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GLORIOUS EXPLOITS

Ferdia Lennon

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'Very special, very clever, very entertaining'
RODDY DOYLE



Glorious Exploits

‘Bold and totally unexpected, I loved this book. A brilliant novel about friendship, the healing power of art and why we must fight for our dreams. I was hooked from the first page’

Douglas Stuart, author of *Shuggie Bain*

‘In *At Swims-Two-Birds*, Flann O’Brien gave us cowboys riding through Dublin. Now, Ferdia Lennon gives us modern-day Dubliners living among the ancient Greeks. This is a very special, very clever, very entertaining novel’ Roddy Doyle, author of *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*

‘As thrilling for me as the first time I picked up a Kevin Barry novel. *Glorious Exploits* is exuberant, funny, lyrical and profoundly moving. It is, quite simply, a rare beauty’

Sarah Winman, author of *Still Life*

‘With all the blunt humanity of Roddy Doyle, *Glorious Exploits* is a vividly conjured vision of the past. Madly ambitious, cathartic like all great tragedy, but shockingly funny too, Ferdia Lennon’s outstandingly original debut is just glorious’ Emma Donoghue, author of *Room*

‘What a voice! What a story! A darkly funny double act from Lampo and Gelon, sandwiched in between the transformative experience of theatre and forgiving your enemies. I loved it from the first line’ Claire Fuller, author of *Unsettled Ground*

‘Sublime. Pitch-perfect dialogue, a fast-moving story that is both dark and lyrically beautiful, tragic and funny in equal measure. *Glorious Exploits* is an astonishingly original and gripping story of brotherhood, war and art. Ferdia Lennon is a fierce new talent’ Rebecca Stott, author of *In the Days of Rain*

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'A glorious thunderbastard, with a unique, stark voice that is expertly drawn. It is cheeky, contemplative and sly, with an outrageous sense of humour and a massive heart. Lennon beats you with a club then whispers you poetry. It is harsh and fun in a way that few other books are . . . A book like this is long overdue and very welcome. Thank the Gods'

Rory Gleeson, author of *Rockadoon Shore*

'*Glorious Exploits* is an agonizing exploration of the cost of violence, for both its winners and losers. It is also a reminder of how dangerous and radical the making of art can be, as the attempt to stage *Medea* with prisoners of war in 412 BC comes to represent war's opposite. This perfect first novel is a tragicomic masterpiece. Ferdia Lennon has created a story worthy of the Athenians: mortal, maddening, heart-mending'

Clare Pollard, author of *Delphi*

'What a truly magnificent novel this is: in turns riotous, brutal and deeply affecting. I am in no doubt that Ferdia Lennon is the real deal. His captivating storytelling resonates with all the beauty of Euripides' plays' Imogen Hermes Gower,

author of *The Mermaid and Mrs Hancock*

'Funny, thoughtful, moving, brilliant'

Nick Laird, *Irish Sunday Independent*

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Glorious Exploits

FERDIA LENNON



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To Emma

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That which is beyond us, which is greater than the human, the unattainably great, is for the mad, or for those who listen to the mad, and then believe them.

Euripides, *The Bacchae*

Death cannot be what Life is, Child; the cup of Death is empty, and Life has always hope.

Euripides, *The Trojan Women*

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Syracuse

412 BC

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I.

So Gelon says to me, 'Let's go down and feed the Athenians. The weather's perfect for feeding Athenians.'

Gelon speaks the truth. 'Cause the sun is blazing all white and tiny in the sky, and you can feel a burn from the stones as you walk. Even the lizards are hiding, poking their heads out from under rocks and trees as if to say, Apollo, are you fucking joking? I picture the Athenians all crammed in, their eyes darting about for a bit of shade, and their tongues all dry and gasping.

'Gelon, you speak the truth.'

Gelon nods. We set out with six skins – four of water and two of wine – a pot of olives, and two blocks of that smelly cheese Ma makes. Ah, it's a beautiful island we have, and sometimes I think the factory closing is my chance to shake things up. That I might just leave Syracuse and find myself a little place by the sea, no more dark rooms, clay and red hands, but the sea and the sky, and when I come home with a fresh catch slung over my shoulder, she'll be there, whoever she may be, waiting for me and laughing. That laugh, I hear it now, and it sounds to me a soft and delicate thing.

