

The Metope Prophecy

by Savannah Schroll Guz

On returning from the continent, he had taken to wearing a black veil. It was a strange affectation for a man, but one he found necessary, above all in public. The veil covered the remnants of an unsightly infection, which had developed without warning around his nose in the days before he attempted a return to England. While he was interned in France as a prisoner of Napoleon, it advanced rapidly. And by the time a doctor was finally able to treat it, very little of his actual nose remained. Although the veil frightened some, silencing them in his presence, it provided him with a modicum of dignity he could no longer enjoy without it.

There were no servants waiting on the steps of Broomhall House when he arrived. Only the coachman, who had delivered him there, moved around the carriage without speaking. He unbuckled his lordship's trunk from the luggage racks and struggled to bring it off by himself. There were no footmen, and Elgin did not offer to help the man. When it hit the stones in the roundabout with a sharp thud, Elgin made no reproachful remark, nor did he turn to determine whether his belongings had been damaged. On seeing his house, he was entirely overcome. In a letter secured with a wax seal that bore an unfamiliar family crest, he had learned he should not expect to find his wife, son, or servants when he returned. The empty portico confirmed the contents of this correspondence, and he now stood on the steps of his estate, looking up at the discolored columns, the darkened windows, the closed door. The ribbon hem of his jet-colored veil blew gently around his jaw line, and a tear also trembled there. It fell to the soiled velvet lapel of his red jacket and left a mark where it landed. He reached under the veil to wipe away another tear that had followed, and then, clearing his throat, turned to address the coachman. "Thank you," he said. "If you'll just set it under the roof here, I'll manage the rest."

When he heard the carriage wheels finally clattering away over the stones in the lane, he again stood regarding his own house,

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ancestral but neoclassical, a segue in his mind to what he had seen years before. He closed his eyes, thinking of the first moment he stood on the Acropolis. He had, he remembered, lost his breath at the sight of the frieze, the figures in the pediment, the amazing articulation of human and animal anatomy. Yet, he did not enter the ruins that first time. Instead, after he clambered like a boy over enormous chunks of fluted marble and fragments of limestone, he felt a sadness descend on him. There was so much defacement. Many figures lacked heads. Arms had been broken off. Some figures were marred by the loss of facial features, like the Centaur carrying away the Lapith woman on the Parthenon's south side. Elgin imagined some souvenir hunter chiseling away the Centaur's nose, wrapping it in linen and carrying it home to the continent, where it would be displayed beside leather-bound translations of Euripides. Some of the vandalism, however, Elgin knew to be the result of the Ottomans' attitude of conquest.

When he saw the extent of the architectural scars left by Venetian forces two centuries before, he realized the building might eventually collapse and take with it the exquisite sculptures. He turned to Hunt, his secretary, and said, "I'd like for you to assemble a team of artists. I'll give you a few names of appropriate contacts in Italy. And, of course, I'll pay for their transport here. I'd like them to make record of the artwork. Take casts. Make sketches."

Still, it was not until the firman was issued, which permitted study and excavation of the site, that Elgin actually stepped into the ruins. He entered through an initial row of columns at the west entrance and continued through a second set to reach the palatial cella. Even without its roof, the sound of his footsteps echoed in the peristasis as he moved forward. He turned 180-degrees to imagine the space's former magnificence, and for a moment, was arrested by the view of Athens below. When he turned again, he saw, as he had not noticed before, an intact wall. Behind it was a series of unmarred pillars and behind these, a reflecting pool, rectangular, perfectly still, its water the white-blue of opals. He walked towards it, blinking rapidly, not truly believing what he saw.

When his eyes adjusted to the low light, Elgin was shocked to see Phidas' giant Athena, robed in flowing gold. She wore a breast plate decorated with Medusa's face and a golden crown on which a sphinx lay, flanked by two griffins. In her right palm, she balanced a gold figure of Nike. In her left, she held a spear. A snake rose up behind a round shield that rested against her left leg. Elgin realized that her arms and face did not just *look* like ivory, they *were* ivory. He recognized the dark lines of age and webbed marks of desiccation. He knew what stood before him could not be real and knelt down before the statue to run his fingertips along the stone lip of the reflecting pool. It was warm, almost hot, as if it were exposed to the sun, not cool as it should have been in a darkened sanctuary. Moreover, he himself was sweating. Perspiration had erupted on his upper lip, his forehead, under both arms. His body felt as warm as if he were standing in Athens' mid-morning sun. He closed his eyes, counted to five, and when he opened them, the illusion was gone. There was no Athena, no reflecting pool. He was kneeling in the bright stone ruins, which had been exposed to the sun by the contact of Venetian mortars and Turkish gun powder. Twice, he shook his head sharply to clear it and gently touched his temples to ease the mild headache he had begun to feel, a headache he blamed for the temporary delusion. He sat for a few moments to recover himself. And after that, he left the Acropolis, wholly enchanted, entirely seduced.

