mata,  
Artemis.

### **White Light**

I wake before sun-up  
to butcher yesterday's kill.  
It is a three-year-old shaggy-haired stag  
that Mata dragged in.  
Rank, musty, dead.

I pull on my tunic	I am getting taller.
No shoes	blood is harder to rinse out of leather.
I bundle my curls up in cloth	they too have grown.

The dogs yawn as my door swings wide,  
their jackal-shaped heads barely lift from their  
sideways sprawl  
and they watch me pad across the hall.

Only Arktos, the youngest –  
the favourite –  
tips up his hips and follows.

Out of the door and dawn lands on me  
like a new skin –  
slick and fresh.

The pup pushes passed my bare feet  
into the garden.  
He licks the grass with his pink, dew wet  
tongue, then turns to bark  
at the blue shadow of the mulberry tree.

‘Hush, Little One.’  
I bend to press a finger to his nose.  
Last night’s moon was bright  
and Mata was hunting late.  
I would not want to wake her now.

The hunting lodge is cold and strung  
with silhouettes - carcasses,  
hanging like puppets.

They used to frighten me.  
But now I am thirteen  
and know more of life,  
and a little of death,

and I am not afraid of bodies.

My lips brush

the stag's fur

and whisper,

*thank you.*

I pull the blade from my belt

and set to gut the beast just as I was taught.

Knife in, hide off, innards out.

The rank tang of raw meat mixes with

the honeysuckle

that threads around the doorway.

A sweet kiss amidst the mustiness.

Then

a white light

fills my gaze like a snow storm

and my knife

falls

from

my

hand.

## **Plant Lessons**

Meadowsweet	To ease the belly
Lady's slipper	To hypnotise
Eyebright	For cataracts
Blessed thistle	To clean a wound
Wormwood	To wake from sleep
Aniseed	For mother's milk
Mouse ear	For whooping cough
Comfrey	To calm the lungs
Silverweed	For use on burns
Mugwort	For prophetic dreams

## **Apollo**

Cara is in the doorway when I arrive  
back at the cottage.

There are loud voices, Mata and –

‘Uncle Apollo!’

‘Ori, wait – !’ Cara goes to grab my arm  
but I am fast and s q u i r m                      a w a y.  
I fling myself at the god bent low,  
sipping wine from a chipped cup and  
running his hand along Mata’s books  
on herbal remedies, cattle-feed  
and carpentry.

Liquid

d

r

i

p

s

on the rug and Mata

groans.

## Such a War

‘Star Child!’

His hug makes my skin fizz.

Throwing a pout Mata’s way, he says,

‘Your mother won’t come out to play  
with me.

Tell her that she must.

She always listens to you.’

I laugh,

gleeful at my hint of power.

He releases me and I rush

to refill their wine.

‘This will be such a war, Sister.’

He mimes

a pulling of a string.

‘We should be there.’

A loosing of an arrow.

‘Bows bent together to one glorious purpose.’

T w a n g.

The mime-shaft arcs and hits

Mata right in between

her furrowed eyebrows.

## Unstoppable

Cara crosses the room to squeeze  
Mata's shoulder.  
Her chin is held high,  
as she faces  
the golden-haired god who drinks  
from *her* cup.

'We would be *unstoppable*, Sister.'  
Apollo's sunshine locks shake  
and the day gets brighter.

Mata yawns  
at her twin's show of showy divinity.  
'The Greeks will win,  
the Trojans will die.  
The sun will set,  
the moon will rise.  
We have both seen this.'  
She leans back into her chair.

Her posture is one of peace  
but I see through the ruse.  
I see the skin on her long limbs twitch  
I see she is coiled,  
poised  
to strike.

'Let them have their war.  
Let me have *this*.'

She kisses the back of Cara's hand  
and takes it to her cheek.

'Please.'

Apollo leans forward, his focus  
sharp.

He too is a hunter.

Leto's son, god of plague.

'If not you,

Artemis the healer,

Artemis the protector,

then who? Who will shield

the weak

from war's teeth?'

He bites the air.

'Piss off,'

Mata barks.

## **Dust**

Sometimes she looks at me  
like she looks at the plants that we pluck  
on our walks,  
as if she sees the specks of dust that have stuck  
together to make me  
mortal,  
fragile,  
temporary.

How do any of us

survive in this world  
without  
snapping?

## **Moonrise**

Arktos scampers to Mata who holds  
a tug-rag to the pup's mouth.

He shakes.

'They trade Helen's body  
like a bauble,' Mata growls.

'Mine, mine, mine.'

Her fingers release and the pup parades  
his prize,  
victorious.

'Menelaus.' She pulls off a boot.

'Paris.' She throws the other at her brother.

'Men will *never* let a woman choose.'

Apollo dodges,  
lifts the cup to his nose  
and calmly peers

d

o

w

n

into the ruby-red.

'You see far, Sister,

but my vision has always been clearer.’

He squints.

‘It is moonrise.

I see a girl,

young,

Agamemnon’s child.

A pretty thing, as princesses go;

hair the colour of the sun as it sets over the salted sea.’

He hands the cup to Cara,

but looks at Mata

as he flicks dust from his tunic.

‘The Greeks seek speed for their ships

and ready to put the princess to the flames.

Tonight.’

He spits and rubs at a stain.

‘A sacrifice.’

Cara places a hand on her belly,

Spilling the wine.

Apollo’s gaze glances over me, then

finds its mark.

‘The fates have only decided so much.’

He smiles at Mata with teeth that glint.

‘A girl snatched away from war’s hungry maw?

*What* a story

*What* a song

*that* will be.’

A growl rumbles from somewhere deep in the earth.

He laughs.

‘Run fast, Sister, run  
*fast.*’

The room dims.

The god is gone.

There is wine on the floor,  
and a taste of ash  
in my mouth.

### 3: Justice

Thus Always

Annie Whyman (Senior Category)

[Narrated by Clare Harvey](#)

He sat staring down at the silver weapon in his hand, it was plain and simple, hardly a weapon that should be noted down in history. The grey blade and cross-guard seemed to blend together, the only distinguishing feature being an engraved motto. ‘Acta non verba’. He flipped the knife over and ran his finger down the fuller, feeling the cold pressure of the metal under his fingertips. It was given to him by his mother, who claimed it was given to her by someone who was of no interest. He disputed this point, she would not have given it to him if there was not a story of value behind it, some dark secret encased in silver with a cliché motto burned into it.

“Brutus,” a voice from across the room called.

“Are you sure this is the right thing?” Cassius paused his pacing to face the hunched over Brutus, watching him twist his dagger across his hands, he took in a breath and opened his mouth about to continue. Brutus stood up. He strolled over to a desk in the corner of the room, littered with discarded wastes of paper. He rifled through the swamp of paper as he looked for a specific one with hastily scribbled writing. When he found it he held it up to the deep glow of the candle light and wordlessly read the scratched mass writing. It was a list of names. Brutus rolled the paper up and held it close to him.

“These men died under Caesar, and I’ll be damned if any more men have to die because of him.” He whispered, a low, subtle whisper Cassius barely heard. He returned the paper back to the rotting graveyard of similar sheets. Brutus looked up. The name ‘Caesar’ tasted like venom in his mouth, poison. His name felt as though all the hellish dimensions of the underworld were burning at his throat etching their way out into the light. His name tasted like a tyrant. It was never meant to come to this; Caesar was a good man. He was a mentor to Brutus, who could not shake the feeling that sometimes he felt like more. But the tyranny of Caesar had to end. The threat to the republic and all it was built for had to be stopped, some way, the wrong way. Brutus had never planned for it to turn to this, but words had only taken him so far, his half-brothers and the *liberatores* conspiring against a tyrant.

He would find himself late into the night pacing his study torturing himself. On paper it seemed simple, kill Caesar, save Rome. Yet something like that could never be simple. His motivation; love, hatred, justice? It all seemed blur into insignificance, and he found

himself fuelled entirely by a sense of dread, of fear. Fear for Rome. Fear for the Senate, for the future. Brutus broke eye contact with Cassius and placed his dagger into its scabbard. Fiddling with its hook for a second he looked back up at Cassius, a calm wave, an action washed over him.

“The Ides of March, during the senate meeting” Brutus explained, hooking the scabbard to his belt and making his way to the door. He looked over his shoulder to meet Cassius’ gaze, daring him to say something in return.

“Tell the others. Only the tyrant’s blood will spill. His demise will be the freedom of Rome,” Brutus said turning, exiting through the door, out onto the moonlit street. His broad figure cast uneasy shadows on the cobbled street as he made his way through the empty Forum. It was late, he couldn’t bring himself to sleep. The moon seemed to judge every step he took and every path he chose to walk down in an effort to hide. Guilt seemed to invade his mind, harbouring it like a hungry parasite. It pained him, weakened him, knowing the unlawful attack he was going to take tomorrow, yet he was the only one strong enough to act. The oracles had told Caesar to ‘beware the Ides’. Perhaps Brutus should take their advice, turn and run from the Republic, and never look back. No, he couldn’t, he had a duty to Rome. Caesar had to die.

§ § §

Days flickered past silent and unobserved. Alone, Brutus sat in his room, a quiet breeze gently waving the candle next to him. The silence of the room hung in the air, it was thick, warm and uncomfortable. Brutus unsheathed his dagger to distract himself and allowed it to glow in the muted light, he studied its thin edge and pointed tip; the light made it look atmospherically sinister. The motto burnt deep in the blade, black and dirtied, comforted Brutus, he repeated the phrase in his head over and over again until the repetition echoed in the quiet room, hanging in the air. He looked past the dagger, towards the candle and mumbled a prayer of forgiveness to Clementia. Looking back at the blade and its dull grey metal, its sublime purpose somehow making it gorgeous in this light, he whispered a prayer to the sky.

“Jupiter give me strength.” He tightly gripped the handle of the blade and dropped his arm. He snuffed out the flame of the candle, concealed his weapon and made his way to the senate house. It was noon when he arrived. Caesar was already there standing high, shoulders back, unafraid of the people around him. Brutus looked at all the men he knew were carrying weapons weighted down by the same guilt he was holding, but their eyes all gleamed with the thought of what was to come. Brutus could feel the adrenaline course through his veins, great Jupiter felt alive in his soul. He made his way to Caesar. Towards the man with the power to be a tyrant, a man who was a tyrant. Caesar looked at him calmly unaware of the danger,

smiled at him and spoke a few words that were lost to Brutus, the pounding of blood had reached his head, he couldn't hear anything.

Heavy. His name means heavy, his arms felt heavy, his dagger felt heavy. His soul felt heavy. He stared into Caesar's black eyes, seeing his reflection in the tyrant's pupils, frail, weak, small. He fumbled for his concealed dagger, pulled the grey blade out of the scabbard, its edge sharp and painful, and plunged it into Caesar. Cries of bystanders erupted around Brutus as the light drained from Caesar's pale face, who looked down at the blade now being forcefully ripped out of him, he would recognise that silver edge anywhere

"Et tu Brute" he whispered, weakened by the wicked blade that was once his.

Brutus' entire world bled out at his feet, his whole understanding of his life broke down and shattered like glass; he stumbled backwards in shock, guilt piercing his heart. He tried to wipe Caesar's blood with the back of his hand but failed, smearing the warm, sticky liquid across his face. He wanted to reach out and help him but the first blow had been taken and the rest of the *liberatores* leaped up from their seats and ran to Caesar, screams of 'rex,' 'tyrant,' 'dictator,' filled the air, as blow after blow was dealt to Caesar's back, front and side. Rage, anger, jealousy, hatred, fear and pain clouded the senate house like thick, burning smoke. Caesar fell to the floor. Twenty-two stab wounds, but his betrayed eyes stayed fixed on Brutus, he seemed to mouth the word 'hero' but he had no energy left to make any audible sound, his blood spilled onto the marbled floor staining its pristine, polished surface with viscous, red, warm liquid.

Brutus felt sick, he could hear the pounding of his own heart against his chest and its pounding ringing in his ears. A tear fell from his dirtied, scarlet face and onto the red floor mixing with Caesar's blood. He was part of this moment for a reason, his motivation, fear, Rome, freedom it didn't matter now, the man who people called Rex was not allowed to live. He bent down and held the hand of the man who once stood like a king, now fallen, bathing in his own fluids. There he stood for a moment, bloody hand on bloody hand with Caesar, before inflicting the final, fatal blow. Caesar's dying moment, an extinguished flame, Brutus mumbled so that he could only hear.

"Thus always to tyrants."

## Orestes: Wrath of the Erinyes

Milly Kotecha (Senior Category)

[Narrated by Alex McAuley](#)

Officer Tisiphone of the Hellenic Police (Violent Crime Squad) let out a shriek of frustration and bashed her hands in disgust against the steering wheel of the Kia Sportage. Two years she had pursued this monster Orestes only for the jury to fail to reach a verdict. It was incomprehensible. She thought of everything she'd gone through to capture this most evil of men, not just a murderer but one who had committed the heinous crime of matricide.

With the locals worshipping him as some sort of hero, she had faced obstacles at every turn in her investigation. Night and day, she'd continued her quest, determined to deliver justice, but for what? Slowly, she calmed herself, at least there was to be a retrial. He would be punished – sooner or later. Her phone buzzed again - it was her partner. Just two words: “He’s escaped”.

A truck had rammed into the police van taking the accused man back to prison, rolling it over. The young man driving the truck, later identified as Pylades, had shot and injured the guards. The two escapees had just now been spotted on foot on the coastal road Paraliaki. Tisiphone’s eyes narrowed angrily into daggers and blood flowed furiously in her veins like burning lava. She rammed the accelerator and the car screeched wildly onto the carriageway. She resumed her pursuit, as a woman possessed.

Pylades beckoned his friend, “Over here, hurry!” Orestes limped forward, pained by an injury he'd sustained from the ramming attack. The side of the highway revealed a steep cliff-face which fell to the sea below. There was a fat tree stump protruding, round which were two thick ropes Pylades had previously secured in his elaborate plan of escape. These they gripped and commenced a slow, silent climb down.

Many a summer’s day in their youth they had spent frolicking up and down mountains; the cliffs would echo with their raucous cries and wild laughter. They had been like lions - fearless and proud. But those times of gay abandon were now a distant memory. This was an altogether different experience: they were now hunted men.

The warped and craggy rockface swept down as a series of synclines. They lowered themselves with their bodies pushed tight against the siltstone. Every now and again a piece of shale would jab them, tearing into their clothes and cutting their flesh. Half-way down came the relief of a jug-haul, and the two men were able to cast away their ropes to descend more freely swinging from one hold to the next.

The sun was beginning to set. As it sank, it picked out the two fugitives like a searchlight, and they glowed gold against the dark rock. Above them was all the hubbub of a major police operation. Roads had been blocked, horns tooted from frustrated motorists, sirens were blaring continuously, and police motorbikes raced by every couple of minutes.

Pylades knew that the overhang on the cliff hid them from view, but it wouldn't be long before the dogs picked up their trail. There was little time to waste. He had reached the crux, about thirty feet from the sandy floor. He eyed a large vertical crack going down and traversed to it: the 'chimney' was just enough for him to squeeze in. He pressed his feet and body against the walls to slow his descent as gravity carried him down. The last few feet were then a short jump down.

Orestes was less fortunate. The cliff-wall on his side suddenly offered not a pocket. He found himself gripping precariously onto a chockstone. The sinews tore up in his back and his fingers burned from some flesh that had ripped away. He looked around desperately but there was nothing, not even a pinch. Eventually his forearms buckled under extreme fatigue, and he let go.

Pylades watched in horror as his friend dropped like a stone and sunk into the sand below. He ran over to find Orestes motionless. He took his head and gently patted his cheeks. Orestes slowly opened his eyes and forced a pained smile. With considerable effort they got him to his feet and with the help of his friend, Orestes hobbled onto the small boat waiting moored in the cove.

On the turn of a key, the engine of the Korel 400 spluttered to a start and the vessel chugged off into the sea. 'Athena' had belonged to Orestes' father and was one the two friends had adventured with many a time. Soon she was cutting through the water like a pro, and they were on their way. The sun had now set. They judged that in open water, the cloak of darkness would give them more than an even chance of evading their pursuers.