'Why, Gelon, I feel so good today!'

Gelon looks at me. He's handsome, with eyes the colour of shallow sea when the sun shines through it. Not shit-brown like mine. He opens his mouth to speak, but nothing comes. He's often down, Gelon – sees the world as if it's filtered through smoke, no brightness to anything. We walk on. Even though the Athenians are crushed, their ships firewood, and

their unburied dead food for our dogs, there are still hoplites on patrol. Just in case. Diocles gave a speech not yesterday about how you can never tell with these Athenians; a fresh batch could arrive any day. Maybe he's right. Most of the Spartans have left. Word is they're heading for Athens itself, all set to siege it up right and proper. End this war. But there are still a few about. Homesick and useless. In fact, four of them walk ahead of us now, their red cloaks trailing behind them like wounds.

'Morning!'

They look back. Only one of them salutes. Arrogant, these Spartans, but I'm feeling good.

'Down with Athens!'

Two of them salute now, but there's no life behind it. They look tired and sad, like Gelon.

'I say Pericles is a prick!'

'Pericles is dead, Lampo.'

'Aye, sure, Gelon, I know that. I say Pericles is a dead prick!'

This time two of the Spartans laugh, and all four salute. Ah, I feel so happy today. I can't explain it, but it's some feeling. Those are the best ones. The ones you can't explain, and we haven't even fed the Athenians.

'Which quarry shall it be today, Gelon?'

We stand at a fork in the road, and a decision must be made. Gelon hesitates.

'Laurium?' says Gelon, at last.

'Laurium?'

'Yes, I think so.'

'Laurium!'

We go left. Laurium is what the main quarry goes by these days. Someone thought it would be a laugh to call it after that silver mine in Attica that the Athenians used to fund this trip. The name stuck. It's a massive pit surrounded by a milky rock

face of limestone so high there's only need for a fence in one or two spots. At one of those is the gateway in; where a couple of guards are sitting on their arses playing dice. Gelon hands them a wineskin, and they wave us on. The path down is a windy ankle-breaker. A coiling brown serpent is what Gelon calls it when the muse is upon him. We can smell the Athenians before we see them. The way being all twisted blocks a full view, but the smell is something awful: thick and rotten, the air almost misty with stench. I have to stop for a moment as my eyes are watering.

'It seems worse than usual.'

'That will be the heat.'

'Aye.'

I pinch my nose, and we walk on. There are fewer than last time. At this rate, they'll be all gone by winter. Gets me thinking of the evening they surrendered. The debate went on for hours. Diocles pacing back and forth, roaring, 'Where do we put seven thousand of these bastards?' Silence. So he asks again. This time that Hermocrates prick mumbles about a treaty. Treaty, my arse, thinks I, and then Diocles says it. Not in those words, but he means the same. He says, 'Do you make a treaty with a corpse?' Laughter spreads, fingers wag, and Hermocrates sits down and shuts his beak. And through it all, Diocles keeps pacing, asking us what to do? Silence. Although now it's a throbbing silence. Ready to burst. Then he stops pacing; says he has something. Something new and strange. Something that will show the rest of Greece that we mean business. That we're Syracuse and here to stay. Do we want to hear about it? 'We do, Diocles!' But he shakes his head. Actually, it's too much. Too strange. Someone else should speak. But the time for that is long past. For we're Syracuse and here to stay, and we tell him as much. So he leans forward and whispers. No sound. Only his lips moving. 'We can't hear you,

Diocles!’ So he says it. Still low but loud enough for us to hear: ‘Put them in the quarries.’ Then he shouts it: ‘The quarries!’ And soon, nearly the whole of Syracuse was shivering with those two words: the quarries.

Aye, and that’s exactly what we did.

From a distance, they look like so many red ants swarming on the rocks, though these Athenians hardly swarm. They just lie about or crouch or crawl about, looking for a bit of shade. Still, to be fair, my eyesight’s not the best, and some of those most stationary may, in fact, be dead.