Days later, back in Constantinople, while he composed letters at his writing table late in the evening, he fell asleep. He dreamed he was back in the darkened sanctuary near the Amazonian female whose skin had the pale faultlessness of unglazed porcelain. Her flowing gold gown seemed to radiate its own warmth, a heat that made him feel drowsy. He realized he was a youth again, no older than fourteen or fifteen, and he lay on his hip beside the reflecting pool, the cool marble against his cheek. In his right hand was a tiny wooden boat, a toy he recognized from his childhood. Languidly, without significantly shifting his position, he set the boat on the surface of the water. When it merely floated calmly on the surface

near him, he pushed it with his fingertip towards the giantess. He vaguely registered that she was alive. Her eyes followed him even as her towering body remained entirely still, her face motionless. The boy looked away from the boat, which moved steadily towards her, and cast his gaze up to her face. When his brown eyes met the lapis colored stones representing hers, she leaned forward from her exalted position and whispered to him, "Save me."

The image haunted him the following morning, even though he'd had other, less vividly remembered dreams afterward. He knew he could not save Phidias' immense Athena. She was already lost. The military leader, Lachares, had used the gold plates that comprised the goddess' drapery to mint coins to pay his troops in the third century before Christ. Resplendent then in copper and ivory, she survived two fires before disappearing with the rise of the Ottoman Empire. So, as he sipped at the dark brew that passed for coffee while his wife moved sulkily in her chair down the long table, he began to think of the statue's plea in metaphorical terms. *It is a message*, he thought, staring at a triangle of buttered toast. *I'm supposed to rescue what is still there.*

His wife, shook back the sleeve of her dressing gown, picked up her porcelain cup and, without drinking from it, replaced it loudly in the saucer. He realized then that she was trying to get his attention. She did not look at him, but shifted her position impatiently.

"What, my dear," he asked, looking at her affectionately. "Are you planning for the day?"

"Since we're not free to go roaming about," she said, throwing her napkin on the table, "I guess I'll be stuck here with George, just as we've *been* stuck here every day while you go off doing whatever it is you do." She got up then and scraped her chair against the tiles so that it made a screech loud enough to echo in the room.

"Darling," Elgin said, replacing his own coffee cup in its saucer gently. "It's too dangerous for you to be out alone right now. Or with escorts, for that matter. I don't know what I'd do if something happened to you."

“And if George has another of his fits, and I'm alone to deal with it?” she asked, referring to their son's epilepsy. Elgin saw how pale her face was, and how the bright pink of fury had begun creeping up her neck. He knew this pattern; soon it would flush her cheeks as well.

“You've got Ligeia and Margarete. Shall I call Philip back for you as well?” he asked, referring to his secretary, Hunt, who was several days away in Athens working with the artists who were then arriving from Italy.

Mary stepped away from her chair, gave him one last defiant stare and stormed out of the room, with flower-dotted pink silk billowing behind her.

If any real human could be considered the goddess of war, it would have been Mary. Unlike the meek and compliant wives (and, occasionally, female companions) of the men he had become acquainted with, Mary was plainly unhappy, continually prepared to do battle with him, and perpetually dissatisfied with their circumstances. Nothing but England, or the *idea* of England suited her now. He doubted, ultimately, that the little island would please her either once she returned. Then, he imagined, she would long for the exoticism of Constantinople, of sun-baked Greece.

“Enjoy it while we're here, darling,” he shouted after her without malice, but genuine sentiment.

It was around this time that his scalp began to tingle. It was a gentle sensation, a light prickle. He disregarded it, set aside the coffee he'd been drinking, thinking perhaps that was to blame. He gathered together the letters he'd been reviewing and then asked Margarete to pack him a small case for his trip back to Athens.

The tingling continued intermittently for two days, as he traveled from Constantinople back to Athens. When he stood again on the Acropolis, he found that Hunt had taken it upon himself to remove the metopes and friezes, rather than simply make copies of them. The removal had begun on the morning of Elgin's departure. The note Hunt had sent to Elgin reached the ambassador's residence just after he'd left.

“Well,” Elgin said, surveying the pieces that Hunt had already brought down, “they’re better off somewhere away from *these* circumstances. The Sultan’s not taking care of them, and who knows what will happen if Napoleon decides he wants to take Athens as well.” He exhaled, ousting a spasm of compunction.

When it became necessary for the frieze to come down in smaller segments, Elgin suffered a blinding headache that lasted three days. Hunt came to his temporary quarters, where Elgin had asked for thick fabric to be drawn over the windows to block out the light. Hunt related the details in solemn whispers. “I suppose,” said Elgin, his thin palm over his damp forehead, “if it must be done to get them out, then it must be done. Try not to disfigure them any more than is necessary. Save them as best you can.”