Pylades steered and voiced the arrangements he had planned. “We’ll refuel at Thasos. Arsinoe will bring provisions, and we can cross through Istanbul to Yalta. We’ll be safe there...” Orestes only half heard him. He lay stretched out on the deck drifting in and out of sleep. For a couple of hours, all was eerily calm.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, the winds started howling and a ferocious storm was conjured up. Angry waves lashed the boat, with great gushes of water attacking the two men. They clung on desperately. The sea rose up and like a monster tossed Athena up in the air. It came crashing down on a piece of rock and immediately tore apart into a thousand pieces.

The two men were thrown into the icy water. Pylades instinctively snatched a sheet of wood for buoyancy; Orestes was nowhere to be seen. Eventually, he emerged, his head bobbing out of the water gasping for air. Pylades grabbed his friend and yanked him onto the makeshift raft.

They floated like this for hours it seemed, when out of the dark emerged the silhouette of a fishing boat. A large net was cast in their direction, and they clambered up using the last dregs of energy they possessed. Orestes looked up at the fisherman who had rescued them. He had a kindly face that reminded him of his old tutor.

“Good thing I spotted you,” the old man said gruffly, “Never seen anyone survive a storm like this!”

The two young men were exhausted, and Orestes was looking feverish. They laid him down, but his body started convulsing uncontrollably. He was murmuring something unintelligibly and started to foam at the mouth. The fisherman got out a bottle of brandy: “Get that down him.”

The brandy helped and Orestes relaxed. He was restful till dawn. Not long after, they spied land ahead: it was the island of Paros. As the boat was manoeuvred into the harbour the whirl of a helicopter sounded above them. The old man saw the trepidation on the faces of Orestes and Pylades and sensed their need to get away. “That’ll be your best bet.” He growled, pointing to a dirt track. The two men scrambled off the boat and hurried to follow the path into the woods.

As the helicopter descended to land, Tisiphone sprang out like a wild cat. She had sighted the two figures and rushed in furious pursuit. In her right hand was a standard-issue Glock 22 armed with a 15-round cartridge - there would be no escape, this time!

Immediately, she let off two shots which fell short of her target. The two men disappeared into the trees. Tisiphone chased after them and every time they came into view, fired off a round. She was now missing by just inches.

Orestes felt sapped of energy. His body ached all over and his legs were stiffening up. Ahead of him Pylades left the path to seek the cover of some dense bushes. Orestes followed as the sound of another bullet rang out, whizzing just past his left ear. He was panting for breath with every step.

Tisiphone, sensing her prey faltering, moved with renewed zeal, but she failed to get a clear shot as the men were weaving in and around the bushes.

Then Orestes seemed to stumble. Pylades turned to aid his friend but as he did so, his foot got caught in a vine. Tisiphone was but ten feet away and took aim. She released her last but most deadly bullet with clinical precision. Orestes let out a cry and without hesitation dived in front of his friend. The bullet pierced through his chest and lodged into his heart.

Pylades, desperate and distraught, caught hold of his beloved Orestes as he fell. Tears flooded into his eyes. "Go!" the dying man whispered, "Live, and I will live through you."

Tisiphone did not follow as Pylades made his escape. She had her man; she had her vengeance.

## We Are Very Little Things

Madeleine Whitmore (Senior Category, Second Place)

[Narrated by Katrina Kelly](#)

### *The aftermath of Persephone's kidnap by Hades*

They ask me at the clinic *where did he touch you, say point on the figure* so I break it in two and hollow it out, point to the chest cavity and the skull base and the soles of the poor doll's feet, muttering *here and here then but he smelled like dried thyme*, like the fact his eyes bore as deep into mine as my mother's is enough to pick him out in a line up. They ask *when did you first try to call us* and I say *as soon as he'd ripped the first camelia to shreds in front of me* but they say they need a date, a time, numbers. They say the windows must stay shut so nothing flutters off the shrouds I'm stood on, but I can't give them what they want so I break the window and leave via the fire exit, no shoes, the alarm screaming like he did.

I'm a train ride from heaven. I have no fare. I sit on the platform reading the graffiti on the side of the phone box.

*these are the days that must happen to us*

*md & sw 4 ever*

*on est bien peu de choses*

*is anyone listening*

I imagine calling home.

*p. Hey. Mum.*

*d. Baby?*

*p. It's me. I'm on my way.*

I don't let it get any further than that.

I try to explain my situation to the guy at the ticket booth, how I was lying in the sun and there was a mackerel sky like jagged teeth and everything was gorgeous, like red earth after a heat storm, and then it all ended but it's finished ending now, I'm back, I'm here and yes I have no shoes, I forgot to double-knot them, but I promise they were there and he's looking at me like I'm asking to drive the damn train. He mutters that minors ride for free.

*Minor.*

The carriage is all flickering neon light and Chanel No. 5, hanging in the air in silky tendrils around its owner. I wonder if she knows Coco Chanel was a Nazi. Her t-shirt bears some faux-feminist quote, *moi aussi*, like the patriarchal paradigm is an aesthetically pleasing designer collection. I suppose over the past months I have averted my attention from my own particular reductive iteration of gender theory but I survived, didn't I? Principles come and go, breath doesn't. He was there but I wasn't, I was floating somewhere in the walls, a trapped moth in the dark. I watched my body move around his rooms. I was not my body. I am not my body. I remember that skin regenerates entirely every twenty-seven days. In four weeks, the air he breathed won't have touched me, tickled every impurity on the skin of my forearms, licked the back of my neck, an ice cube on hot wax. I dig my nails into my palms and there's a shrill masochism to it, like blood on a dry tongue. I'm seven minutes and a bus ride from heaven.

The amber glow of the omnibus headlights reaches me before it shudders into view, honed and metallic, two rusted pennies. The woman in the misogynistic shirt gives the driver an extra coin for my ticket. Our eyes touch for a second. I sit across from her, the grimy window to my left tinting the landscape pink, a view with cataracts. I wonder if this woman has a mother, if a therapist might one day label her puppy twitch as 'indicative of complex trauma', or whether she just has nerve damage in her left leg. I wonder if she bought the t-shirt because it was the cheapest thing on the rack. I wonder if she ever thinks about her sex, her gender as a whole, the concept of 'woman' as more than breasts and a womb. Our sex is synonymous with light, our gender with colour. I wonder if she was born in her body or if she grew into it.

Heaven is a three-minute walk from the bus stop.

Before I walked to the clinic, I painted methylated spirits on the soles of my feet to harden them because my shoes hit the floor like maracas. I feel the moss in the pavement

cracks soft against my toes, dirt caking the rivulets in each one, a hundred tiny rivers of freedom running over my skin as I eddy the puddles with my heels. No one stops me.

I think of her, goddess of cornflakes and muesli, capricious muse of a negligent husband and I am three feet away now and I feel it, the thumping of her fists on the March ground –

PERSEPHONE

*thump*

SWEETPEA COME HOME

and later, once the crying has ceased and the damp brown petals have been ladled from my pockets, my skin scrubbed and exorcised with bathroom steam, my hair shaved to a buzz because the matts were too stiff, we lie in my bed, curled around the same infinity.

I unhook her arm from my side and pad to the window.

He's down there now beneath the parking lot, bludgeoning down walls and spitting pips and I might never be free of him but I am back, and my body is alive and glowing, and I know who lies in my bed and she is kind and soft and full of glittering stellar grit, and I write our names on the glass with lipstick, backwards so he can see them under the salmon canopy of morning –

PERSEPHONE

DEMETER

and my synapses are pulsing like cicadas and the night is seraphic and pure and I don't sleep, I just watch my mother pretending to and she watches me pretending to until we both stop pretending and the dark hugs us, dumbstruck, and the last thing I am aware of is that we are small, so small.

## Her Retaliation

Maya Pyshkin (Senior Category)

[Narrated by Ian Goh](#)

Her tattered sandals flicked the sand onto the back of her leg irritatingly, and dehydration tickled at her throat.

It is strange how the most unexpected thoughts nudge their way into your mind when you're delusional. Things that happened years ago, lifetimes ago. Things that happened to another person.

She still remembered him, the way even the sun seemed to worship his golden hair, his eyes of the richest -

*No.*

*I will not think of him. Not now, not ever.*

The remaining black shreds of her heart were leaking their ichor into her body, and she was tired of it. So, so tired. But strangely enough, when she rolled off the makeshift mattress she had crafted over the years, it was not remorse, or loss, or even pain that rushed to Ariadne's heart in a swelling wave of emotion, as she thought yet again of Theseus, but it was anger. Dark as the night, and merciless as fire.

And this newly found anger brought her a new gift, a purpose, a reason to keep going every day: revenge.

Revenge on the man who had broken her in the most important and irrevocable ways.

She smiled a cruel smile- one of her cruellest- and prepared to board the ship that awaited her- the one that would bring her to Athens.

To Theseus.

To Revenge.

\*\*\*

*Full lips parted as a heart-melting smile overcame his features. The dying light caressed his jawline, and his flawless skin glowed, even in the gloomy half-light of the dungeons.*

*“You could come with me, you know.” Something of my confusion must have shown on my face because he breathed a quick chuckle: “To Athens. Meet on the beach before the sun has fully risen, and we’ll flee together- I’ll take you to my palace across the seas. We’ll wed before the sun has set.”*

*My breath hitched. I’d not disobeyed my father since- but no. It won’t be like then. It will be good, I’ll have a new home, a fresh start. And, best of all, I’ll have Theseus by my side. Protecting me. I dared a glance under my brows at the boy- at the man- sitting beside me, only to find him staring back already. My heart raced.*

*“Okay, I’ll come with you...” I thought carefully before fumbling in my gown. My slender fingers soon found what they were seeking, and I pulled out a ball of blood red wool- stolen from the palace weavers- and handed it to him. My fingers brushed over his calloused ones for a second, before- in a flash of red- he had the prize safely cradled in his tunic.*

*“Tie it to the stone outside the maze entrance and trail it behind you wherever you walk. Do not let it go. Follow it back once you’ve... finished and I will be waiting for you.”*

*He opened his mouth to speak but was cut off by a scream. I sat up. I knew that voice-*

\*\*\*

I jolted awake and scrambled at the bed beside me, whimpering between short breaths. Fumbling with the sheets, I reached for the hard warmth of a male body beside me. I recoiled. Of course, Theseus was gone. It was a dream.

Eventually, after watching the shadows dance along the walls as I attempted to reel myself back in, I dragged myself out of the cabin and ventured to the top deck.

It had been a while since I'd been on a ship, and I had forgotten how...fulfilling it was. And calming. It was strangely comforting, having all of humanity spread out before you- feeling like a tiny candle in the dark *Kosmos* of our world. Unnoticed. Unjudged.

My eyes flicked to the wooden panels of the deck and I watched how the sun played on the sea sprayed boards. I tilted my head up to the breeze: the wind was filling the sails with her salty breath. Good. The journey to Athens should be quick.

I heard shuffling footsteps behind me and whirled when a head of sandy hair caught my eye. But, when I spied an old man hobbling towards me instead of... him, I let out a breath I hadn't even noticed I was holding.

"Who are you?" The old man's voice reminded me of coarse parchment rubbing together. I swallowed.

"Achlys," The wise blue eyes of the man twinkled, as if he knew I was lying. It was slightly unnerving. "Achlys," he drew out the syllables, testing them. "What a lovely name..."

I held my chin high: "Who are you?"

"Ioannis," His tone left me no reason to argue. So I shrugged and turned back to the view, placing my hands on the wooden barrier. A few seconds later and a paired of gnarled fingers appeared beside mine.

"What brings you to Athens?"

“Visiting a cousin,” Again, I beheld that secret glimmer in the old man’s eyes. “Ah,” Ioannis turned his face to the wind.

“What about you?”

“Trade. Have you been to Athens before?”

“No”

“A shame - it’s a beautiful place”

A bitter taste filled my mouth.

\*\*\*

A week later Ioannis and I were playing a ‘friendly’ round of dice (though it turned out the old man was a fiercely competitive gamer) when he prompted the subject of Athens and my so called ‘cousins’:

“Why are you really going to Athens?” It was so sudden that it took a while for me to process his question. I opened my mouth but was cut off: “and don’t lie to me”

And maybe it was the wine, or maybe it was my own stupidity but I did not hesitate to say: “Revenge”

Whatever the old man was expecting it certainly was not this, but –to his credit- he did not blanch. He merely said: “Oh,” A few moments passed... “Why?” I sensed he knew I could not tell him who.

I took a breath. “They abandoned me. At a... difficult time”

“Is it really that bad? I understand it must’ve hurt you, but can’t you move past that? Can’t you be the better person?” He didn’t understand.

Rage boiled up inside of me- faster than I anticipated, “Is it really that bad?!” I said venomously, pushing away any guilt I felt for my tone. “I let him get close, I opened up to him, I gave him every part of me, thinking he would accept them and never let go. And then he walked away”. My face burned- though I hope the darkness disguised it- as I rushed out, feeling like a scorned child.

But as I lay in bed that night, I refused to think of the things that I didn’t say- the things I had not admitted for a long time, even to myself. So when memories started drowning me, I did not fight it. Not anymore.

*Someone was screaming- was it me? Did it matter? Down here no one could hear me, anyway. I winced as he approached, slowly, savouring my pain. The iron-tipped whip was dripping blood.*

*Drip.*

*Drip.*

*Drip.*

*It splattered on the clay floor. I watched it fall.*

*My body started shaking- however much I hated it, however much I despised myself for it, I could not quench the rising fear. Black, blood splattered boots stopped in front of me. Minos. My father. The man who was supposed to protect me.*

*And behind him: Theseus. His face was pale, and his eyes wide but still he did not move. I mouthed his name. He was still wreathed in shadows- and Minos (how I hated his name) had his back to him. Theseus palmed his fighting knife. I had seen him in combat before, and there was no doubt he would win if it came to a fight. He advanced. He stopped. He mouthed something: Sorry? Then he was gone.*

*I let the flickering light inside die and welcomed pain like an old friend.*

\*\*\*

We docked at the port of Piraeus the next day, and everything felt...hazy- contorted. I watched my hand pass a small purse into Ioannis' hand. I thanked him for the safe passage and wished him all the best with a heavy heart. I could've sworn I saw tears in his eyes. He swore we would meet again. I nodded.

It was then that I saw Theseus. Golden haired and grim, beside... beside my father. The cool hilt of my hunting knife slid into the palm of my hand.

The killing calm swept over my features, sharpening my senses to a lethal edge until I was no one and nothing but cold fire and wrath.

Theseus could be forgiven eventually, but my father could never be.

Now I was in front of Minos- not behind, so he could see his killer. I watched his eyes widen but I did not give him the honour of retaliation- he had abandoned any sense of humanity long ago.

My knife slid along his throat easily and I smiled as his still-cooling blood covered my palms.

## Stone Cold

Sophie Davies (Senior Category, Third Place)

[Narrated by James Robson](#)

The number of cameras outside the apartment dwindles with every passing day until finally, I'm able to take a step outside without being set upon by thousands of flashing bulbs. I haven't looked at a newspaper in 246 days. I haven't used the phone in six weeks. I've become invisible. Maybe it's better this way.

I know what they're calling me. A siren. A seductress. A gorgon.

The last time I left the apartment was 78 days ago. I'd done everything right – worn black, covered my face. Still, they found me.

After that, I stayed inside. I know the story he'll be spinning.

He'll say I manipulated him, that I stole him away from his wife with false promises and perfumed lies. He'll tell them that he hated it, hated me. And they'll believe him. I take a deep breath. In, then out. My hands curl around the railing of the balcony, long nails making a sharp sound as they collide with the metal. They used to be beautiful. Now they're gnarled and curved, unkempt and destroyed from too many coats of nail polish and too much time spent tapping them against tabletops while a tightening net of anxiety worms its way around my thoughts. With shaking fingers, I raise the scissors and begin to cut. Flakes of nail crumble beneath them and fall into the darkness, down and down and down and down. The noise of the city feels muffled, as though I'm sinking, further and further into the depths of the ocean. I cringe.

I don't think about the sea anymore.

With another, shuddering breath, I head back inside, pulling the sliding door shut behind me. Over the months, I've ritualistically smashed every mirror in the apartment but now, I go and hunt because there's work to be done.

Eventually, I find one. It's an old, handheld thing, with a blemished façade that slightly distorts my reflection. I think I like it.