‘Morning!’

A few glance up, but none return my greeting. Now, as time goes by, some in the city feel we’ve made a mistake. That keeping them here in the pits is too much, that it goes beyond war. They say we should just kill them, make them slaves or send them home, but ah, I like the pits. It reminds us that all things must change. I recall the Athenians as they were a year ago: their armour flashing like waves when the moon is upon them, their war cries that kept you up at night, and set the dogs howling, and those ships, hundreds of ships gliding around our island, magnificent sharks ready to feast. The pits show us that nothing is permanent. That’s what Diocles says. They show us that glory and power are shadows on a wall. Ah, and I like the way they smell. It’s awful, but it’s wonderful awful. They smell like victory and more. Every Syracusan feels it when they get that smell. Even the slaves feel it. Rich or poor, free or not, you get a whiff of those pits, and your life seems somehow richer than it did before, your blankets warmer, your food tastier. You’re on the right track – or at the very least a better track than those Athenians.

‘Morning!’

A poor bastard sees my club and raises his arms. A stream of

words follow, most of which I can't understand, his voice being a faint croak, but I pick out 'Zeus', 'please' and 'children'.

'Fear not,' says I. 'We come not to punish, though you Athenian dogs deserve punishment. Gelon and I are merciful. We come –'

'Shut up.'

'What, Gelon? I speak the truth.'

'Just be quiet.'

I chuckle.

'Ah, you're in one of those moods, I see.'

He's already kneeling by the poor bastard, giving him water.

'Any Euripides?' says Gelon.

The man is sucking at the goatskin like it's Aphrodite's nipple, some of the water trickling down his beard. He's pink. Actually pink. Almost all of them are pink, though some are even red.

'Euripides, man, do you know any?'

The man nods and sucks some more. Other Athenians are coming forward now. Feet clanking with chains. There are more than I thought, though still fewer than last time.

'Water and cheese,' says Gelon, 'for anyone who knows lines of Euripides and can recite them! If it's from *Medea*, or *Telephus*, you'll get olives too.'

'What about Sophocles?' asks a tiny creature with no teeth. '*Oedipus Rex*?'

'Fuck Sophocles! Did Gelon mention Sophocles? You –'

'Shut up.'

'Ah, Gelon. I'm only saying.'

Gelon starts with the terms.

'No Sophocles, nor Aeschylus, nor any other Athenian poet. You can recite them if it pleases you, but water and cheese are only for Euripides. Now, my man. What have you got?'

The man who was drinking clears his throat and goes to

straighten up. It's a sorry sight. Try as he might, he can't do it. His neck flops, the head swaying from side to side, loose fruit blown by a gentle wind.

He says, "Eh, but we must learn to understand, King Priam . . ."

He stops.

'Is that all?'

'Sorry, I knew more, but I can't seem to. My head, it's broken, see, I forget faces, and I can't remember my . . . I swear I knew more.'

The man puts his head in his hands. Gelon pats him on the shoulder and gives him one last sip. I think the Athenian's crying, but he still sucks away at the skin. Water pouring into him even as it pours out.

'Can anyone do better than that? A mouthful of olives for some *Medea*?'

Gelon's mad for Euripides. It's the main reason he comes. I think he would've been almost happy for the Athenians to have won if it meant Euripides would've popped over and put on some plays. He once spent a month's wages to pay an old actor to come to our factory and recite scenes while we shaped pots. The foreman said it was reducing productivity, and he threw the actor out. Gelon didn't give up, though. He had the actor shout the lines from across the street. You'd hear snatches of poetry through the blaze of the kiln, and though I think we made fewer pots that week, they were stranger, more beautiful. This was all before the war, and the actor's dead now, the factory gone. I look over at Gelon. His blue eyes wide and nervous. A block of cheese held over his head. Shouting about olives. Gelon's just mad. Never mind Euripides.

Many volunteer, but when it comes to it, most fumble and pause and complain about headaches and thirst, or just collapse on the ground so that we only get a line at a time. Two if

we're lucky. One bluffer starts doing a scene where Medea is being wooed by Achilles, which even I know is a load of bollix. Medea was way before Achilles. She was with Jason.