Athena did not appear in Elgin’s dreams again. As he lay still in the swelter of his small Athens apartment, waiting for the sun to set, the heat to abate, for his the headache to lift, he experienced ocular fireworks, the flashing of strange geometric shapes, and a disturbing delusion that there were snakes around the base of his bed. But there was no ivory-skinned goddess. He longed for her approval. At one point, in the cool clamminess of night, he woke to shouting, but realized, on fully waking, that it was his own voice he heard. The words still filtered through his consciousness: *Have I done right by you? Have I done right?*

Elgin recovered by the time the works from the south sides were prepared for shipping, although not all of the tiles were yet off the building. He oversaw a portion of the packing process and ran his fingers over the flared nostrils of a sacrificial ox before it was placed in a wooden crate and covered with straw. He felt his mood lift, and remembered Mary, with whom he’d had no correspondence over the previous days he had been ill.

He went back to Constantinople, still thinking about the sculptures. During the two-day trip, he was continually haunted by the wide eyes of the Selene Horse he’d seen on the east pediment. As it was lifted for removal, an ear hit the marble molding above it

and fell to the earth, where it struck another piece of the ruins and shattered. When the artisans finally got the head down from the scaffolding, they set it before Elgin for appraisal. Perhaps, he thought, they also sought his approval. "We had a bit of an accident getting it out," one of the men near him explained, pointing his metal pick towards the pediment from which it was removed. "It had both ears, but it was somewhat lighter than we thought when we picked it up."

Elgin stared at the horse's face, saying nothing for several moments. His eyes traveled over the taut muscles and tendons, the circular jaw, the open mouth. He thought, absently, *for this level of detail, they must have been performing dissections already in antiquity*. Then his gaze rested on the horse's wide, globe-shaped eyes. Their expansion reflected both fear and fury, and caused him to unconsciously step back two or three paces. He recognized this emotion. He'd felt it himself during the time spent in that borrowed Athens apartment, where discarded strips of fabric kept out the light of day. Again, his scalp prickled, as if he bugs were moving beneath his wig. He thanked the men, nodded curtly, and left the Acropolis as soon as he was able. Once he was safely enclosed in his carriage, he removed his peruke and ran a hand across the crown of his shaven head. There were no insects, no apparent lice.

When he returned to his ambassador's residence, he could not find Mary, but saw two trunks standing buckled and ready for transport near the entrance to her room. He lifted them to determine whether they were filled and grunted when he found they were. He then went to the wardrobe, cast open the doors, and indeed found it mostly empty. He scoured the house for signs of either maid, and when he finally located Ligeia, coming back with George from the market, he took her by both arms and asked her, searchingly, where Mary had gone. "I do not know where my lady is now," said, Ligeia, pulling her face and torso away from Elgin, as if he frightened her. "I only know that she is packed to leave." She cast her eyes somewhat desperately away from him and pulled gently against his grasp so he would let her go. When he did, she ran past

Elgin and into the house, leaving the boy behind. George gazed up at Elgin somewhat peculiarly and asked, "What's happened to your nose, father?"

The only mirror Elgin knew of was in Mary's room. It was mounted on the wall near her bed. He first cast back the heavy curtains she used to battle the afternoon sun and its stifling heat. Then he hurried to the small oval mirror beside them. There, he saw a thick whitish scale covering his nose on both sides. He thought: *it is marble dust. That is all. An accretion of marble dust. Limestone from the ruins.* He brushed it briskly with his fingers, but it remained, the skin around it reddening. He wet a finger on his tongue and wiped it across the scale. It dried back to white almost instantly. He then tried to scratch the scale away, using his nail. Blood welled up in a fine tracery, like cracks in ceramic glaze. Tears came to his eyes. The pain was extreme.

Reflected in the mirror was movement, and Elgin realized Mary was in the doorway behind him. Her hair was up, but hung in a decorative bunting of coiled ringlets. Her high-waist yellow dress draped itself in pleats, and he could see the gleam of perspiration on her pale forehead. She stood erect but crossed her arms forbiddingly. "So, you're back," she said, raising her chin, "after traipsing around who knows where."

"I always come back," he said, moving towards her. "And you know where I am."

"My God!" she said to him, drawing back. "What's happened to you?" She braced herself against the wall she stood near.

"Nothing," he said, rushing closer. "It's nothing. It's from breathing all the marble dust. With all the time I've spent in the ruins, I haven't had a chance to care for myself properly. And I was ill."

This did not soften her. She clung to the wall.

"While I was in Athens," he said kneeling before her now, like a supplicant, "I had terrible headaches, and I wasn't able to write to you. I know it's been long. I thought of you the whole time I was gone."