I pick up a hairbrush from the countertop and methodically begin to brush. At first it is difficult – my previously sleek raven hair has become matted and tangled by weeks of apathy and dragging the brush through it proves to be a challenge.

Clumps of hair gather in the basin beneath me, and I collect them in a reverent manner, pressing them into the bin with the respect of a grieving mother. Then, I look in the mirror. The face that stares back at me is not my own. My face is sharply defined, with high cheekbones and full lips the colour of blood. This face is tired.

I look gaunt and haggard, like the last few months have shaved decades off my life. Eyes that once sparkled are red-rimmed, puffy from too many nights of sobbing like my heart was going to crack in two.

With detached motions, I splash cold water onto my face, blinking slightly in shock and begin to lay out my makeup. I haven't touched these bottles in what feels like a lifetime. Once, they represented excitement, the prospect of something illicit. Now, they just feel like a reminder of everything that came before.

Everything on this table reminds me of him.

It takes me an hour before I can bring myself to take a proper look in the mirror again. Am I capable of facing the world again?

The doorbell rings.

I flinch. I'm surprised it still works.

My legs carry me to the door over a bed of brittle shells, but I'm floating, high above my body, watching the scene below me play out like it's a movie and not the life I've subjected myself to. I watch my hand reach for the doorhandle but don't feel it connect until the door is swinging open and suddenly there's a person there, a bundle of wires in his hand and a microphone sticking out from the rucksack he's got slung over his left shoulder.

He looks too young to be here in my monochromatic home, with his dusty blonde hair and his sea-green shirt.

With a wrenching feeling, I am torn from the sky and forced back into my body to look this man in the eye.

Normal. That's what he needs to see. I'm normal.

I extend a hand, "Meredith."

The boy grins back at me and shakes my hand. His grip is stronger than mine. "I'm Percy, I work for The Kereek newspaper."

"I know," I smile, trying not to let my discomfort show on my face. Another person hasn't set foot in this apartment for 292 days.

Percy is still staring at me expectantly and after a few seconds of awkward silence, I realise he's waiting for me to let him in. I step aside hastily with a sheepish huff of a laugh, "Sorry, please make yourself at home."

He grins and makes his way inside, swinging the rucksack off his shoulder, "I'll just set up by the sofa if that's alright. Can I have a plug socket for the microphone?"

Wordlessly, I gesture to the wall where a socket is set into the plaster, "Excuse me for a second."

Before he can respond, I've half-sprinted across the apartment and into the bathroom, slamming the door behind me. My breathing is increasing in pace at an alarming rate, and I have to take a second to remind myself of exactly who I'm doing this for.

I'm doing this for me. For myself and my career. Not for him.

Serena assured me this is going to be a short interview. He's going to ask about my plans going forwards – am I going to make any more films, do I have anything planned for the future. Nothing too difficult. Nothing that could break me again.

It's going to be fine.

Taking another, shuddering breath, I open the bathroom door and head back to the living room, my shoes scuffing slightly on the wooden floor. Tentatively, I lower myself onto the sofa across from Percy and smile at him like I didn't just breakdown in the bathroom.

“Are you ready to get started?” he asks, his bright eyes shining with warmth. Something about him manages to put me at ease and I smile slightly, a real one this time, “Go ahead.”

He reaches behind him and flicks a switch. There's a small, high-pitched noise and then, the microphone seems to be working. Giving me yet another reassuring smile, he asks, “So, how have you been doing the last few months?”

I take a split seconds to format my answer before speaking into the microphone he holds out to me, “I've been coping alright. After all, it's not every day there are thousands of people camped outside of your apartment building, shouting your name.”

He laughs. That's good.

“Can we expect anything in the works for you in the next year?”

I give him a secretive smile, just like I would for the cameras, “Well I can't say anything yet but I'm constantly on the lookout for new opportunities.”

That's a bold-faced lie. No production company will touch me with a ten-foot-pole after the last year.

He smiles again and carries on in the same vein, inane questions about what I've been eating, whether I'm enjoying my new apartment and a rather strange one about whether I prefer wasabi or beetroots but then, he finally reaches the climax of the interview and it's right at that moment that I know I've made a terrible mistake.

This boy, this golden-haired, deceptively charming boy, has the nerve to look me dead in the eyes and ask me, “Do you think he ever loved you?”

It's like he's held a deadly mirror up to my face. I freeze in my seat, my body turning to stone.

In a deep, slow voice, I say, "Get out."

He tries to protest, to retrace his steps and profess that it was never his intention to offend me but it's too late. He knew exactly what he was doing.

I shoot to my feet and repeat the words, "Get out," but this time they're a scream. So he leaves, chased out by my fiercely cold eyes and frigid heart. He takes with him his microphone and his cables and all the evidence of my brokenness that, by tomorrow morning, will be plastered across the front page of every newspaper in the city.

And just like that, I'm the villain again. The highly-strung, volatile madwoman, chasing away a heroic reporter who was just trying to do his job.

I'll be a pariah, a devil. My words will be twisted, my life made to seem foolish. They'll use the pictures again, the ones from the beginning of my disgrace. He'll make millions. He'll become the hero who exposed Meredith Gorgo in all her madness and I will fade away until all that's left of me is a blurry image of a stone-cold temptress that people will look at and see a person who maybe, was beautiful once.

## Fury

Cheryl Byrne (Senior Category)

[Narrated by Clare Harvey](#)

“I have spent many years in this house, waiting for vengeance to be dealt,” Tisiphone whispered to herself as she stood and stretched her scaled black wings behind her, as though they were stiff with stillness. Voices from the courtyard below her balcony carried to her. They made her skin itch, discussing the imminent return of Agamemnon, the long absent king.

“I must prepare to give my revered husband the welcome he deserves,” the voice of her friend, Clytemnestra carried to her on the chill dawn breeze and Tisiphone smiled the smile of long held desire about to be satisfied.

Clytemnestra turned and entered the palace, making her way to Tisiphone no doubt. The huddled crooked men, who had been too old and feeble to go to war ten years before, whispered of past murders and a thousand ships setting sail. “A demon of bloody vengeance is in this house,” they said. They didn’t name Tisiphone, but she felt their fear of her presence reaching to her like tendrils of smoke that wrapped themselves around her body and nourished her. Mortals don’t mention the Furies by name.

Firm footsteps in the room behind her and Tisiphone turned to watch as Clytemnestra stepped out on to the balcony. She was tall, almost as tall as Tisiphone and her dark hair was pulled back from her face in simple plaits. She wore a long dress belted with bronze, with matching brooches at her shoulders. She stood strong and determined, with her hands clenched into each other in front of her.

“Did you hear?” she asked, her words clipped and tense. She reeked of excitement and nerves with a peppering of something else underneath. Something she had carried with her since her husband had set sail for Troy with all the armies of Greece under his command.

“Yes,” Tisiphone replied, “Is everything ready?”

“Of course it is, everything has been ready for months, years even,” the peppery scent grew stronger, almost singeing.

Alecto swooped over and handed Clytemnestra a cup of wine. “Then there is nothing to do but wait,” she said, linking her arm through Clytemnestra’s and spreading one black leathery wing around her, “come and sit and we can talk and spend this time we have left together before all of our plans can begin.”

Clytemnestra raised one eyebrow at Alecto’s uncharacteristically soothing tone, “This is a side of you I’ve never seen, Alecto. Are you trying to make me less angry?” she asked with the hint of a laugh. She took the offered seat, but sat straight, ready to leap up at any moment.

“There is more than one type of anger, and yours is honed and sharp like a tool, and it is glorious!” Alecto’s eyes glittered as she said this, large and dark and eager.

“She’s right, don’t lose that focus now, not when we are so close,” Tisiphone said as she sat down opposite her sister and this mortal woman who had become her friend. She relaxed back into her chair, her arm lazily draped over the back of the seat, and she took another cup offered to her by Alecto. The burning in her nostrils faded as Clytemnestra’s rage held at simmering.

In all the eons since she had sprung into existence, a Fury to answer atrocities, to feed on vengeance and anger and torment those who had done wrong, no other mortal had embraced Tisiphone, taken her into their home and worked with her. Most ran from her, they didn’t nurture her. They fled as far and as fast as they could, hurrying to cleanse themselves of any hint of contamination that might attract her and her sisters. Few had the sense and the courage to use her as a willing tool, not in the way Clytemnestra had. She looked at her friend with admiration, a woman who would do whatever it took. They had spent years together as Clytemnestra had woven the luxurious trap of precious purple thread that would ensnare Agamemnon. They had planned every detail, it was almost scripted. Now, Tisiphone felt the rage and anxiety and impatience whirling in Clytemnestra almost as though they were her own emotions.

They drank in the silence of close companions, listening to the hunched gossiping men below whisper about Agamemnon’s return. And of his departure. Tisiphone remembered a sacrifice for the wind and Clytemnestra’s rage calling to her all the way from Aulis to Argos. She remembered the grief that painted her friend’s face in a mask of pain etched deep and the screams that echoed in the halls of the palace. Tisiphone had brought her focus from that grief and fury, helped her hone it and in the ten years that had passed since, Clytemnestra had become a warrior, ready to be a tool of vengeance.

“Are you ready?” Tisiphone asked.

Clytemnestra looked at her with a small frown, gathering her words, “I am. He is polluted with the blood of my daughter. Iphigenia comes to me still, follows me from the kitchens to the loom. When I close my eyes, I see her, dressed in yellow, gleeful at a fake wedding to a false hero. I have watched her walk to the altar a thousand times, and seen the change in her from hope to fear as she realised that a knife in the hand of her father waited for her, not the husband she had been promised. And for what? He sacrificed my daughter so he could punish my sister. So he and the rest of the armies could go to Troy and fetch a stolen wife back for her husband,” Her hand quivered with suppressed rage and a splash of wine leapt from her cup to stain her white dress just above her belt.

“I have prayed for their return, made sacrifices and spent hours on my knees in the temple of Hera, begging for a Greek victory. But their glory isn’t my aim. Their venture was cursed from the moment they watched my husband butcher my daughter. They all watched, not one of those so-called heroes stopped the murder of an innocent. They watched and were appalled, but ultimately, passive. I don’t care whether they live or die, but Agamemnon, he must return.” She brushed at the wine on her dress impatiently. “It doesn’t matter I suppose. It will be covered with worse soon enough.”

Alecto leaned back into the cradle of her wings and laughed a joyful laugh, revelling in the rage. “You won’t fail, you can’t. Your anger has not lessened in ten years, you are as full of fury now as you were the moment after Agamemnon stole your oldest child.”

“He will not know a day of rest under this roof. The moment he thinks he has reached home and comfort, I will take it all from him.” Clytemnestra breathed in deeply, her shoulders and chest rose and she closed her eyes. “It’s all so close. After so long.”

A clattering of hooves and cries of welcome reached them. They did not turn to watch his arrival. They stood facing each other while the crooked men greeted their king and asked of the war. The woman who had befriended The Furies looked into their faces, took from them the strength that she would need for what lay ahead. When she was ready, she asked, “Will you be here?”

“Yes,” Tisiphone replied.

Clytemnestra turned and left the balcony to welcome the returning hero.

## Heroes and Murderers

Isabella Dennis (Senior Category)

[Narrated by Gráinne Cassidy](#)

The rain glistened with the glow of streetlights as it ran down the window, illuminating the pallid face watching listlessly the passing spectrum of cars, made bright by the droplets which clung to their frames. The face in question belonged to a woman, wrapped in a long black coat, her blonde hair slick against her neck. She gave the impression of having once been beautiful, but now, in the low light of dusk, the sun bleeding into the horizon, her cheeks seemed hollow and dark circles crept under her eyes, her face pale and stark. Between her hands was a newspaper, the smaller print wet and running down the page, the headline just discernible, reading: *Hero Perseus Ends Medusa's Reign of Terror in Brave Act of Self Defence*. She pulled the cap off a red pen and wrote 'Murderer' across the picture, as the taxi pulled up beside a house, strung up with banners and surrounded by outlines of people, flashing lights stinging her eyes.

When the door closed behind her she sunk down onto her knees, burying her face into her coat, muffled sobs wracking her body, unaware of the approaching footsteps until a hand lifted her chin and tucked a strand of loose hair behind her ear. He was lithe and tall, about the same age as herself, but looked years younger, his blonde hair tousled, his eyes the deepest shade of blue. The same man on the front of the newspaper. "Darling," he said, frowning, as she raised her bloodshot eyes to meet his, "why are you upset?"

The woman simply stared back at him. "It's my big night, Andromeda. I can't have my wife in tears now, can I?" He spoke as if to a child, and when she gave him no reply, Perseus simply took her hand, and led her into their room. She lay there for some time, atop the duvet, breathing heavily, before she simply said: 'I'm sorry.' Perseus took her hand. "I'll be back before you know it darling." As he turned, he noticed the red handwriting scrawled across the newspaper, and his face contorted into one of pure rage. He turned on his heel, smiled falsely, and bent down to her.

"Drink this," he said to her, and he brought the bottle to her lips. "You'll feel better when I get back." Her eyes widened in terror as she realised what he had given her, before she convulsed horribly, her eyes dimming. She opened her mouth to scream but his gloved hand covered it, and she fell into a limp state. He lifted her hand and gave it final kiss before closing the door behind him.

“It was tragic,” he told the police when they interviewed him about the recent turn of events. “I went out and when I came back she was gone.” He shifted, the weight of the bottle in his trouser pocket a guilty imprint of what he had done. “Do you have any leads?” he asked, stifling a sob. “None yet, I’m afraid,” the officer replied, to which he furrowed his brow and spoke into the camera. “Please if anyone knows about what has happened to her, let me know.” The camera flickered off and when no one was in sight, a woman walked up to him. She was the epitome of youth and beauty, with black hair tied into a bun, bright green eyes and red lips. She wore a slitted red dress which sparkled in the light of studio, as Perseus and herself snuck into a darkened corner of the studio, and with no one in sight, kissed. When they pulled away, she said: “When will we be free to be together?” Perseus sighed. “All in good time, Athene. All in good time. But Andromeda’s dead now. We’re so close. And then, no more hiding.” Athene let a smile flicker across her face. “No more hiding,” she said, and walked away.

Athene crossed the hall and turned into the police quarters, before she was soon met by an officer, his blue uniform contrasting with the red of her dress. “News?” he asked. “The best,” she replied, and walked over to a board, dotted with images and pins and criss-crossing red string snaking its way throughout. “I must admit,” said the Officer, “You did well to earn his trust like that. But has he confessed to Andromeda’s murder?” She contemplated the question, and after some time, she placed a pin and dragged it across to the opposite corner of the board, wrapping string around it. “Nearly,” she said. “It’s just a matter of time.”

He was pacing, up down, up down, up down, by the time the email came through. ‘Polydictes invites you to the wedding,’ read the subject line. He grimaced. Had he not done enough? Opening the drawer, he slipped a knife into his pocket, the handle black and menacing, before closing the door of the hotel room and slipping into the taxi.

The journey was short enough, and he soon arrived at the right place. He stood on the porch of Polydictes’ house, and rang the doorbell. Polydictes opened it, and a look of disgust crossed his face. “You,” he sneered. Perseus shrugged. “Is my mother home?” Polydictes shook his head, and made to close the door, but Perseus stopped him. “I’d like to wait for her here, all the same.” He stepped in, and was led into the kitchen, worktops polished and gleaming in white. He waited until Polydictes turned before gripping the knife. He looked at the blade, which suddenly glared and flashed in light. Stunned, he turned to see Athene. “Put the knife down,” she said calmly, but it was too late. Perseus, anger flaring in his eyes, lunged towards Polydictes, who had turned to face him, and plunged the knife deep into his chest. A spray of red settled on the wall and Polydictes’ shirt matted with blood as he screamed in pain, but before long his eyes glazed over and he slumped against the wall in a pool of his

own blood. Perseus felt a needle slam into his neck and his muscles became paralysed, his eyes closing within seconds.

“What happened?” Perseus awoke to a voice, and his eyes opened to see the cell, cold and bare and brutal, before him. The interrogator sat facing him, a pen in his hand. Perseus blinked at him.

Medusa was a freak. Polydictes had told him that he wasn't strong enough to be a murderer. Wasn't strong enough to kill her. The night had fallen thick and fast, blanketed the sky and the trees. Perseus had snuck into her apartment, a gun in his hand, determined to prove him wrong. Before Medusa could even scream, he shot the back of her head, watched as the life drained out of her eyes. Her head jolted and spilt a crimson liquid upon the carpet. Tissue hung from the back of her skull, bones poked from beneath mangled flesh. “A heroic act of self-defense.” That was what it was called. They thought that the bullet was meant for him. But it never was.