“But swift-footed Achilles it can never be! Oh Hellas, my father will never allow it. Achilles, what can . . .”

Gelon raises his club, and the bluffer slinks away. Another takes his place. This one at least mentions Jason, but it's a bit Gelon already knows. Still, he gets a few olives for his troubles.

The day goes on in this way. The sun gets fatter, yolkier, and its heat less fierce. Pinks and reds bleed into the blue. I leave Gelon to it and take a stroll around the pits. Officially I'm scouting for actors. Gelon's taken a bold step and offered to return with a bag of grain if he can get five Athenians to do a scene from *Medea*. But he wants them to properly act it out. Like, perform it. He'll be lucky if he finds one. These poor bastards are just waiting to die. I imagine the worst spots of Hades are something similar. Hairy skeletons with a hint of skin. Apart from the hair, the only bit of variety to be found is in the eyes. Glassy gems made brighter by dying. Massive browns and blues peer out at me. I haven't found a leading man yet, but I'm looking.

Now, you watch these Athenians, and you feel like you're seeing their spirit float out through the nostrils and lips, one breath at a time. You feel like their skin withers and flakes in front of you, that if you only waited and watched one long enough, they'd disappear, and all that would be left is their teeth and a few slender branches of bone, white teeth and white bone sinking into the quarry, and maybe some day a house will be built with that very stone, your house, and you'll lie awake at night with the walls moaning, the ceiling weeping, a second sky dripping on your little head, and you'll hope it's nothing, the wind or the rain, and maybe it is, though maybe

it's them Athenians twisting in your walls. These are strange thoughts. Hades thoughts, but the quarry is a strange place, and a man is not himself in here.

There's a scream in the distance. A lot of spirit lost in a scream. Must be serious. It comes again, just as loud. From a spot at the end of the quarry. Athenians seem to pour out and away from it so that instead of the usual wall of skin and rags, you can see the rock. I decide to take a closer peek. There's a huge man swinging a club. An Athenian rolled up like a wailing kitten at his feet. Actually, there are two Athenians at his feet. Though the other is clearly dead. The clubber's tunic is splattered with red. Is it Biton? Aye, it's Biton. Always Biton. His son was killed in the first battle with the Athenians. Well, not in the actual battle. He was captured and tortured to death. Biton comes here a lot. Even more than us.

'You're a terrible man, Biton.'

Biton turns around. I wink. He doesn't. There's a twitching in his cheeks. If possible, he looks worse than the poor bastard at his feet. The Athenian's face is a mass of gore, but there's strange hope in those green eyes. Shocking green they are. Lizard-green. They're bright, and he's already pulling himself away. Not ready to give up on life just yet.

'Gelon and I are up yonder. Collecting a bit of Euripides, would you believe.'

Biton doesn't answer. Just squeezes the handle of his club. The veins in his arm streak like lightning.

'Blinding heat we got this morning.'

Again nothing. The Athenian's still crawling away.

'You having a bit of sport? What did he do to deserve such attention?'

'Found them in the wall.'

'Wall?'

'They'd made a hole. Bastards.'

‘They?’

Biton kicks the dead body at his feet.

‘Asleep in the arms of this piece of shit. Fucking wrapped around each other. Like lovers.’

I nod. The Athenian’s a decent bit away now. Crawling, a trail of red in his wake.

‘There are fewer here than last time.’

‘Bastards.’

‘Aye, they’re bastards. I give these Athenians two months at most. If Apollo keeps up this performance, maybe less. I think I’ll miss them when they’re gone. They break up the day somewhat.’

Biton puts his face in his hands.

‘You’re not the worst, Biton.’

The Athenian’s still in view. He’s not moving nearly fast enough. Go on, you bastard.

‘Diocles says we ought to follow them back to Greece. Really finish the job. What say you? I, for one, wouldn’t mind a stroll through their Acropolis. Maybe catch a show. They say it’s stunning. Like nothing here in Sicily.’

Biton lowers his hands and takes a step away.

