

Asphodel

Kelly Digges

From set *Theros*

Maia picked her way through the ruined building with bare and careful feet. They were already covered in soot, but she could wash them off in the stream. It was her sandals she couldn't get dirty, along with her tunic. She'd only made that mistake once, and mother had sent her to bed without dinner and forbidden her from going back.

She ducked under a creaking beam and stepped into the forge itself. The stone anvil still sat in its familiar place.

Papa never let her go back there when he was casting molten bronze or smelting iron. *Much too dangerous*, he'd say gruffly, and then, with a twinkle in his eye: *Maybe next year*. So, most of the time she'd spent back there had been on days when papa was cold-working the swords and shields after they'd cooled, hammering their edges to harden the bronze. She'd sit and listen to the clang, clang, clang of hammer and stone. Sometimes papa would tell her about what he was doing, and why, and every time she learned a little bit more about the trade.

In her hand she clutched a bundle of delicate white and purple flowers, fresh picked in the hills beyond the forge. Mother brought asphodels, the flowers of the dead, to the spot up on the hill where they had buried him. She said that was proper. But asters had always been papa's favorite, and he had never even been up on that hill that Maia knew of. This was papa's place. So she brought these flowers, to this place, as often as she could.

Maia closed her eyes and saw the forge as it had been, before the fire, filled with tools and smoke and the clang of the hammer. Charms bearing prayers to Purphoros hung on the walls, imploring the god of the forge to fill the place with the passion of things being made.

She opened her eyes and blinked back tears. The roof had collapsed, and sunlight streamed in. The light should have been cheery, but it was wrong, all wrong. It had been half a year since they had placed a clay mask on his face and laid him in the ground.

She lay the bundle of asters on the anvil, like she always did. Usually, by the time she was able to make it back to the forge, days or weeks later, the flowers were gone. She knew they'd probably been eaten by deer or blown away by a gust of wind. But she thought of papa coming and taking them away just the same.

The angle of the sun shining through the slats of the ruined roof told her it was time to go. She said a quick prayer to Erebus, god of the dead, and hurried out of the forge. She picked up her sandals and ran to the stream, washed her feet, dried them in the grass, and made her way back to their little house on the outskirts of Meletis.

Maia unlaced her sandals by the door and washed her feet in the basin. The thick smell of lentil stew wafted out of the kitchen. And if there was less spicing than there had been this time last year, and smoked fish instead of fresh, could her mother be blamed? Without the forge, and without papa's strong hands around the house, times were harder, and food was food. She made her quiet way to the kitchen.

Mother was slowly stirring the pot of stew, and little Kadmos, who was only four, was sitting on the floor playing with a straw soldier. He looked up at her, blinked, and went back to his play.

"Hello, Mama," she said.

Her mother turned from the stew pot. Her hair was streaked with gray, and her eyes were always sad, but she was as pretty as ever.

"Hello, Maia," said her mother. "How were lessons?"

Mother still paid to send Maia to a scholar in the city for lessons. Maia had offered to give them up, when she realized that they cost money the family no longer had, but her mother wouldn't hear of it. Maia no longer complained about the lessons, even when they were dull.

"Fine," she said, although in truth this had been one of the dull ones. "We learned about triangles, and the lengths of their sides, and... and numbers."

"Very good," said her mother absently. She had gone back to stirring the stew.

Dinner was quiet, the stew bland but filling. Kadmos fussed and spilled his bowl, but Mother only sighed.

Maia went to bed early and dreamed of the ring of hammers.



Plains | Art by Adam Paquette

It was over a week before lessons finished early enough that she could stop by the forge on the way home again. The growing season was coming to a close and the days growing shorter, and she had to range farther into the hills to find asters, but she pulled together a decent bundle and judged that she still had enough daylight left.

Maia was just cresting the last hill, bundle of flowers in hand, when she heard it.

Clang .

Hammering. Someone was in papa's forge!

She hurried down the slope, still clutching the flowers, and didn't stop to take off her sandals. They'd get dirty. She could wash them. She had to know who it was.

Clang .

As soon as she was inside the ruin, quiet but for slow, rhythmic sound of hammering, she stopped. Apprehension set in. If somebody from town had asked to use the forge, she'd have heard about it. Mother would have told her. That left outlaws, or invaders, or...

Maia took a deep breath, ducked under the fallen beam, and peered into the forge.

She saw a broad back in a leather apron and strong arms as big around as she was. One arm raised a charred hammer and struck.

Clang .

Maia crept around the edge of the room, picking her way through the debris and staying in the shadows. She had to see his face.

In his left hand was the charred remnant of a sword in progress. Even she could see that it was beyond help. It had warped in the fire. She'd seen swords like that, and papa had always melted them down and started over. The sword's blackened edges had begun to flake under the hammer.

Again the arm rose and fell.

Clang .