When they were finished, he was taken to a cell. The door was closed behind him. And in the middle lay a bed, with restraints attached, upon which he was forced. He was going to die. And no one was going to call it off. The executioner came closer, and in their face he saw Andromeda, Medusa, Polydictes, smiling at him. “Feels nice, doesn't it, *hero*. Death.” He whimpered, watched as the needle plunged into bare skin. Watched as his world swam away from him. Listened as his heart beat slowed and slowed and slowed. “All in good time.” Maybe this was what it meant. It was meant to be. His heart was meant to. Stop.

And he saw those he had murdered. They danced around his soul.

“Heroes and murderers, played a little game.

Heroes and murderers, aren't they both the same?

Heroes blame Perseus,

And murderers do too.

Now tell me where you go when

No one wants you.”

Not even the Underworld would take him.

## Could've Been a Hero

Sophie Hislop (Senior Category)

[Narrated by Katrina Kelly](#)

*The knife, still frozen in my hand, was bloody. Whether it was his or mine I could not tell; really, they were one and the same. What I could tell, was that my legs were glued to the spot. That's a cliché, yes, but there's a reason it's been used so much. I could not move. All I could do was look at him, my brother, my partner, my destruction.*

...

'They said I should plead guilty for manslaughter.'

'They?'

'My lawyer... lawyers. I went through quite a few.'

'And you didn't take their advice?'

'No.'

'May I ask why not?'

No response.

'Then may I ask about the outcome of the trial?'

Again, silence.

'We know; we'd just like to hear it from you. You know, for the piece.'

'Guilty.'

It was the reporter, this time, who did not speak.

‘Guilty of the murder of my brother. My brother Rennie. You need that too?’ There was a nod.

‘How about I tell you that I killed him with a knife? His own *ornamental* knife. Do you want that for your piece as well?’

The captive’s voice became bitter, the cold facade cracking for just long enough to see what was underneath.

‘Do you want to know that I didn’t hesitate? Do you want to know how powerful I felt when I buried the blade into his chest? That I wanted to yell out in joy before I registered what I’d done?’

Roman looked at the reporter, his previously contorted face now sanguine. He gave a mechanical grimace, ‘What? Aren’t you writing this? Don’t you want it for your piece?’

...

*I became aware of the clock ticking. Then my other senses decided to kick in and suddenly my pulse was racing, and my shoulders were shaking, and the dried liquid on my shirt made my chest itch, and my lungs; they felt like they were seizing up as I began to scream. The knife fell from my grip and my hands jerked almost comically to cover my mouth. An iron taste crept onto my tongue and the noise died on my lips as I began to truly take in what was around me.*

...

‘Haven’t I already done this?’

‘Different paper.’

‘How many headlines do I have to make before they stop asking questions?’

‘Well, this isn’t technically a headliner; it’s more of a novelty...’ The reporter’s words faded as Roman lowered his brows in a glare. He hadn’t looked at all formidable before, not remotely capable of what he’d been put on trial for, but now the reporter began to understand it, and it made him a little more than uneasy. He managed to keep the quiver out of his voice, however, as he continued with a slightly strained smile, ‘I’d... better get it over with then, so you can get on with your...uhm...’ He faded out once again. A poor choice of words, perhaps. Though the irony was not lost on Roman, and he gave a small grin.

‘Yeah.’ He said, the slight smile fading from his face as quickly as it had come.

‘Okay, yes.’ A little flustered, the reporter began. ‘Now we... we all know that you’ve been found guilty of the murder of your brother, partner in your business firm. Were you two... close?’

‘You could say that, I suppose.’

The reporter raised an eyebrow. He wasn’t giving in that easily.

‘Alright, yes. We were fostered for a while, and I guess we only really had each other, so we had little choice but to be.’ He paused ‘We may have grown apart a little as teens, but what children don’t?’

The man finished scribbling down his words and Roman couldn’t help but wonder just how much he would twist them. There was little point in holding back now though. He was going to be here for a long time and why not let the world know his story, a warped version of it anyway. That was what he had wanted, right? To be known.

Not like this though... not like this.

‘Perfect, perfect...’ The reporter muttered, putting a last dash on the page, ‘Now, into the nitty gritty-’ Roman snorted at that; it had been a bit more than nitty gritty.

...

*Remie was on the floor in front of me. Dead.*

*Okay.*

*The knife that had been used... that I had used... to kill him, was on the ground between his legs. The office was fairly neat, but desk was slightly askew... that couldn't be right. I walked over to it and moved it perhaps an inch closer to the right-hand wall. There. It was all okay now.*

*It was. Except... except the blind... creased in one corner. No. It needed to be smoothed out. I reached for it and ignored the blood staining its' pristine white edges as I removed the imperfection.*

*And... why was my name plate on the ground? I bent down to pick it up, wincing as my side smarted with pain. I might want to call a doctor... but not until this was cleaned up. The name plate must be centred.*

*I took a seat at the desk. It was better now. Neater, tidier... except the floor. But I wasn't going to look down. No... nothing of consequence was there.*

...

'How long is this going to take?'

'Only a couple more shots and it's over.'

Roman looked at his hands, white against the faded grey table.

'Could you please look at the camera?' The reporter sighed.

'You want me to say cheese too?' Roman gave a satirical grin, baring his coffee-yellowed teeth.

The cameraman raised an eyebrow and the look faded. Roman stared at the camera, his darkened reflection staring back.

He'd lost weight. His cheeks were hollowed, and the ghost of his face stood out stark white against his tousled charcoal hair. The shirt he was wearing seemed almost the same shade of pale as his skin, and no colour serenaded him as the camera gave out flash after flash.

...

*'It's cheaper. Haven't I shown you the damn stats?' Rennie was getting frustrated. 'Just build it downtown for god's sake!'*

*I laughed and moved around the table to look at Rennie more closely. 'And did I not prove to you that if we go downtown, we'll get next to no takers. Next to none! The expense of building further uptown is balanced out by the profit we're sure to make. Did that make it through your thick skull?'*

*I had tried talking to him nicely, but I was past that now. Even after they'd called the upstairs, Rennie still persisted that the cheaper downtown build was the safer option.*

*'No.' Rennie shook his head 'No I've told you a thousand goddam times-'*

*'And I've told you twice as many!' I turned around and balled my fists. Rennie, taking the bait, shot up and grabbed my arm.*

*'Don't you walk away from me.'*

*'I just need a moment.' I took a deep breath. 'A moment to process what you're telling me.' Swerving round, I said, my voice low, 'You're telling me that after all I've done for our business, you want to burn it all to the ground?'*

*'That's not how it works you-'*

*'Oh, but it is! It always has been. Just for once admit that I'm right!'*

*'No.'*

*'Admit it.'*

*'No.'*

*Admit it!'*

*'No!'*

*'ADMIT IT!'*

*'NEVER!'*

*And that's when I grabbed the knife.*

*I pushed the desk aside and snatched the weapon from the table where it had lain.*

*The first lunge missed and Rennie shoved me back into a wall where the blade slashed my skin. A royal crimson stain began to spread. But the second attack was not met with such a strong defence and Rennie's eyes widened as my blade buried itself in his abdomen.*

*His mouth was a perfectly innocent o, as he toppled. 'We could have had...' The last whisper was barely heard as I stared at the knife still frozen in my hand. 'An empire.'*

‘Anything more to add?’

‘No.’

‘This is your final chance...?’

‘I’m done.’

Roman was escorted from the room and out into the stale corridor.

‘Is it over?’

The guard gave a stiff nod then continued to focus his stare ahead of him.

...

*Why? Why had I done it. I could claim, of course, that it was in the heat of the moment. But what the purpose of all this had been, what I’d really wanted... I’d wanted to be a hero. To be the one who brought us success, whatever the form.*

*But where was I now? Sitting at this desk, ignoring the body sprawled on the floor... because that’s all it was now. A body.*

*I sat at the desk and waited, a blank stare penetrating the opposite wall. I waited for them to come and find what I’d done. I didn’t care anymore; I’d flown too close to the sun. I deserved this.*

## 4: War

### Not Long Now

Ellie Field (Open Category)

[Narrated by Douglas Cairns](#)

Dearest, [name and date censored]

I just thought I would write a few lines to let you know I am ok and I hope that you are in good health too. We have recently marched further down the line and are currently in dug-outs at [place name censored].

I believe it once must have been very beautiful with fuchsias and hydrangeas but it is now barren and virtually lifeless except for a small group of passerine birds that hop and skip around our feet when we are at rest. Darting in and out of our shadows, not missing the opportunity to snatch a titbit or two. Their habitual movements, oblivious to the hell that is around them, calm my nerves. I think that the abundance of flies encourages these little fellows. The flies are everywhere; on my plate of army supply biscuits, on the broad back of Ripheus and there are even a few on my bare toe peeping through the straps on my leather sandal! I blame the unburied bodies that lie not far from where the trenches worm their way through the dry, baked earth. It's far too dangerous for us to recover them so there they lie like discarded string puppets; twisted and tormented with their lives quite simply snipped out of their bodies. When my time comes to journey to the Underworld I shall seek out the souls of those we have left out there, apologise for deserting them and beg their forgiveness.

Time moves very slowly. By the time Helios, in his chariot, is chasing the night into the ocean on his horses we have been up for some time on high alert – not wanting those Greeks to catch us unawares. Knowing me, never an early bird, this is the time I dislike most. The coolness of night still hangs stubbornly in the air but your skilfully knitted socks keep me blessedly warm. A tot of the local spirit gets my body moving but until the golden glow of the sun god caresses my skin my actions are slow and slumberous. Cleaning ourselves and our weaponry is a daily chore that I will not bore you with here but if I tell you it is not dissimilar to that seemingly endless and futile task of building that stonewall at the end of our garden, you will know exactly what I mean. Is that wall still intact by the way?

Earlier this afternoon, after we had gathered for lunch, we were given our usual time to rest. Hypanis and Dymas were kicking something about on the dusty ground, Coroebus and a few others were chatting about their lives before this pointless war (ten years!!) and I was just

dozing, propped up against the walls of our shelter. It was during this moment, as I was wrapped in a sleep so delicious it nearly took my breath away, that I had the most unusual and ominous dream. I'm not sure if you will believe what I am about to share with you, I shudder with the memory, but please be open minded.

Before me stood Priam, his body bloodied and battered in complete contrast to reality, standing tall in his regal robes. No longer was he my intrepid chieftain who, when faced with the enemy, does not hesitate to share his true thoughts. Instead, his eyes were open wide, reddened and darting from side to side. His whole body trembled and his fingers fluttered over his tattered robes. His mouth opened and a stream of snakes and sibilance tumbled out. In the warmth of the afternoon sun, my mind drifted in and out of a somnolent state and even now as I write to you my mind is confused as to what the Priam of my dreams told me but I'm sure it was something like "timeo Danaos" and then mention of bearing gifts. He told me to listen to Laocoon's words and then instructed me to "Escape" or "Run away". Three times he repeated his words and three times I listened in vain. Can you imagine that, my Dearest, if I just gently placed my arms down now, laced up my sandals and came home to you now? I think the lads would laugh at me and accuse me of skiving!

No, My Love, despite that strange and mysterious daydream, today has been a good day and I am content with this path that the fates have fixed for me. I would not want you worrying your pretty little self about me and my vivid imagination. When I was released from my reverie I went and checked on Priam and he was fine – full of life, you'll be glad to hear and Laocoon was busy pottering around making a cup of tea and sharing a story about the early days of his priesthood. Later on this afternoon we made this place feel a bit more like home. This involved digging in sweltering heat and much merriment as we assigned new names to the ridges and roads around us. Rhesus Ridge was my particular favourite and Aeneas Alley, followed closely by Hector's Hump which was disallowed (can you believe it?). We were then permitted time to trek down to the beach below us and take a much needed dip.

The water was so beautiful, crystal clear and Galene blessed us with calm waters. I dived down and found a small, shiny piece of treasure. Its beauty reminded me of you and the colour matched your eyes. Lifting it to the bright sunlight I was taken aback by Halius as he seized the stone from my grip. Halius pocketed it but don't worry I'll retrieve it later. For an hour or so the war belonged to the realms of myth as we bathed, sang and laughed. I haven't felt this clean in years! In the distance Hellenic shouts were all that reminded us that we're in the midst of an ongoing feud. With heavy hearts we composed ourselves, dressed and returned to the battle line and the drudgery of the dug-outs.

This evening after a light meal, we were then assigned light duties. Both Halius and I were tasked with digging another set of latrines. It was a hard slog of a job but somebody had to do it and we had drawn lots. As the crimson tipped hair of the Hesperides could be seen sparkling like the stars and trailing a countless number of golden colours behind, we could hear the gentle sounds of singing coming across the flat land between us and our Danaan enemy. We all fell silent, every single one of us as our feared foes dared to sing our very own songs, taunting us. Something inside me changed. As the singing eased, we all gathered for a quick debrief of tomorrow's plans. Thankfully it was short and to the point and has given me the opportunity to continue writing to you.

It is very late now, some of my group are out checking our lines, others are whispering in low voices and I am gazing at the stars, my faithful friends. I like to think that you are out there safe with our boy slumbering nearby looking at the stars too. Thinking of me, I like to imagine. I can hear a shifting noise from the beach, I shall return shortly...

Oh my, down on our beach there is a wondrous sight, I cannot write much more, my Dearest, as intrigue is filling our minds! A man who goes by the name of Sinon has entered our camp, he seems very distressed about something. He is currently with Priam who is calming him. We have been called to come and listen to his sorry tale. So I must make haste, I can see darkness waiting out to sea. A storm is coming.

Farewell and may happiness and love fill your mind until we meet again, not long now.

All my love,

Deiochus.

INCLUDED WITH THIS LETTER:

DEAR HEPHAESTA, WIFE OF DEIOCHUS,

I DEEPLY REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT DEIOCHUS WAS KILLED IN ACTION. HE WAS THE MOST LOYAL OF WARRIORS AND HIS LOSS WILL BE SORELY MISSED.

HIS BELONGINGS ARE INCLUDED WITH THIS TELEGRAM: A LETTER TO YOURSELF, BLOODIED SANDALS AND A SMALL, DULL PEBBLE.

YOURS IN SADNESS,

PRIAM

## Just like an honest wool-working woman

Susanna Phillippo (Open Category, Commended)

[Narrated by James Robson](#)

### **“Just like an honest wool-working woman...” (*Iliad* 12)**

He was never sure if she, like the other pictures he saw reflected in the spring-pool, were his imagination, or real: visions granted by some water-nymph muse. Today, again, the ripples of water stilled and the picture appeared, sharp with life. A straggly dust-brown sheep, rubbing its head against a girl-child’s thin tunic; one hand was combing the fuzzy neck, the other clutched tightly to a tufty fistful, keeping it clear and safe. The woman who squatted in the shelter of the well-spring wall turned, her own small bundle hugged tight against her. The wind tugged a lock of ash-tinged black hair from its covering.

“Here, Aithra.” Her voice sounded sharp; how she needed that wool, every last tuft, safe from the wind. She bent over the well, the water mirroring her cracked, reddened hands; her gaze clung anxiously to the precious, meagre handfuls as she dipped them.

Her eyes met his directly. For a moment, time circled like a child’s spiralling mobile; then he was there, beside the well in the biting wind, the straggly sheep still nuzzling the dusty child. The woman stumbled back in shock, and he reached out to steady her, his grip closing on chapped fingers that clung even then, half-desperately, to the sodden wool. “Don’t be frightened —”

She broke away and dropped to her knees, pulling her daughter to her.

“Lord, I have nothing for you. There is so little, since my man was taken. I beg you, do not be angry. I will offer when I can, but the children...” Suddenly piteous, “Do not take from what little we still have.”

He had played many roles with his songs, but never before been taken for a god. His mouth opened on a denial; then he thought, how else to explain?