‘That’s some club you got there. Heracles massaged the Nemean lion with such a club, Biton. I salute you on account of that club.’

I salute Biton. The Athenian’s moving tortoise-slow. I think, what’s the point? Let it be, but ah, I don’t want to see him die.

‘Will you pop back with me and give your greetings to Gelon? He’d be delighted to see you.’

This is a lie.

‘Too busy.’

‘Aye, I can see you’re a busy man. That’s clear. The thing is, I fancy a bit of company as I stroll. The light’s fading now, and it pains me to admit this, but I don’t like this place in the dark.

The rats come out, and it frightens me. Now don't laugh, Biton. I know it's funny, but I say it plainly. It frightens me.'

Biton isn't laughing. He's walked off back towards the Athenian.

'Wait!'

He stops and turns to face me.

'Do you have your heart set on that poor fucker?'

Biton nods.

'I only ask on account of Gelon looking for a green-eyed actor for the role of Jason. Jason being well known to have especially green eyes. The eyes being a significant factor in what first attracted Medea, if the tales are true.'

Biton looks confused.

'I offer you this pouch of fine wine by way of compensation.'

He's still confused, but it's interested confusion. Since his son's death, Biton has become a devotee of Dionysus, but being skint, he gets to worship rarely.

'For me?'

'Aye, in exchange for the Athenian.'

His eyes widen. He looks ready to cry.

'Thanks.'

'Enjoy, Biton.'

He takes the goatskin and sucks at it mightily. The suction not being quite equal to Aphrodite's nipple, but surely that of a nymph or some lower goddess. I pat him on the shoulder and walk on ahead. It takes no more than a couple of strides for me to be level with the Athenian. He curls up in a ball, expecting more of the same. When the blows don't come, his fingers open up, and I see those green eyes staring out at me – lizard-green.

'Fear not, for I come not to torment, though you do deserve tormenting. I come to engage you in a theatrical performance!'

His fingers close, and he only rolls up the tighter.

‘For fucksake! If I wanted to hurt you, I’d hurt you.’

The fingers part, and those green eyes return. I think he’s saying something.

‘Please, don’t . . .’

‘Enough snivelling! I may change my mind. Now tell me plainly, and no harm will come. Do you know Euripides?’

He doesn’t answer.

‘Speak! Do you know him? Euripides, a fine Athenian poet?’

‘I do.’

‘Would you be knowing any passages? I mean, could you say them when prompted? Be truthful.’

He nods.

‘*Medea*? Do you know *Medea*?’

‘Yes, I think so. I . . .’

‘Think is no good to me, man. I’m considering you for the role of Jason. It’s a key role. Now speak plainly.’

‘I think, sorry, I’m sure, I remember quite a bit, please.’

I hand him a waterskin to clear his thoughts. He finishes half in one gulp. I squirt the rest on his face to wash away the gore. It’s not as bad as it looks. A big gash on his cheek and another on his forehead. Nothing broken. I wouldn’t call him handsome, but all things considered, he’ll do. I offer him my arm, and he takes it. We walk. It all seems to be going fine till we get to the other Athenian. The one Biton killed. When we get to him, the green-eyed fella drops to the ground and starts crying, kissing the body and whispering to it.

‘Enough, man. I’m in a rush.’

He ignores me, just keeps kissing and whispering so that his lips and face get all red and messy. I’ll have to wash him again. That’s a waste of water.

‘Come on!’

Nothing. I raise my club as if to swing. It works, and he

moves away from the body right quick. His arms up to protect himself.

‘Now stand!’

He goes to stand but stops, kneels back down, pulls a few bits of yellow hair from what’s left of the head and squeezes them in his fist. Then he stands. I start walking, real slow, and he follows.

The moon’s already out, a silver grin in the sky, but the sun is there too. Fat and red. In a little while it will be gone below the walls of the quarry and then below the sea and then, sure that’s night-time. I imagine my friend will be delighted with night-time. The sun, it seems, being the principal cause of death in these here pits.

‘You’ll be happy to see the evening come, no?’

He doesn’t respond.

‘Answer me, friend.’

‘Sorry?’

‘I say you’ll be happy now Apollo’s making himself scarce.’