She crept closer. The figure wore a gold mask with broad features, stylized but recognizable: a broad nose, a great bushy beard, and close-set eyes that had twinkled with life, now dead and cold and crafted. The arm rose again.

"Papa?" she said.

The figure paused with its arm upraised and turned its head to regard her. It lowered its arm, slowly, but did not move from the stone anvil.

She remembered the bundle of asters at her side, held it up, and stepped forward.

The figure remained still.

With no sudden motions or threatening movements, she walked toward the anvil. Soon she was close enough to touch it, closer than papa ever let her get when he was working. She held out the bouquet of asters. The golden mask betrayed no expression whatsoever.

The hammer rose.

She dropped the flowers and jumped back with a gasp.

The hammer fell, then again, and again, pounding the delicate purple flowers against the ruined sword.

Clang . Clang . Clang .

Maia turned and ran out of the forge, away from the pounding of the hammer. She didn't stop until she reached home, wild eyed, covered in soot and sweat.

Mother was furious. She marched Maia to the back of the house and fairly well threw her into a bath. She asked Maia what had happened, why she had gone back.

Maia didn't answer, and mother sent her to bed without dinner again. She didn't mind. She wasn't hungry. She lay awake well into the night, certain she could hear the rhythmic pounding of hammer on stone.



Traveling Philosopher | Art by James Ryman

Over the next several days, Maia threw herself into her lessons and her chores around the house. If her mother noticed her newly quiet intensity, she didn't mention it. She was probably just glad of the extra help.

On the fourth day after her encounter at the forge, as lessons ended, she waited as the other students filed out.

Her teacher, a matronly woman named Pylia, turned to her after the others were gone.

"You've been quiet lately," she said. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"I... I have an unusual question," said Maia.

"I am your instructor," said Pylia. "It's hardly unusual for you to ask me a question."

"It's about the Returned," said Maia.

"The Noston are a sad lot," said Pylia. "What is your question?"

"Do they... remember?"

"As a rule, no," said Pylia. "They retain their skills and their knowledge of the world. A Returned navigator could still sail up the coast. But their memories of life are left behind in the Underworld. It is a sad irony: they loved life enough to return to it, but they cannot bring that love back with them."

"What happens to them?" asked Maia.

“Some wander. Some are violent. Many gather in the necropolises—quiet Asphodel and bitter Odunos—to be among their own kind. They live shadowed lives, filled with sorrow and anger.”

Maia nodded and blinked back tears, and the teacher’s expression softened.

“Maia,” she said. “It’s very rare for someone to join the ranks of the Noston. And of those who do come back, the things that made them who they were—their memories, their relationships, the things they treasure—are lost forever. No one truly returns from the Underworld.”

“I understand,” said Maia. “Thank you.”

Pylia nodded, and Maia rose and left as quickly as she could.

She left the city and headed home. She steeled herself to hurry past the path that led to the forge, as she had the last few days, but as she came around a bend in the road, she saw that the grass around the little path was trampled. She looked closer and saw a great jumble of footprints, heavy in the style of military gear.

She ran for the forge.

A group of about twenty hoplites had surrounded the forge, some pointing their spears inward while others searched the area nearby.

“No!” cried Maia.



Phalanx Leader | Art by David Polumbo

The heavily armed men and women turned, but most of them went back to their duty when they saw she was just a child. Their captain, a strong young man with a high-crested helm, walked toward her. She tried to slip past him, but he barred her way with the shaft of his spear.

“Stay back,” he said. “Someone spotted a Returned in the area. We’re to send it back to the Underworld before it vandalizes something or snatches a child. Like you.”

“The building’s clear!” yelled one of his troops.

“Fan out!” said the captain. “If it’s here, we’ll find it.”

Before he could turn back to Maia, she bolted.

She ran past him, ignoring him when he yelled after her. She ran past his troops and out into the hills. She searched for what felt like hours, until at last she saw a hunched figure loping away through the brush, hammer in hand.

“Wait!” she yelled.

The figure stopped, then turned, its mask frozen in an expression of sorrow. She walked toward it, but stopped out of its reach.

“They’re looking for you,” she said. “They want to hurt you.”

The figure nodded.

“Do... Do you know who I am?”

Slowly, sadly, the figure shook its head.

Tears tumbled from Maia’s eyes. The Returned reached out a hand, and she didn’t flinch away. With one thumb, it wiped the tears from her face—a gentle gesture, shocking in its familiarity.

“Don’t cry,” it said, in dull monotone. “Don’t cry.”

She stepped back, and the thing turned to leave.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

The great hunched shoulders rose in a shrug. “Away.”

Maia’s lip trembled. She looked down to see a patch of flowers at their feet, long white flowers with sturdy green stems. She bent down and picked one, and offered it to the figure.

“Asphodel,” she said, pointing inland. “Go to Asphodel, the necropolis. There are more there like you.”

The Returned took the flower from her shaking hand and nodded.

It turned to follow her pointing finger and walked, hammer in hand, away from the ruined forge. To Asphodel.