“I am not here to take,” he said. “I only wish to see and know you, a little better.” “Know — me?” The grey eyes with their spider-lines of care leapt to his, baffled, still afraid. “Why would —”

“I sing songs. And I need the men in them to live, for me, and for those I sing to.” She reared up, straight-backed. “You are cruel, to mock. I have no place in any song, no story men or gods would want to hear.” She jerked her head sideways, in the direction of the plain. “Down there — the warriors and princes, the mighty walls and great gates — they are what men sing of.”

The sheep, curious, had edged round to him; absently he caressed the rough head. “Mostly, yes. And I have watched them, but one day I thought I should look beyond...” The bitterly accusing gaze made him want to prove his point. “I saw the blacksmith’s son, slipping away from the forge every day to water that sprig of an olive tree, up below the limestone crags. I watched the old man who comes down from the woods to the shadow of the crags, when the sun rises high. He has bread and cheese in a blue cloth, and his eyes keep drifting to them as he comes...” He smiled, indulgently. “And I saw the old donkey who broke into the barley field, digging in his hooves when the boys came to drive him out with sticks...” Her face suddenly blazed with anger.

“It was hungry. Like the woodcutter. As you would be, with your body aching after labouring since dawn. Are we just pretty pictures, something different when you grow tired of your heroes? In the songs — when I’ve time — that’s how you gods seem. Did you also see the blacksmith’s boy weeping, after the storm when he found his poor tree uprooted and dying? Do you see the woodcutter creeping home to his hut at night to hide away by his fire, bitter and ashamed because his son died fighting another and he could get no blood price? And now his family has almost nothing, and his grandson...” She stood and turned her back, still clinging to the dripping wool.

“Please.” He reached out again, as gently as he could, ashamed. “I did not mean — I am sorry.” It was time for the truth. “I am not a god. Maybe they do think like that, I don’t know. I am — only a man. A singer, like I said...”

She faced him again, still accusing. “Men don’t appear out of wells.”

“I — don’t know how that happened. I have been — seeing things, looking into a spring down by the town. Not from my own time; I doubt you’d recognise the town I know...” She stared back, uncomprehending. The sheep had slid away and was lapping at the well; the raven-haired child, disturbed by her mother’s anger, slipped across to embrace it.

She gave a small cry. “Maia, I can see a little boy! In the well!” She bent further over. “He’s galloping a toy horse along a wall. And there’s a lady, all in black...”

The singer moved to join her. Would he see, too, here...?

They looked together, at the child with the chestnut curls, and his gleaming horse. The lady in black seemed to call, and the boy ran to her with his treasure. Her eyes, brown and sad, lingered on it, before she gathered the child up into her lap. He snuggled there, cradling the horse. There were freckles of sweat on his forehead; a fly landed there, and the lady — his mother — gently brushed it away.

There came a small, stifled sound behind them. Another face appeared, reflected in the water. The singer and the girl twisted round, to see her mother with her clump of wool clamped against her chest and tear-tracks on her cheeks.

“Your son,” said the singer suddenly. “I saw you do the same, once, when he was sleeping...” He looked around, abruptly stricken, “He — did he die?”

She shook her head, dully. “No. But — there was so little to feed us all, after his father... A kinsman, down by the shore, said he could take him, to help with the fishing. So I sent him...”

“I saw your son, playing by the shore, once...”

Her eyes drifted towards the shore far below, where the wind that lifted her loose hair was curling the sea-fringe. He knew what she was remembering: the vivid child solemnly, lovingly, shaping his towers, hands burrowed in the clinging sand. The careless laughter of the two fisher-boys, kicking up the shore-spray, toes clumping his work into shapeless ruin. Her son’s face had crumpled, then he too began to join in the prancing ruin, pretending to share their boisterous fun.

“I don’t know if he plays much now. The work is so hard, and the other boys — they are often — not kind. I — hardly get to see him.” A forlorn gesture with the wool-clump in her hands. She glanced at the well, and with sudden fierce bitterness, “Not like the fine lady and her son. Who is she, that you have made me see? Some princess, whose child can play all day, and never goes hungry, or cries for his father...”

“But the lady was sad,” came her daughter’s voice, timidly.

“Yes,” murmured the singer. “Her husband died — will die — too. It’s — war, you see.” All those pictures he had seen, long before his time, somewhere in her future. The lady feeding her husband’s horses, beseeching them to bring him home safe. The child tossed lightly up by his laughing father, helmet laid aside. The boy who loved his wooden horse, and the yellow dawn when his father’s body came home, after those other horses... The child who would never play in the sand by the seashore, lined with enemy ships. “His mother will still have her child,” she retorted after a moment, but less harshly. There was one more horse; and beyond that one last picture of the child... He didn’t think he could ever sing of that, himself. He certainly couldn’t tell it to this woman, with her own deprivation and her hungry, painful eyes.

“They will suffer, too” he said at last.

“Like us? More than us?”

He hesitated. “I — have no right, to compare. You have shown me the strength of your griefs.”

Two griefs, so different, each so deep. Both of them Troy, he realised. All of them Troy — everything he had seen and heard — part of the story, and the sorrow.

“But it will be theirs you sing of, won’t it?” she challenged him.

And that he couldn’t deny. It was as she said: mostly, those stories were what men wanted to hear. In his day, at least. All the same —

Time shifted and circled again; he was back by the springs, beneath the patched, scorched city walls. They were just reflections, the child, the sheep, the woman, and the wool in her work-worn hands; but sharper still with life. He stood, remembering her, her children, her words.

“I will try, to find a way to sing of you too,” he promised.

## Troy

Rebecca Lewis-Oakes (Open Category)

[Narrated by Anastacia Holding](#)

*I sing of the forgotten gods, and of a man. And of the woman who brought them back.*

Aphrodite puffed out a long-held breath. A cloud wisp floated away from the heavens. She blinked, rubbed her eyes. ‘Have we been asleep, sisters?’ She yawned. Next to her, two white-robed figures stirred among the clouds. My singing woke them, their hazy forms flickering into substance.

‘For a long time, sister,’ said Hera, stretching and trying to sit up. She patted the white cushions around her. Mount Olympus was looking bare.

Athena shook her head, cast her gaze around and sat bolt upright. She could see through her pale white arms to the sky behind. She could see through Hera to Aphrodite. ‘We are not ourselves,’ said the warrior goddess.

‘I’m tired.’ Hera reclined.

‘We are in decline,’ said Aphrodite. ‘Our colours have faded.’

‘We are ghosts of ourselves,’ said Athena. ‘We must fix this.’

‘Well then we need a miracle,’ said Hera, yawning.

‘We need some mortals,’ said Athena

‘Urgh, mortals.’ Hera.

‘Their worship sustains.’ Athena again, sharply.

‘They’ve stopped all that. That’s the problem,’ said Aphrodite. ‘Earth is different. Look at those machines.’

Three goddesses leaned over the clouds' edge and peered at the human world below. 'The mortals have progressed,' said Hera, impressed.

'Too much to believe in us?' asked Aphrodite, then laughed weakly and tried to shake her shimmering hair. 'They'll always believe in me, believe in love.'

Athena stood up, stumbled, tried again. 'We have to move now. If we can't get a sacrifice, we need our stories told. Saying our names keeps us alive.'

I whispered a name to them on a breeze.

*Schliemann.*

The name swirled around their ears. They looked and looked, and found him. 'Him?' Hera snarled.

'He's rich. He craves fame. He'll do.' Aphrodite shrugged.

'Who else is there?' Athena's resolve strengthened. She looked more solid. 'By invoking our names he makes a name for himself.'

The goddesses looked at each other. They tried to make it happen. In the ancient times, they called storms with just a look, started wars with just a thought.

Nothing happened.

They strained, reached to the corners of their minds for their power. Nothing. They closed their eyes.

They opened them again. Still nothing.

'Not strong enough,' said Athena, thumping a cloud and wasting some energy. She faded further.

Aphrodite stood up shakily. ‘Do you love me, sisters? Do you love me?’

Hera nodded. ‘I do but every time I talk it makes me weaker.’

‘And makes me stronger,’ smiled Aphrodite. ‘I can do it. Say it.’

‘We love you,’ whispered Hera and Athena.

‘Say it again.’ Aphrodite was already stronger.

‘We love you!’

‘It is my time.’

And on a blossom cloud she floated down, softly, to Earth. Not to Greece. Not to Hellas. To Germany. To a man with a factory, with shipping interests. With a fortune built on indigo. A man restless with lack of recognition. People did not appreciate him enough. He had ideas, he had knowledge and no academic took him seriously.

Schliemann had studied. He knew the ancient world, he adored the ancient world. And he had theories about it – brilliant theories. Yet the so-called scholars thought his business success dirty, lowly, not highbrow like their ivory towers.

Beautiful Aphrodite spoke to him in a golden whisper. *Tell our story, brave sailor, tell our story. Remind the people. Change the world.*

Schliemann had an idea.

The fingers of a plan curled around his mind. He would find Troy. He would dig and he would show them they were wrong. That the citadel that fell existed. He’d show them. He’d show them all.

He picked up his pen and began to plan.

Aphrodite flew back up to Olympus. Soared to her sisters.

Already the goddesses were brighter, more formed.

Athena was pacing the clouds.

‘Was he... the right one?’

‘He’s the only one.’

‘He’s going to discover Troy?’ Hera fretted.

‘Rediscover. It’s been there all along.’

Aphrodite was back in the clouds. Her shimmering form was more opaque. She had substance. She had love and a plan and mortal attention. ‘And I will protect this man on his quest. I’ll give him a wife.’

‘Could he not rediscover one of my cities?’ asked Hera.

Aphrodite smiled. If her sister was sulking, she knew she was already stronger. ‘Your Greeks won, sister, we all win by Troy resurfacing.’

\*

Schliemann took a ship. Schliemann took a wife. Schliemann took another man’s ideas and blew them up.

He arrived at Hisarlik. He dug and he dug and he dynamited, single-minded as an arrow in his quest for Troy.

They found Priam’s treasure.

His wife was unsure, wavering. Her fingers found the precious relics first. Her delicate woman's hands finally found a use for. Women's hands otherwise not allowed out of the house. How nothing changes since ancient times.

Sophia hesitated. She could just cover it all up. She could say there was nothing there. Oh but the shiny things. The marvellous things. She found them. She'd get the credit. People would know her name. See what a woman can do. Was this her chance? He made that story up. What actually happened was, Sophia was attacked by a base foreman. Sophia went back home, to their baby.

But Schliemann knew it all sounded better with his wife there by his side. Romantic, the stuff of legend. Did it matter that she wasn't really there? What story would sing more widely of his genius, of his fame, of the gods – him in a ditch, or her shining in the ancient diadem? Heinrich Schliemann used his wife. He made his name and he brought back Troy. At what cost?

\*

The goddesses were thrilled. They were back in business. Mortals recognised them, spoke their names, sang their songs, revered their forms. But not like before.

'This is getting out of hand.' Aphrodite wrung her beautiful hands.

'He thinks he knows best.' Athena stomped around the clouds.

'I'm not getting any stronger,' Hera complained.

'You are, dear sister, you are!' Her sisters fawned over her, gave her some love, conjured a mirror.

The goddesses saw themselves. Thicker, more golden, more solid, more glorious. Hera finally smiled. 'We're back.'

Athena cast her gaze upon the mortal lands. She did not like what she saw. 'Should we... help the women? It's not very fair.'

‘It’s never been fair to be a woman.’ Aphrodite tossed her pretty head and admired her lovely arms.

Athena sniffed. ‘That woman, Schliemann’s woman, she’s working and vulnerable. There’s no army but now she’s in a fight. In old Troy, the women were restricted but protected. They couldn’t leave the house but they couldn’t be killed in war.’

Hera lay back for a luxurious snooze. ‘They all die eventually. The eternal mortal problem.’

Athena wouldn’t let it go. ‘But now they can’t work and they can’t get credit and their lives are not safe.’

Aphrodite’s laugh tinkled across the sky like bells. ‘Like you said, it’s not fair.’ Hera yawned. ‘It’s not our job to make them happy. It’s our job to survive.’

\*

‘They hate me!’ said Schliemann. ‘They call me stupid. They call me imbecile.’ His fame was cemented, but his reputation was the same. No one took this amateur digger seriously. The British Museum wouldn’t display his finds. Troy was back, but still on the experts’ terms.

Schliemann raged.

Sophia cowered. *How did I get here? Why me? I found the goods. I gave him a son. Why can’t he let me be? Goddesses, help. I am the muse! I called to you! I asked you to send a man!*

Athena heard. ‘What’s this?’

‘They think he’s a charlatan!’ Hera laughed.

Aphrodite frowned a beautiful frown. ‘He still gets no credit?’

Hera shrugged. ‘But look how many of our stories they’re reading. They’re reprinting!’ ‘Printing?’ asked Aphrodite.

‘Machines for books,’ explained Hera.

‘I liked the poetry recitals.’ Aphrodite smiled.

‘Move on, dear. Get with the times.’

Athena stood tall, stood proud. ‘They remember us, they remember!’ ‘They love us!’

Aphrodite danced.

The goddesses shone.

Sophia cursed the gods. *I curse the gods! I am the woman who brought them back. I get no credit. I sang of gods, of a man, and where did it get me?*

The goddesses heard. They turned their ears away. They had no need to help mortals.

All they needed was love. It was not a two-way street.

## The God of Forget

Joseph Nevin (Open Category, Commended)

[Narrated by Caroline Bristow](#)

*Who was the god of Forget?* Andromache did not know their name.

As though an octopus was feeling its way between rocks and broken shells - the Epirote crowd thronged in the market, tendrils of people reaching out into every street. They moved aside as she walked and would not look her in the eye. Perhaps that was for the best: once a man selling dolls had asked her if she had any children - maybe it was a cruel joke, or he was new to the town, and did not know what they had done to her son. Little Astyanax, with eyes of ocean.

She had been a princess of Troy, wife to the noblest man she had ever known. She had fallen asleep each evening in his arms, and woken with the dawn, content and safe in his embrace. They lived a blessed existence, had given themselves totally to one another, and for a few perfect years, their lives had been entwined... but it had been a long time since any of that was true. First came Helen with Paris, then it was Achilles, and Pyrrhus after that. Hector, her father, and Astyanax were all gone, and now her children had the face of their killers. The only thing Andromache had left was Forget.

She walked away from the conspiratorial mutterings and hushing voices of the market, down to the cliff edge so she could look out towards Korkyra. The sea was calm; a rich sapphire. Beneath the surface Andromache caught the flashing scales of a shoal of fish turning suddenly, and towards Helios on the horizon, she saw dolphins tumbling in the evening air.

When Andromache had been a captive, Pyrrhus would show her off to his guests along with the rest of the concubines - few people could claim to have a princess of Troy as their captive. Invariably it was other Greek kings that he received - Andromache always watched them; some were delighted by Neoptolemus' displays, but she could tell that many were less impressed. One time had felt different from the beginning; the prince from Sparta had only looked at her the whole time, smiling falsely whenever Pyrrhus or his courtiers spoke to him. Once everyone had the madness of Dionysus upon them, he took her to one side and spoke low and quick: her son was alive, he said, and he had brought him to Epirus. Pyrrhus was going to travel to Delphi, and the prince would take them all away while he was gone. She could see her son in the market tomorrow. She hadn't had a chance to say anything before he had left her there. She wished she had told him to take him away, and never bring him there

again. If he was alive then no good could come from his presence in the town. Could he really have been switched with another that day?

That night she allowed herself to pray that it might have been true; to every name of every god: gods with foreign names, gods with names that mortals cannot say, and gods with no names at all. Why had she prayed? She had seen him hurled from the city walls and scattered across the ground like grain. Somehow, she had managed to believe that her memory was wrong.

But when she saw that young man standing there in the market - the boy who was supposed to be hers - she saw a warm face of kindness, but eyes of sky.

She didn't return to the market the next day, nor would she allow the Spartan prince to corner her at court. Who knew if he understood what that meant, but he left soon after, and so now she only prayed to Forget; if she had forgotten his eyes that day, she could have had her son back.

It wasn't much longer after that that news came back of Pyrrhus' murder at Delphi. Andromache should have been overjoyed, but she felt nothing at all.

"Mother." It was Mollossos, the eldest of her children with Pyrrhus. "I made you something".

He held it out to her - a little baby boy made of clay. Arms folded and squeezed together, curled little legs, an oversized head with fingerprint dimples forming hollow empty eyes. He had brought her gifts before, but never one like this. Always simple pathetic creations and a plea for gratitude, as though anyone other than a six year-old could be impressed by ugly, twisted earth. But this was something different. Something for her to use. An attempt at understanding.