‘It’s not much better at night.’

‘The rats?’

‘No, the cold. It gets bitter. The change brings on fevers.’

‘That why you and your mate were in the hole?’

He nods.

‘Shows ingenuity. I respect that, but sure, Biton, the fella you met earlier, he hates Athenian ingenuity. Despises it. I reckon you pissed him off with that one. Having a kip in the shade when you should’ve been outside baking.’

The Athenian’s crying again.

‘Calm down, man. Have an olive.’

I hold out the cup. They’re lovely olives: mixed with oil, salt, garlic and a secret ingredient. My ma makes them. Best in Syracuse. He hesitates but takes a few. He’s still crying, but he’s chewing too.

‘What’s your name, friend?’

‘Paches.’

‘Paches?’

He nods.

‘I’m Polyphemus.’

I made that up. You can never tell with these Athenians. A name can be used for a curse or whatnot.

‘Polyphemus, like the Cyclops?’

‘Aye, the very one. Ma tells me my da had one eye. Poor bastard.’

‘Oh.’

We walk on.

‘You know, Paches. You Athenians brought this on yourselves. Sailing over here like sharks ready to eat us up. You’re worse than the Persians. They’re barbarians, but you’re Greeks attacking Greeks. Aye, Diocles is right. You’re scum.’

He doesn’t answer, just limps on. Eyes watch us from the shadows.

‘Still, my mate Gelon will be pleased to meet such a scholar of Euripides. He says he’s finer than Homer. You’ll meet him soon. Gelon, not Homer.’

I wink.

With the light falling, the rats come out. At first, there are only one or two, but pretty soon, the ground is full of them, the air heavy with their sounds. They look mad. Not like any rats you know: wet, red and very fat. They waddle over your feet, but if you don’t step on them, they cause no trouble. Still, it makes me awful tentative as I walk. Paches doesn’t seem to notice, yet he must, for he never steps on one. Gelon reckons there are over a thousand rats in these pits. He says if you listen carefully at night, you can hear their screeching from the city.

‘The rats don’t bother you, Paches?’

‘No.’

‘I think they would get to me worse than the hunger or the thirst.’

He looks at me as if to say I’ve no clue.

‘Would you like some more water?’

He nods, and I hand him the skin.

‘You miss Athens?’

He spits out the water. Coughs.

‘Sorry, course you do. What I meant is, I hear it’s really something. You know, we Syracusans looked up to you so. Sure, isn’t our democracy taken after yours? Aye, I think I’d love to see it. The Parthenon. Gelon says it’s more beautiful than anything, even in Egypt or Persia.’

‘He’s been?’

I go to pat my club, but don’t.

‘No. He’s never been, but he’s spoken to those who have.’

‘It is.’

‘What?’

‘The most beautiful . . .’

He stops. I think tears are coming, but he masters himself.

‘It is the most beautiful city in Greece by far. I’ve been to Egypt, and I think it equals anything there. I can’t speak for Persia.’

‘You’ve been to Egypt?’

‘Yes.’

‘The pyramids? Really?’

He nods.

‘Would you like an olive?’

I hand him a few more.

‘Thank you, Polyphemus.’

I spot Gelon in the distance. He’s plopped on a rock – a couple of Athenians below him.

‘Lampo,’ I say quickly.

‘Pardon?’

‘My name. It’s not really Polyphemus. It’s Lampo. Sure, who’d be calling a child after a Cyclops?’

‘Oh.’

I grin and nudge him forward.

‘Brace yourself, Gelon. Here’s your leading man!’

Gelon peers down.

‘What?’

‘Meet Jason. See those green eyes. Didn’t you say Jason was green-eyed?’

Gelon takes in Paches. I don’t think he’s impressed, and in truth, the cuts Biton gave him are worse than I first thought. Paches looks a state.

‘Green-eyed? What are you on about? Anyway, that poor bastard’s dying.’

‘You’re a negative fucker, Gelon.’ I put my arm around Paches. ‘Show him, Paches. Jason’s final speech, right, when he realizes his children are dead!’

Paches coughs.