What did he expect her to do with it? Add it to her own offerings as though she had made it herself? As though the hands that pressed it into shape had any conception of what losing a child meant. He was just a boy, he could not hope to understand. It was insulting that he had tried.

He looked up at her with yearning oxen eyes, looking quite unlike his father, were it not for the sharp brow of the Peleides.

“Very good, my dear,” she said, pretending not to have even looked at it, and relished the hurt she heard in his silence. She left him there at the cliff edge.

*Every child is born an immortal, and only becomes mortal as they grow.*

Once the sun had gone, she made offerings to the god of Forget, four blue stones from the sea, two for Hector’s eyes, and two for Astyanax, as well as two milky white stones for her old father Eëtion.

When Andromache slept, she could see all the faces she knew from her childhood. She played with them, screaming and running, carelessly and carefree splashing through the water meadows of Cilicia. She was a child again, and there was no evil in the world. It was not a time of work or worry - emotions were felt truly, but it was not a place where pain or hatred could linger. There was no time, and there was no age.

*Every child is born an immortal, for they do not yet know that everyone dies.*

When she wakes she is terrified - a young girl pulled into a savage future, submerged in unfamiliar hurts, until she remembers who she is.

*She could not pray to the god of Forget - she did not know their name.*

Her eldest living son did not stir when she took it from his bedside, and few were awake to notice a woman in the night leading a lamb away towards the woods.

Andromache knelt in a forest clearing beside a silent, motionless lake. The crown of trees was a black outline around her, but the water was as bright as the sky - from its mirror depths shone Galaktikos Kyklos; Andromeda, Perseus and Orion watching once from above, and again from below. All was quiet save for the lamb pulling at tufts of grass behind her.

There, surrounded by gazes, she dug a pit and into it poured drink for those she had lost: milk sweetened with honey - her son's favourite to staunch his tears; wine to conquer her husband's nerves before battle; cool water to slick her old father's throat; and barley sprinkled over all, for the crows that did not feast on their bodies.

Finally she placed a little clay baby, with twisted legs and dimples for eyes, and she prayed - for the first time in years - to the gods of Remember: Mynemosyne, Ouranos who watches over all, Hera, The Moirai, Hades - Zeus Cthonos. She cried out every memory she had, the first time she met Hector, the day their son was born, the three of them together - Astyanax cowering in fear at the long horse hairs on Hector's helm, and herself laughing through her tears.

For what might have been hours, she spoke all she could recall. Then, exhausted, shivering, drenched in tears and sweat, she grabbed the knife suddenly and opened the throat of the lamb. As blood cascaded down into the pit, up roared the spirits from Erebus.

Orbiting, warping and shrinking back, wheeling around to stare at her in terror, the shoals flashed as they turned in the darkness, tendrils filling the gaps in the trees. They were a dancing court, a fearful crowd in the market, the horrors of the blackest depths of encircling Oceanus - all of life and none. She called her son's name, and they shrieked in fear at the proffered identity. Between them all she searched for some familiarity, or something she could recognise, but she saw only the wailing multitudes; breathless faces of horror, and eyes of shadow - the mindless children of Forget.

## Ode to an Odyssey

Vijay Hare (Open Category, Commended)

[Narrated by Katrina Kelly](#)

The wreckage of a million lives surrounds him.

Troy is more a space than a place now, a world of charred ruin that stretches from horizon to horizon. To the king's eye, it appears a storm has swept through the city. Destroying all too weak to stand before it, stealing away whatever is left.

Which, the king ruefully reflects, is precisely what has happened.

The Achaeans are many things, as the last ten years have proved. But they are thorough, when it comes to war. Kings, princes, men sired from gods; men who live and breathe their honour like a creed, whose honour was the reason they sailed into this war. These same men plunder and pillage with the prudence of pirates.

The Achaeans' rage has burned Troy to the ground, but their grasping, avaricious hands come for all that remains. Booty. Trophies.

Slaves.

Some of the fires are still burning. Ashes scourge and singe the king's feet as he walks. Bereft of his mantles of kingliness – the silken robed weave in the colours of Ithaca's royal house, or the sculpted bronze breastplate with its iron and pewter trimming – he looks no different from the other waifs and strays picking their way through Troy's ruins. Waiting out their time, because what else is there to do, before the Achaeans take them away in chains?

The king keeps walking, heedless of the pain of treading ashes underfoot. He made this happen, after all. Troy was brought to ruin by his genius. A few burns to his feet seem fair recompense.

He is far into the ruins now, though this is no aimless meander. He feels little fellowship with those Achaeans remaining on Troy's shores. Menelaus is still showboating, crudely parading

that thrice-cursed wife of his with all the other spoils. Agamemnon still plays at being king, pretending *he* is what bound the Achaean host together, rather than a tenuous oath they all long regret swearing. He has little desire to witness either.

So, yes. Any chance to be alone is a chance worth taking. And out here, with only ghosts and slaves-to-be for company, he is alone in every way that matters.

Alone, that is, except for the woman he seeks.

\* \* \*

The Trojans called this place Mount Ida, though 'Mount' is a generous title. Not quite a peak to rival Olympus or Cithaeron, but still high enough to give a god's eye view over the now-dead city.

If the king's quarry is anywhere to be found, it will be here.

Ida is as bare and desolate as the land it overlooks, though this has been a more languid, more fastidious pillaging. The mountain's immense forests and glades are long gone, having fed the Achaeans' wooden walls and fortifications for ten years of war. The king looks out, across the plain, right the way down to the strip of coastline.

Ships are leaving the bay, more and more each day. The Myrmidons were among the first, leaderless without their two princes. Diomedes and the Argives weren't far behind, the Achaean champion still unnerved by his brush with the Palladium. Most others followed suit in the weeks since. Nestor led his Pylians home this day, and with few slaves left to harvest, there is little sport left for Idomeneus and the Cretans.

Home is calling to the king, too. At night he practically tastes the Ithacan sea breeze. He hears Argos' contented whining in his dreams, smells Penelope's perfume on the sheets when he wakes.

He wants to leave, with every fibre of his being. Leave this blasted hellscape behind him and forget the war he was forced to wage. But he cannot. To even begin on that path will damn

him, locking the very earth around his feet. To take a single step towards the family he forsook will only widen the chasm between them.

The king is damned if he does, and damned if he doesn't.

A woman's voice, calling his name, cuts through his darkening thoughts.

'I see you've finally found me, Odysseus,' it greets him, regal yet sarcastic. 'Hail, sacker of cities.'

\* \* \*

She stands at the crest of Ida's topmost plateau, regarding her slain home with emptiness in her eyes. Her hair, once a shimmering fall of barley, is now knotted and dishevelled into ruin. An 'A' daubed in filth across her slaves' rags denotes her as property of the man who has claimed her.

Her face is tired. Haunted. Crushed. But a glimmer of Priam's haughtiness remains in those features.

Odysseus, son of Laertes, ruler of the Isle of Ithaca, cannot meet her gaze. He has accrued many nicknames in his life, some of them cruel, all of them deserved. But this one particular epithet seems to have stuck, in recent weeks. It is one he could have done without.

'You cannot be here, Cassandra,' he avows. 'You are the crowning piece of Agamemnon's war spoils. Your lineage and your foresight may protect you for now. But neither will grant you any liberties, that I promise you.' Odysseus sighs, despite himself. Agamemnon has a taste for women and prophets. Briseis, and many others since, have learnt that painful lesson.

Cassandra's reply is a mirthless laugh. 'Have no fear, son of Laertes. I know exactly what awaits me once I board that creature's boat.' She turns, regarding the king with bloodshot opal eyes. 'And I have seen what lies ahead of you, when you finally leave this place.'

Odysseus has no answer. Seeing his own reflection in the prophetess' eyes is an unwelcome truth. Scars mar his form from head to toe, so many and so thick. The mark he took during his grandsire's boar hunt is scarcely even visible.

He grimaces. Rare are the moments he is glad for Penelope's absence.

'But of course,' Cassandra interrupts his maudlin musing, 'you have your own portents to heed.' Another laugh, another lightless smile. 'And this is why you've yet to leave, king of Ithaca? Too scared to face the inevitable?'

Odysseus tears his gaze from her, looking back out towards the sea.

'Twenty years, prophetess.' How quaint it feels, to finally speak the fear he has nursed for a decade. '*Twenty years* would pass if I left for Troy, the oracle foresaw. Twenty years before I made it home again.'

He looks back at Cassandra, perversely warming to sharing his fears. 'Ten of them gone, spent playing politics and razing your home to the ground. Which means another ten, once I reach the open sea.' He swallows, looking at his feet. 'So what is there to do, princess? What travails and tribulations are there to come, that can keep me from Ithaca for *yet another decade*? What walls can lie between us that any mortal can hope to break?'

Is that a tear, gracing the city-sacker's cheek? How curious.

'I am a man, Cassandra. Old. Tired. Beloved of no god, no matter what the others think. Whatever can keep me and Penelope apart for ten more years...' Does she hear the waver in his voice? 'How can I measure myself against it?'

The Fates have been right about enough already. The apple. The plague. Achilles, dying in the Gate's shadow. Ajax's disgrace. And the horse that ended it all. What can a mere mortal do against that?

Where the king is breaking, the prophetess is already broken. Cassandra's unwashed hand meets Odysseus' cheek, lifting his gaze once more to meet hers.

‘The Fates are spun without our say,’ she replies. Her voice is soft, but not consoling. ‘But those paths mean nothing, without our walking them. A short life and harrowing death await me in Mycenae. This I know.’

She releases his face, looking at him, looking *through* him. ‘And a long, arduous journey lies ahead of you. With a terminus that is more sorrowful still. We can stay here, you and I,’ she gestures out across the rubble of Troy, ‘as king and queen of this kingdom of dust. But neither of us will avoid our Fates by doing so. You and I are walking our paths already.’ Her smile comes from nowhere, so pitying it makes the king’s skin crawl. ‘We just don’t know it yet.’

The light fades a notch. Afternoon is turning to evening.

‘Agamemnon will be missing you,’ Odysseus finally replies. He sounds distant, so very distant. ‘Enough now, girl. I’m taking you back to the camp.’

There is no defiance left in Cassandra’s eyes. The Trojan princess does not protest as Odysseus sweeps her into his arms, carrying her wispy, malnourished body untenderly down the mountain.

New lives await them both, once they have left Ida’s gentle slopes. Looming and inescapable.

Perhaps. Neither of them will ever know for sure.

‘I thought nobody believed your prophecies,’ Odysseus idly remarks as they descend.

‘But Odysseus,’ Cassandra replies through half-closed eyes. ‘You *are* Nobody. And one day, sooner than you think, that fact will save your life.’

## The Last Song

Lorna Lee (Open Category)

[Narrated by Daisy Dunn](#)

When I was a child, my mother often brought me here. She used to point to the distant reflection of sunlight glistening on the water below, bending low and whispering to me that it was the gilded manes of Poseidon's horses, glittering gold as they danced beneath the waves. I have not seen the sea for ten years; and now the dying light flickers feebly against the water.

A wild shriek slices through the silence. I turn and watch a young couple stumble home, drunk on their own happiness; filled with hope that the Greeks are dipping oars for home, that the war is over at last. I draw a shaky breath, returning to my vigil; the distant outline of Tenedos smirks at me as I look out across the empty plains. I learnt a long time ago that any hope Troy has from the gods is fantasy.

The soft song of flutes clings to the evening wind as I weave through the tangled maze of passages, back towards the palace, watching the crowds whirl and sway to their joyful music. A warm breeze whispers through the streets, causing the shadows to flicker and cavort menacingly in the torchlight. My heart tightens. The last hours of Troy are falling away like golden sand and all they can do is celebrate.

The festivities suddenly swim before my eyes. I barely have time to steel myself for what is coming before I am surrounded by ravenous flames, glowing orange behind thick clouds of dust. The ground trembles beneath me as I tear through the streets, shards of shattered masonry crunching beneath my feet and a bitter gale lashing at my face. I hurtle round a corner, tripping over the bodies that choke the streets; I try not to look at their faces as I stumble on, fighting back the bile rising in my throat and trying to ignore the chilling wails drifting out of the smoke.

I have no need of the visions anymore. The terrible scenes are seared into my memory; my lips murmur every word and my face twists with every scream. When I try to resist I can feel him, Apollo, seizing my mind like riptide; I feel like a ship caught in a seething surge, carried away by racing waves. I twist my fingers around my hair, knitting myself to the present. I am always terrified that I will not be able to find my way back.

The passage widens and I come to a standstill, scowling at the monster towering above me. Heavy with hidden death, its wooden legs are wreathed in gold that snakes upwards towards the belly, where the swords of Greece lie in wait. Behind the great horse the temple of Athena

glimmers in the pale light and my throat sears with screams I haven't made yet. Just then I spot movement beside the temple. I am not alone. 'Please!' I breathe, 'I need you to listen to me...'

'I have; and now you must listen to me', Hecabe moves out of the shadows, contemplating me sadly; 'Cassandra, this silliness has got to stop...'

'You will never believe me, even when the walls of Troy are blackened by fire!' My eyes burn with tears. 'All of this, these festivities, they mean nothing! Soon the beaches will ring with the cries of captured women and everyone you love will be dead. Polydorus will float adrift on the salty foam; unwept, unburied, betrayed; and Polyxena will be wrestled from your arms, sacrificed at the tomb of Achilles. Odysseus, his tongue dripping honeyed venom, will come to tear her small hand from yours and her breath will be stolen by the sword of Neoptolemus; her life fading from her eyes like the last spark in a dying fire, flickering and burning brightly, before it is lost forever, dissolving into smoke. Your husband...'

'Cassandra, enough!' Her eyes flash.

'No! I must watch it happen, again and again!' my voice breaks, 'Some fresh grief looms endlessly; and I am here, always waiting for your tears!'

The words die on my lips as I look into my mother's eyes, blank and glazed, and my heart feels numb as I walk away; my feet slippery on the blood that will soon soak the paving stones. They will never understand what it is to feel completely alone. I have heard people talking about me, heedless of my presence as though I am already a ghost drifting amongst the smoking ruins. The kindest suggest that I am insane. A bitter laugh escapes my lips as I enter the citadel, I only wish it was so simple.

My hand skims the walls as I meander through the palace, the cool stone shuddering beneath my fingertips, like an ancient tree that is held in the earth by a single root and could be felled by the faintest breeze. Sometimes I see the future as it could have been had we burned that infernal offering, had Paris not included Helen in his plunder, had three goddesses not fought over an apple. But these happy scenes ache with grief. They are just dreams, passing in the night.

I have almost reached my chambers. I round a corner, almost colliding with Helen; I was so lost in thought I had forgotten she would be here tonight. Her sharp eyes flicker to mine, weighing my expression, but she walks purposefully onwards. I pause, listening to the soft caress of her footsteps fade; when suddenly the hollow chambers are filled with the most beautiful melody that has ever touched my ears. But my heart throbs with sorrow as I slide

down the hard stone to the floor, hot tears spilling onto my cheeks. This is the last song I will ever hear.

The swords continue to flash behind my tear-soaked eyes as I sit curled on the floor, the smell of smoke stinging my nostrils. It's all the same. Blasts of fire rip the earth apart, the bellowing wind whipping up the flames. Mud spatters against my skin as I stagger through the confusion, flakes of ash clinging to my hair. The awful wailing rips through the night and the faces... My heart quickens. They are the same faces, warped with fear; but I have no memory of them. I am suddenly aware of the numbing fog drifting eerily around me. I look up, suspicion smouldering; the twinkling stars are barely visible through the smoke and completely in the wrong places. 'No!' I feel fingernails tear my skin, my breath catching in my throat as I choke on the truth. This is not Troy.

Everything is silent. I open my eyes, shivering in the darkness. My face stings with scratches and my limbs are drenched with sweat, a single torch splutters at the end of the passageway. I crouch against the wall and let the cool stone soothe my aching skin, twisting my hair around my fingers, losing myself in the dancing flames. Finally, clutching the wall for support, I drag myself from the floor; but I have barely taken three steps when I hear a terrible scream ring out into the night. I halt, dread pounding at my heart. One by one the cries toll like warning bells, swelling until the whole city is a symphony of screams. My mouth goes dry as the crashing of boots echoes out all over the citadel, panicked voices calling out what I already know. It is time. I try to steady my breathing, unpicking my trembling fingers from my hair as I turn and make my way back towards the temple of Athena.