‘“You who are most despised by the gods, I –”’

‘Wait!’ says Gelon. ‘If he’s going to do it, at least do it as part of the scene. Medea, are you ready?’

‘Think so.’

A very tall woman steps forward, but of course, there are no women in the pits. I look again. Isn’t it only the poor bastard whose neck was swaying so, though his hair is much longer now and he’s in a girl’s chiton.

‘That your sister’s?’

Gelon nods.

‘The hair?’

‘From a horse.’

‘You went all out.’

‘Aye.’

Paches and Medea get in their positions. Gelon and I sit on a rock and wait. I think of what it would be like to see the real thing in Athens, and I feel an ache for I know I never will, but then I look around me: the quarry walls circling and the sky pressing down, thick with stars, or gods, and below equally thick with Athenians. Sure, isn't this quarry itself an amphitheatre?

A huge Athenian amphitheatre, with two little Syracusans watching.

They begin.

2.

The lantern of Dismas' sways like a stocious moon in the distance. We've had a few since leaving the quarry, and Gelon wants to finish up by the sea, and Dismas' is by the sea, precariously so. The path's littered with shells, crushed crabs, medusas of seaweed heaped in glistening bunches. I lob one at Gelon, and he kicks one at me. As we get closer, the waves blend with the clinking of cups and the crackling nonsense of a hundred voices together.

A handsome fella with one arm stands at the door, a fiery red horse branded into his forehead. This is Chabrias – an Argive war slave who Dismas picked up cheap on account of the paucity of limbs. Sober, Chabrias gives the impression of one experiencing a constant low level of pain – cheek and forehead muscles strained in a half-grimace – but late at night when the punters get generous, and a jug or two is brought to him, the cheeks loosen, the eyes brighten, and if you stay and listen, he'll regale you with stories of Argos: women loved, chariots raced, temples prayed in, sacred springs and verdant groves galore. Yes, a debauched and holy place is Argos. If only he could show you; and there's something in the way these tales are spun, their desperate urgency, that one feels poor Chabrias is trying to conjure it up as much for himself as for you. That he wants the ashes of his present to kindle and glow with Argos, till it all gets too much and he stops mid-sentence, looks at the sky, hums an odd tune and shows you the stump of his arm. I like Chabrias.

'Look who it is!' says I.

Chabrias bows, opens the door. The area around him decidedly jugless. We head in.

A blast of brine and fish scales fills the nostrils. Dismas' reeks more strongly of sea than the beach itself. Owing to its location, it's a favourite of fishermen, and packed in as they are, with the windows shut, the odours sit and settle. The air positively steams; tendrils of fishy fog rise from necks and soaking cloaks. The men crouch over their jugs, beards speckled purple as they boast or commiserate over the latest catch. Yet along with this human din, there are loads of other noises that the building makes. Over the years, the wind and rain have gnashed numerous tiny and not so tiny holes within the walls so that the structure seems to whistle, the ceiling beams and floor to creak and bend. Yet, this fragility only adds to your comfort. Your ears prepare your skin for an onslaught that never comes, and, as a man never cherishes something more intensely than in those moments he fears losing it, so too this constant expectation of elemental fury adds savour to your boozing.

Gelon heads straight for Homer's chair. A rickety piece of shit the blind bard is reported to have sat on during a visit to Syracuse a few hundred years back. It's stuck in the corner, a bronze inscription above that reads '*Homer's chair*'. Is it Homer's chair? Well, there are many Homer's chairs scattered across Syracuse, and can they all be Homer's chair? Why not? The arse is capricious and does not wed for life, and so perhaps, yeah, it is Homer's chair.

A fella's already in it, and Gelon asks him to move. The fella says fuck off, and Gelon politely drags him by the scruff and sends him tumbling to the floor, apologizing as he does it. Heads turn, and many cheer and hoot, 'cause Gelon's well known in Dismas' and this ritual's often enacted when unsuspecting punters take his place.

I get the first one in. A new slave girl pours the wine. She's dark, almond-brown eyes and skin like freshly beaten copper. It fairly glows, that skin, and though she's only chattel, I find myself wincing when I see her eye my cloak, stained and