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The clouds blush with a rosy glow as the first signs of morning trickle across the sky, flooding the smoking ruins with golden light. The herald set to guard me shifts uncomfortably as what is left of Troy emerges out of the darkness. I watch the last of the plunder being loaded onto the ship, already groaning with gold, and my heart picks up like the wind as I sway to the gentle rhythm of the waves tumbling onto the shore. The tide is coming in. I think about the vision, turning it over and over in my mind. This will not be the last city razed to the ground. There will always be another ending, a final song; and now it is my turn.

A fierce gust rushes through the camp; the ships creak ominously and my torn dress flutters around my ankles. I have seen this moment so many times, but this is the last. The herald moves cautiously towards me; but just once, I turn away from the future, away from the past, and I let it fill me, the cold wind blowing in from the sea, the salty tang of the air and the sunlight glittering on the waves.

## I Am Too Much in The Sun

Heather Chapman (Senior Category)

[Narrated by Alex McAuley](#)

He walks barefoot along the lip of the trench, his sword a metronome's beat, knocking against his side with every step. It is quiet, for now, the mist smothering all sound out of the hills, and the soldiers he passes walk with chins pressed to chests against the cold. He has gotten used to this constant waiting, time wavering between battle and silence, never fully tipping into the extremes. Sleep is the only interlude, but even that is different to before. When he puts his head to the pillow, he pretends he is dying, that the ground is cold and soft, and the silence hides numbed combat.

Before, sleep felt like coming alive. Before, in dream, he walked among heroes.

It is stupid to reminisce, but he does it anyway. His father's words, second-hand promises snatched from fate's lips, swearing he would be remembered. He was not skilled with weapons, not gifted with word or action, but the dreams, the only sign he might be different, gave hope.

In sleep, he visited the house. Wallpaper the colour of cherry juice, rooms with golden ceilings, the soles of his feet memorising the step and the turn of the corridor better than the maze of his father's house. The rooms opening up before him, a breath taken slowly. Heroes, walking barefoot across the floorboards.

Their faces always held a sort of familiarity, seen before in his father's stories but never in this strange, imagined flesh. His gaze caught on the boy in the corner, sat with hands knotted. Pearls of calluses brailed his hands like snowdrop bulbs, a map of battles fought a thousand years ago. He spoke in a voice so soft it was barely audible, stories of men falling out of row, blood spilling between patchwork metal helmets like wine out of iron bowls, rust snowfall across his golden hair. Memories of the forgotten.

He'd listened, or thought he had. Nothing felt real when he woke. Remembering was like trying to collect grains of sand. It was too easy in the numb morning to turn the stories into pearls of gold, forgetting they were sharp enough to wear his skin down and make his fingertips bleed.

And every morning, he sat opposite his father at breakfast, watched him speak of war and prophecy, naming him, his son, the same way he named the characters in his ancient stories. Then his dreams faded to a golden haze - proof he was gifted, and nothing else. War would come, and he would be a hero.

Around him, soldiers trudge back to underground bunks. He pictures them from the gods' eyes, cloud-blurred and hazy. From above, they must become a trail of ants stumbling through the grass, trenches mapping the veins of some giant creature. He wonders what thought went into the creation of this, all of this. Where had they placed its head? Where is the heart, stuttering with rifle flare?

His faith in the gods faded as fast as his dreams. He remembers the shrines in his father's house, coins palmed magician-like into marble hands. He believed him, ate every story whole and let them slip like molten gold into his stomach. Now they sit heavy beneath his skin, warm enough to heat his fingers when he passes absent hands across his ribs, checking in the dead of night to see if he is still breathing, but not enough to catch bullets out of the air.

The sun dips under the mist, a watery orange eye on the horizon. Soon it will be dark. He knows his routine - to return to his bunk, feign sleep, flip coins and wish for some golden road to take him back to the house. Then to wake up after another dreamless night, pulling on clothes with shaking hands and brushing night off his clothes. He wonders sometimes whether it is better to stay awake, but the thought never sticks. Every evening is a new chance to return to the house, the heroes, and he can't help himself.

He turns on his heels, back to routine. Lying in his bunk, the other soldiers' swords are his nightlights; curved ribbons of moonlight, clattering gently like windchimes. If his father were here, he would paint them into some story. Rows of crescent moons, or the silver ribs of a vast creature. But in the bright darkness, all he can see are numb fingers, hilts fumbled from palm to palm, bone and muscle and footprints in the shadow.

He turns to face the wall, drawing the skin of the blanket around his hands. Sometimes at night, he thinks he sees Achilles in the walls. He stands at the edge of his bed, or paces the ceiling, winding shadows around his fingers like thread through a loom. In every soldier's breath he hears his echo, the wish for remembrance, to live forever.

One day he finds himself running, stumbling between shots in the remains of a field while bombs and bullets ribbon the ground into blisters. It is winter, the snow dust under his feet. Soldiers run in and out of his vision, flickering like candle flames.

When the bullets hit him, he feels confusion before anything. It does not hurt, not as much as he expected - what did he expect? This is not a familiar thought, not well trodden enough to be mistaken for memory. His father's voice curses molten gold in his heart, wringing his hands. It will be a strange sort of funeral, if he is ever remembered at all. *Bring me back to my house*, he thinks, thoughts stumbling. The sky is falling into pieces around him. *Lay me down there, tell them I tried.*

The snow is melting underneath him, dissolving against the retracting warmth of his cheek. He closes his eyes and lets it ache through his bones, but instead it begins to recede, softening to a familiar glow. He opens his eyes, breathes crimson air and realises he is home, underneath the same sun blinded golden marble, and suddenly Achilles is in front of him, and he wants to press his hands to his cheek just to feel the fading pulse of someone else who gave the blood in their veins to be a hero, who succeeded while he failed. He looks at Achilles' face, but shadows are beginning to crowd his silhouette, misting darkness across his lips, his eyes. Panic grips his stomach; he stumbles for comfort without knowing who he is comforting.

*They still speak of you*, he says. They are the first words that come to his lips, even as darkness clouds the edges of his vision, the only thing he knows matters. But Achilles' face turns to dust in front of him. His voice is the barest echo.

*I know.*

ὄλος

Seung-A-Han (Senior Category)

[Narrated by Caroline Bristow](#)

A great fleet of triremes float in the harbour of Aulis, their sails unmoving in the absence of wind. Men swarm the town restlessly, shouting and arguing; some are already drunk, although the sun has only just set, evident by their red faces and ungainly stumbling. As they push and shove their way into the few taverns that still have room for more customers, the men do not notice three hunched figures shrouded in black cloth. Their countenance hidden, they watch the various Achaean soldiers, mostly from Sparta and Thebes, though they recognise some others like the towering stature of Ajax of Salamis, or the cunning warrior Diomedes of Argos. But only one man catches their attention, and as he walks by with a slightly older man, deep in conversation, the three figures glance at each other from under their hoods knowingly and begin to hobble after them. Each holds a staff; in unison, they strike the cobble with each step, as if to invoke the gods.

No one pays mind to the three old crones who shuffle into tavern, inconspicuous amongst the jostling men who fight for the last drop of wine or the best chunk of mouldering bread. They only watch as the man they followed sits down in a secluded corner, pulling his companion to sit next to him with a fond look in his eyes. The stone hearth in the middle of the tavern crackles, warding away the winter cold and drawing their attention onto the bard by the fire who is telling a story.

“-and with a valiant effort, the noble Perseus sliced off the Gorgon’s head, and it fell to the ground, the snakes of her hair hissing in fury!” The bard uses his hands animatedly to re-enact the tale. “And from her neck sprang two beings: a man with a golden sword, known as Chrysaor, and,” he pauses for dramatic effect, much to the bored groans of the soldiers, “the divine winged horse, Pega-“

“Don’t you have any other story?” This shout from one of the customers is followed by grunts of agreement, punctuated by the slamming of cups on the wooden tables. “We have heard the tale of Perseus and his oh-so-good deeds too many times!”

Another man joins in. “If you have no decent story left in that cowardly head of yours, be of some use! Perhaps we should give you over to Agamemnon and he can sacrifice you instead of his precious daughter to appease Lady Artemis. Then we shall finally be out of this wretched town and on our way to Troy!”

The bard shrinks in on himself, bellows of laughter rising in the crowd.

“Alas, although amusing, it is not this man’s time to join Hades in the Underworld.”

The tavern grows silent at the rasping voice, and all the men turn to stare at the three figures in the shadows. Before any of them can voice their objection, the three speak again in unison, their hoarse voices sending chills down the men’s spines.

“We shall tell you men a story.” They limp out of the darkness, the clatter of their staffs echoing in the silence. “Not a tale of ‘oh-so-good deeds’,” the three crones approach the hearth, and the bard scrambles out of their way in fear, “but a tragedy that befell upon one hero.”

At once, the fire in the braziers around the tavern are extinguished, but the murmurs of panic are soon drowned out by the exclamations of horror. Before the men’s very eyes, the great blaze of the hearth flares violently, now-green tongues of flame licking hungrily at the stones like a wild beast. Shadows around the room writhe and twist in a grotesquery of shapes, coiling around the three figures like serpentine monsters.

They turn to face their audience and their eyes glint ominously in the flickering light. “Let us begin.”

\* \* \* \* \*

There was once a warrior, the greatest of all the Greek heroes, quick-footed and valiant, slayer of hundreds. You will, no doubt, have heard of him. He was seemingly invulnerable, his prowess so great that no weapon dared to shed the blood of this legendary warrior. Yet he was also the hero of grief, a reminder of the many losses he suffered, one of those being his cherished lover by his enemy’s hands.

These events unfolded in a war, one of thousands upon thousands of deaths. And though the warrior wanted to withdraw from the seemingly endless bloodshed, his lover convinced him otherwise. He allowed them to wear his honourable armour and lead the Greek forces into battle. And so, impersonating the warrior, the lover killed many of the enemy in his stead, in a brave effort to drive them back to their ships.

But they got carried away in their lust for violence; some even say that the gods removed their wits. Whatever the cause, the lover lost their life in war. With just one stab in the stomach, they were torn away from the hero and into the hands of Death.

The hero's broken heart filled with an enraged desire for vengeance. He could not wear his own armour, for it had been stolen by the killer. But the gods took pity on him and gifted him not only a new set, but also a shield. And this shield was a work of art; it depicted the universe in its embossing: the heavens, the land, and the sea; the sun, the moon, and the stars; conflict and discord alongside peace and harmony. A shield worthy of his revenge.

Wielding this great shield, the hero sought out his lover's murderer. He was so angered that Zeus himself had to send down the gods to restrain him. The warrior chased the killer three times around the city of war before the latter decided to gather up the courage to fight the legendary hero. It was a futile effort. The hero's wrath, his rage, and the heartbreak that the killer had caused drove him to kill ruthlessly, and he dragged the bloody corpse in the dirt afterwards.

But the Fates were not on his side, and the hero's death was later brought about by the arrow of the killer's cowardly brother. It pierced his flesh, and his thread of life snapped; at last, he was reunited with his lover in the Underworld.

In both life and death, their threads of life were intertwined: when one snapped, the other frayed, soon breaking too. The moon to his sun; the stars watched over them both.

\* \* \* \* \*

The three crones hold up a string, winding it around their bony fingers and tracing the outline of their gnarled hands. They smile: a frightening twist of their lips that reveals their crooked teeth, like jagged flints set in their sickly gums. When the men look closer at the string, they see that it is, in fact, two threads twisted together in a silvery coil.

A sharp twinge of dread stirs inside of them.

As they watch the middle figure bring out cutting shears, the men hold their breath, looking on in apprehension when the crone bears the glinting blade to the delicate thread. The three laugh: a cruel cackling that echoes throughout the silent room, save for the sharp crackle of

the fire behind them. Illuminated by the green flame, their silhouettes are indiscernible: they merge to form a huge monster.

They wave their spindly fingers in the air, like the claws of a beast, and the fire seems to grow bigger, smoking cinders raining down upon the men, much to their fear. The tavern is unbearably hot now, but the men dare not move, frozen in place by the unnatural happenings in front of them. The shadows flout the light and gather closer and closer to the cronos, swathing them in a darkness that grows and expands and

They disappear.

\* \* \* \* \*

From the murky depths of the sea, a nymph slips out from the water: Thetis is her name. Under the guise of mortal woman, she silently walks to the nearest tavern but does not enter. Standing by the window, she looks in through a crack in the shutters, and her lips twitch into a sad smile.

Though she has done her best to warn him, Thetis fears for her heroic son and his lover, who would soon be wrenched away from him.

“Patroclus! Stop drinking my wine and give it back!”

She startles at the sudden shout that comes from inside the tavern. Looking in again, she sees her son wrapping his arms around his companion, a smile on his face, his eyes crinkled with laughter as he snatches back the cup.

Thetis lets out a shaky breath, watching the white puff dissipate into the air. She looks up at the stars. Achilles would be fine, she tells herself; after all, he and Patroclus are together.

## The Fox Who Charmed The Snake

Benjamin Howell (Open Category)

[Narrated by Douglas Cairns](#)

“Why are we always the ones sent to fetch things?” moaned Odysseus. “All because some face-painted prophet reckons Apollo told him something.”

“As an augur, Calchas has no rival in the camp,” replied Diomedes. “Everyone trusts his interpretations. Besides, he was right about Chryseis.”

The black ship lurched violently. Odysseus clutched the bulkhead to steady himself. “Well, to an extent. Without all that business, Agamemnon wouldn’t have insulted Achilles by pinching his prize, and then he wouldn’t have sulked and—”

“Sulked?” cut in Diomedes, astonished. “Wouldn’t *you* have sulked? It’s not ideal, I agree, but we should leave it to the gods.”

These measured words silenced his great friend. Odysseus’ eyes, so rarely betraying such a hint of feeling, returned to the horizon.

Swaying metronomically, the two men were sailing the northern stretch of the Aegean Sea. Their destination was Lemnos, an island not far from the barren shores of Troy. The outcome of their mission would, they hoped, bring an end to the Trojan War and restore Helen to her rightful husband. Over the course of the decade, the Greeks had seen their heroes rise and fall. The greatest, swift-footed Achilles, now inhabited the halls of Hades. In the chasm left by his death stood Diomedes, Lord of Argos, and Odysseus, King of Ithaca.

The Lord of Argos attempted to buoy his forlorn friend, who wore his frustrations plainly on his weathered face: “I know you regret being at the mercy of the gods, but it can’t last long.” Odysseus sighed. The steady rise and heavy fall of his shoulders mirrored the powerful surge of the wine-dark waves through which their ship cut its course. He had sailed away from this island once before; he hadn’t contemplated having to return.

“It’s not the gods as much as these augurs,” he huffed. “I respect and fear the gods more than most mortals. I just wish they’d deliver messages themselves; instead, we’re

forced to listen to some self-important windbags who stand around all day bird-watching, inventing some drivel that they report as gospel”—he affected a voice—“*My lord, this morning the raven croaked, a sure sign that the war is going in our favour!*” Well, I can tell ‘my lord’ that at the end of a day’s fighting. We don’t need...”

Odysseus tailed off and leant back, stretching his arms as if in mockery of a bird’s wings. He heaved another sigh and continued: “I do respect and fear the gods, but what I’ve no time for is a fool who spouts bilge disguised as divine intelligence.”

His friend chuckled. “Indeed, as Athena’s favourite, *you* know all about the benefits of divine intelligence!”

In truth, they both enjoyed Athena’s favour, each exhibiting one of her fundamental virtues. Odysseus possessed the bright-eyed goddess’s wisdom, which inspired him to outfox his enemies with superior intellect and devious cunning. Diomedes, however, shared her warrior spirit: with Athena at the reins, his chariot sped into combat; with her guidance, his spear sent countless Trojan sons to the underworld. There was little to set them apart. They were two sides of the same coin: toss it, and whichever way it landed signified doom for those who stood against them.

A little way ahead, two rocky promontories projected into the water, creating a curved bay that opened to embrace the black ship.

“I’m not even sure he’s still alive,” mused Odysseus. The ship reared up again, slicing through the foamy lips of the water, sending spray in all directions.

“From what you’ve said, he was in terrible shape when you left him,” replied Diomedes, who wedged his round shield between two planks for stability. “We’ll soon know. Let’s hope he’s happy to receive you, otherwise we’re sunk.”

Odysseus’ war-wearied mind was unusually susceptible to nostalgia; nearing the beach, thoughts of his wife, his son, and his lofty halls swirled in his head.

Diomedes’ familiar voice shook Odysseus from his reverie: “Remind me why he’s there and not at Troy. I thought he was with the rest of you courting Helen; I thought he took the

oath.” “He was and he did,” replied Odysseus curtly. He swept his salt-matted mane from his face, and continued: “Old Tyndareus made us all swear to defend whichever man his daughter chose.” “And he broke his promise?” presumed Diomedes.

“Not yet,” returned Odysseus. “It depends who tells the tale and I’ve heard them all. Most of them reckon Hera poisoned him because he was devoted to Heracles. Then there’s the Tenedos story, did you hear that one? The Mycenaeans like that one.”

“After Achilles killed their king, a vengeful snake crawled out of Apollo’s temple but mistakenly bit him,” intoned Diomedes, as if by rote. “I’m sure Agamemnon spread that one himself to generate some ill will towards Achilles during their spat.”

“Regardless of where it came from, a snake did in fact bite him. The wound festered and rendered him immobile. Honestly, it stunk to high heaven, like milk when it’s left out in the sun. We had no choice in the matter. We had to sail on without him.”

The ‘him’ they referred to was Philoctetes, who possessed the famed arrows of Heracles, arrows tipped with poison, arrows which never missed. This was the man Odysseus had convinced the Greek commanders to ditch on Lemnos. Yet Calchas had prophesied that the city of Troy would not fall unless they recovered these arrows, so here was Odysseus, the wily fox, in a position he seldom occupied: tail ignominiously between his legs, sailing the seas towards a man he’d abandoned, begging for forgiveness. Those were the facts, but the ever-cunning King of Ithaca would sooner die than reveal his shame; his heroic pride, and his even more renowned ego, was too great for that.

Their ship shuddered up the beach. “Well, you’re back now,” declared Diomedes. “Let’s go see what’s left of him,” said Odysseus grimly.

Bronze clashed and iron clattered as the two heroes gathered their effects: helmets, shields, spears, swords. They disembarked.

A sharp hiss followed by two dull thuds disturbed the placid scene. Half-buried in the sand before their godlike feet was a pair of arrows.

An embittered voice spat out: “I wondered if ever I would see you again, *my glorious Ithacan king.*”

Diomedes stepped forward to speak, but the creak of the bowstring tightening stayed his words.

“With you, Diomedes, I have no quarrel,” returned the marksman. “You conduct yourself with the heroic dignity of your father. Why our people hold you in such esteem is obvious—unlike your ‘noble’ companion.”

Diomedes inclined his head, grateful for the compliment, and plucked one of the arrows from the sand. It was long, straight and fletched with the feathers of exotic birds. He twirled the shaft between his thumb and forefinger, careful to avoid its poisoned tip.

Odysseus then stepped forward: “Philoctetes, King of Meliboea, you who lit the funeral pyre of lion-hearted Heracles, on whom he bestowed his arrows which never miss their mark, hear my words. We come from across the sea to return you to our ranks, so you can take your place among our heroes and restore—”

“Heroes?” Philoctetes snapped, disdain dripping from his mouth. “Heracles was a hero! Bellerophon, Cadmus, Perseus were heroes. Long in the memories of mortals will their deeds live! Tell me what hero is there at Troy. You? Ha! You fight with words, with deceptions, with lies! What separates the others from you is action. Words are not heroic; deeds are heroic!”

He nocked another arrow, drew back his bowstring, and took aim. But for the soft flutter of the sails and the gentle lap of the water, all was silent.

A seabird’s sudden squawk sent all eyes skywards. Removing his plumed helmet, Odysseus seemed taller and grander, as if lifted by this airborne omen.

“You upbraid me,” he said, “for my conduct, but what of your own? You languish here, stewing in your loathsome state, ignoring the oath you swore in Sparta: ‘I vow to defend Helen’s chosen husband against anyone who would quarrel with him!’ Here I stand, at the behest of Helen’s husband, commanding you to uphold that oath. Deny him, stay here, and by your own measure you are no better than me.”

At this Diomedes grimaced and tightened his grasp on his shield, preparing for the inevitable backlash.

Odysseus went on, undaunted. His words rang out like trumpet blasts before battle: “There is no hero here. A hero would seek Trojan targets for his arrows. I was right to leave you. Philoctetes, master of the bow? No. Philoctetes, oath-breaker.”

The sharp speech wounded Philoctetes’ pride more severely than the snakebite did his body. Odysseus had reminded him of his duty; he now had to discharge it honourably. The bowstring went slack. The arrow returned to its quiver. He limped down to the beach.

As he did, Odysseus suppressed a smirk, satisfied by his own silver-tongued skill. His words had once again won the war.

## The Mother of Heroes

Allan Gaw (Open Category, First Place)

[Narrated by Lindsey Davis](#)

My timbers creak as the salt air finds its way between my ribs. Carrion crows sharpen their razor beaks on my flesh but find no sustenance there. I was shaped from the great prows and deck planks and rudders of their ships and pinned together in three short days by the gods themselves, moulded for a single purpose: to end the war. Those gods gave me a hundred sea-soaked horse hides for protection against flaming arrows hurled from the highest battlements, but the skins have long since dried and cracked. They now lie in brittle broken pieces at my hooves, and most have turned back into the dust from which they came. But still my wooden bones stand ten long decades after I was first given as a gift to this great citadel, and then in turn the city was given back to me as reward for all my labours.

Now, though, everyone has gone and I alone stand watchful guard over this place of empty ruin. The salt-winds that blow in across the plain from the wine-dark sea still stir the blood-stained ashes of Troy. Yet I stand here, a silent sentinel in the agora, waiting for my children to return. Those same winds have worked with the suns of a hundred harsh summers to bleach my bones and I am no longer what I was, but still I stand.

That night a century ago, through the mighty gates of Troy, a hundred ropes drawn by a thousand men dragged me home. My hoof-wheels turned and groaned with the weight of my burden, an expectant mother near her time.

Like any mother, I could feel my children stir within my belly, but I could also hear them speak of me while they thronged my womb. They wondered if my limbs would be strong enough to bear them forth. They worried that my great hard-timbered frame could not protect them from the light of sight. They struggled to hold their tongues and their peace until my time had come. Such innocents as children are, concerning themselves with matters only their mother must contend with.

My children were born in the dark, full-made, well-grieved and helmeted, sword-handed. They came into this world by night and in silence. My midwife was stealth, herself. It was a painless birth, and I watched these brothers spread out through the city's streets at first pad-footed and in the shadows of that Trojan moon. And then the blood began to flow. Throats were slit silent and bellies empty-slashed with bronze. One by one, ten by ten, a hundred by a

hundred the Trojans awoke to the sting of a metallic death. The heavy gates through which I had been drawn into the agora had been closed hard fast at my back.

Now, the binding ropes were cut, the bolts drawn back and the great portal was opening again, pushed in by the weight of an army hungering for victory. The others brought fire to light the way and torch the timbers of the city. Those mighty walls that had been built by the gods, and which had defied every onslaught from without, would be brought down from within by the stolen gift of Prometheus. High on my vantage point, I stood on my rolling beams, proud as I watched my children take the city for me, their mother. And although I could feel the flickering heat from the flames all about me, I was never harmed. My children would never place their own mother in danger.

With dawn came the soft caress of her rosy fingers, and with the ever-spreading light from the East the work of my children was all too plain to see. The gutters ran thick black with Trojan blood, the hacked limbs of men lay still and lifeless, and the wailing of the women violated in the night filled the air like a stench. The houses were still burning, sending great belches of smoke up to the gods like unanswered prayers. The glittering riches of a now impoverished people were already being allocated and loaded on to every ship. And the young were being taken away in chains.

One young man, a Trojan by his dress, slipped past me. He bore an old man clinging upon his back and led a small child by his side. I watched as he lurked before peering around every corner seeking a safe path of escape. When my children were no longer in the agora, he made his way across the empty square towards the open gate. As he passed, he spat upon my hoof and looked up to curse me. I thought to call out to my young, but the look in the man's eyes told me he was nothing now without his home and letting him live might only ensure his telling of my glory.

Now, after another century has slipped through my grasp, when he is long dead and all have surely forgotten that he ever lived, I still stand, whether he told of me or not. There may be vines growing up and through me now, and birds may nest in my salted wooden loins where once I bore my young, but I am still here.

A hundred years more and I still look out through wooden eyes across the broken rooftops and over shattered walls to search the sea for my children who have been gone so very long.

But I am no longer alone. Amongst the rubble of the city, new men in rags now find shelter. They herd their sheep about my feet, and I hear them talk about the wind. They build their fires, scavenging around the agora for kindling. Piece by piece, they take of me what the years have forced me to release.

One child looks up and asks his mother if I can talk. She shakes her head and tells him that, whatever kind of creature I was, I am now long dead. She is wrong. I will still be here when she is gone, and that child is stooped and grey because the memory of me will last forever. My children might be heroes whose rage and speed and cunning are sung of in epics, but if they are heroes then I am the mother of heroes and greater still. I was the one who gave birth to victory, I mothered their peace, made great their defeat. My glory will ever outlast my rotting bones.

I feel the shepherds pull and tear at my limbs as winter approaches and I watch their flames rise higher. They roast their lamb in the night and sing while my bones burn and keep them warm. These godless people trailing after their flocks climb upon my back to steal my mane, to take my tail, to pull at my throat. Each night is the same and slowly I am losing any sense of myself. But my identity does not depend on any physical existence. I am so much more than beams and planks of weathered wood sawn and pinned together. I will live forever in the minds of men. In their imaginations and in the darkness of their dreams, I will stand for eternity in this city that my children captured for me and me alone.

I am the daughter of Poseidon and his brine is my blood. But one day as the rest of me crumbles slowly back into this earth, my blood will once again be his. The rain will wash my ashes across the plain to the Scamander and the river will carry me home to the sea. There, I will dwell forever drawing life from the words spoken of me by every tongue.

“She was the wooden war horse of Troy,” they will say, “the great mare fashioned by the gods. Her story will become history when it is spoken of by men yet unborn. A silence given voice and willed as an eternal song for those to come.”

## The Winning Story

### Fate's Engine

Madeleine Friedlein (Senior Category, First Place)

[Narrated by Stephen Fry](#)

The Man Engine was at fault, they say: while bearing human freight,

Though very near the surface smashed - and sent them to their fate.

- K. A

*Daughter of three daughters, beating heart of Nyx, Clotho, counting by the points on your coronet – thirty-three spools of string, from distaff to roll. Taut between such hands and cupped, like scales; the cold weight of Hector's breath.*

\*

Levant Mine, October 1919

In the dry room, Thomas folds his pasty into his trouser pocket, 'Red sky over the headland this morning.'

'I noticed that, pretty to look at - made the morning walk here more bearable.'

'No, well, you know what they say.' Thomas mutters, boots strike the ground as he speaks.

'Aye Shepherd's Warning it is Thomas. If you reminded me every time the sky was red...'  
His brother, Freston, sighs.

Uneasy, Thomas gazes down the tunnel to the mine shaft, where men are already welding clay to their helmets. 'They've patched up that leak in 40 backs with bits of wood and cement, the seabed rattles away above my head, it's close to flooding – I can hear it.'

'I'm sure you can, my Thomas, I'm sure. Fear changes nothing, though, you're still going down.' Says Richards, only a teenager, who grasps his shoulder before striding into the tunnel, chuckling. His voice echoes as he reaches the end, 'Just be glad you don't have to take the ladders.'

The man engine creaks at another pair of boots, candles like so many third eyes, gathered at the heart of the tunnel. The flames watch Thomas where he sits.

‘Hurry now, Tom, or if you want to be a Bal Maiden, just say so!’ Freston jeers, mimicking bringing down a small hammer, crushing larger pieces of stone into smaller ones, as the women did.

Thomas stands and as he walks, wrings his hands in step, in prayer. Christianity felt foolish in the mines. God doesn’t exist under the craggy cliffs of St Just, in the pitch - men and ore disgust him. Their descent begins with a hymn, the Almighty watches them go down and prays at the mercy of something else entirely.

\*

*Lachesis with the measuring staff; rings of wood and timely blood. She winds all thirty-three with practised breath, measuring portions – Patroclus you are no saint, these strings don’t stretch past Lachesis’ stick. A hexad of working white, with six soft arms and Plato’s song – they watch the men inside the earth.*

\*

At the end of song and croust and scraping ore, Thomas leaves the 40 backs tunnel. The wood-cement overhead had held strong, his fear of doom subsides like a dead leg.

The men around him begin to make their way to the man engine, Thomas joins this train. With boots filled with sweat and candlewax he steps onto the platform next to the shaft. He imagines rising, past the count house and the Wesleyan church, into a sky that was another sort of red, under a sun like a treacle tin, pierced with holes. He thinks of this as the engine churns, and of Freston in the dry room, *Did your Shepherd’s Warning come true, Thomas?* Or as they begin their walk over the headland, *See any other omens of death Thomas?* Laughing. Thomas would laugh too, out of relief.

He notices Richards on the sollar below, who looks up at him, ‘Nice to see you smile Thomas’. They move upwards still, some men sing.

The engine drops like a breath; the singing pauses.

Immediately, Thomas looks down at Richards, who replies, ‘It’s fine’, the engine resumes its upward motion, ‘see’, smiling reassuringly. Thomas dares to look up, fathoms and fathoms to the top of the spine. He rubs his dusty brow, hears Richards join the song that resounds the length of the engine.

Then, the engine rod shakes violently. Something gives way, a dark and sickening drop. Debris and men and bits of each fly back down to the heart of the mine, arms pinned between platforms and helmets swinging upside down, hard-boiled survivors and black-wick victims.

Thomas is thrown to the sollar, chest down with dirt between his teeth. Something dull strikes his calf, a leg of timber. He lies there as the cries mount, as the men turn into bodies. Eventually, He lifts the wood, an eye of the engine, and crawls to his feet. He hears a horrible sobbing, nearing the edge of the sollar; he glances down the shaft to see Richards.

He swings, feet caught between where he had been standing and the side platform below. Swinging and sobbing. Thomas wrings his hands, though he feels nothing in them. Not a person, but a heart that was beating so loud it became the walls of the mine. Dragging Richards through a manhole, who is shouting with panic, Thomas brings him up to his sollar, which was strangely empty and hot.

Richards looks at him in terror, his round face studded with cuts, before fainting.

Thomas notices the ladders by the pumping engine shaft, used long before the man engine was introduced, rungs like bone, unsteady as death - sees a path to an escape. He looks down at Richards, breathing still. He could not leave his friend down the mine, he who was a brother and son and knew all the songs, a kid who loved to sing them poorly at the end of the day shift and irritate them all.

He grapples with Richards' body, resting it on his, slim build yet such a huge and impossible weight for his sloped shoulders. Approaching the ladders, rung after rung, there were so many cries, coins of wax, sweat and blood, Thomas passes timber-people with boots for arms and unblinking eyes, who could see in the dark.

People often died from falling. Men dropped from the ladders at the changing of shifts, the merciless ladders. Thank heavens for the man engine!

Thomas was nearing the 150-level shaft, had somehow reached it, carrying this boy. He waits to fall, he waits to die, yet still edges up like some hellish beast, from the depths of a thick grey hell. A pit of monsters hatching from the seed of the buried engine.

Several snakes of rope fall, in front of Thomas, men shout from above. Richards is prized from him, still hanging unconscious, and rises to the pin of light. He is next, his whole body one pulse of adrenaline, a thick rope wound about his torso. His world is grim, grey turning white like the insides of an eye, the blank scroll of rebirth. Is he dead?

The men, his rescuers, lay him down next to Richards, 'A brave one', they say.

\*

*Atropos, the inevitable Moirai, spins thirty-three threads from nail to thumb and braces silver shears. Sarpedon lines up on the blood fields. They shine like milk and cut as silk, discarded in the pit. Once and twice, thirty-one threads lie under the earth. The engine of inner life pulled gently, gutted with one snip. The two threads spared, lying neatly side by side on the outer surface of fate.*