Mary looked away from him. She hid her eyes in the arm that braced her against the wall. "This is some great nightmare," she said. "This heat. The food, the stench. It's one great nightmare I want to wake up from."

Elgin reached for her pallid left hand, which she resignedly let him take, although she still did not look at him. "Darling, if you will be happier at home. I will send you. I will send you now. Is that what you want? To be back in England?"

"Yes," she said, sobbing. "Yes, I want to go home."

And so, he let her go the next morning, along with George and an escort Elgin thought equal to the task of protecting them if they found themselves in trouble en route. In the days following their departure, he requested a second firman from the Sultan, one that would allow him to ship the Parthenon carvings back to England.

As Napoleon was confirmed First Consul for Life by French national referendum, Elgin ordered boats into the Piraeus Harbor. There, several pediment sculptures and a few hundred feet of frieze, cushioned by straw and secured in wooden crates, would be loaded onto a ship bound for Britain. Elgin, too, was determined to come home, to give up his ambassador's post, to find some position in Parliament that would allow him to maintain ties with the Turks so he could continue moving the reliefs and sculptures out of Athens, although he sensed the Sultan's power weakening. But certainly there had to be a position for Elgin in England, given all he had done to rescue from certain destruction the sculptures he'd found here. He thought, in a moment of soaring euphoria, that he would be celebrated as a national hero, when people saw the bas reliefs and the figures so finely articulated. The thought buoyed him as he watched Ligeia fold clothes and place them in his trunks.

He was now troubled only by the fact that neither of his maids would look at him directly. Ligeia, he noticed, had a new habit of casting her eyes to the buttons on his knee breeches or the buckles of his shoes when he gave her daily directives or asked her to perform specific tasks. He knew why. There was no need to check the mirror in Mary's room. In fact, he found he now almost

unconsciously avoided looking into any reflective surface. He could see a peripheral view of the white scale's progression across his nose, and that was enough. The tip itself had become distended and was visible to him even when he chose not to look at it. More disturbing was that it had begun an acute and constant aching. *When I get home to London*, he said, *I will see a physician immediately*. He did not trust the doctors in Constantinople. Also, some part of him still felt it would abate and go away.

It was on his trip home, as his party traveled through France, that he was taken prisoner by Napoleon's forces and sequestered for many months in an abandoned palace formerly looted and now devoid of furniture. Here, he watched his nose continue to deteriorate. Its rapid disintegration caused him acute pain, from which there was little reprieve except in sleep. He could not smell the infection himself, but suspected he might very well have the odor of a corpse about him. The severity of his situation made him subject to the cruel jokes and unfair appraisals of men who guarded him. "Shows how rotten the people with titles really are," Elgin heard one guard say to another in French. "He's just got his rottenness showing on the outside."

None of the soldiers he saw would make physical contact with him. When he was fed, the sentry on duty would first place his tray on the marble floor tiles, open the door to the largely empty room, and then push the tray inside with the toe of one boot. Elgin did find some consolation through his two windows' wavy glass panes. Although both were fixed with a crude system of iron bars--which he had noticed defacing the palace façade when he arrived—they did not significantly curtail his view. Between them, he could still appreciate the beauty of the turning trees and the lovely undulating movement of the uncut grasses. He also found solace in the notebook he had been allowed to keep. This journal, with its lovely marbled cover, held his amateur sketches and the many poetic phrases that had captured his emotion for the Acropolis. When he read them, he remembered that he had only felt truly and fully *alive* when he stood near the Parthenon. He thought about the ships he

had ordered to Piraeus, wondered if they had embarked, and speculated on the arrangements Hunt might have made for their arrival in Britain. Surely, by now, they'd arrived. He could get no word out to Hunt. He had only a small reserve of ink, and he suspected none of the guards would take his letters...or if they did accept them, Hunt would never receive them. Certainly no correspondence was ever brought to him. He was only half certain that anyone knew he'd been taken captive. Perhaps they all thought he was dead.

Still, it was not this circuit of thought that nearly drove him mad. Instead, it was his increasingly confused conception of Mary and her connection to the antiquities he so desired that made him feel he was losing his mind. It was not Mary's heart-shaped face and trembling ringlets he saw when he thought of his wife. He did not think of her pale bosom concealed by patterned dresses or muslin gowns. Instead, the image that eclipsed the memory of his wife was a tall, striking female, whose flesh was the color of ivory and never reddened with emotion. Her hair hung in snake-like coils. And over the succeeding months, this woman *became* Mary in Elgin's mind. And home was not Broomhall House. It was the Parthenon. When this notion would begin, a conviction his logical mind still recognized as nonsense, he would get on his hands and knees and trace, with his index finger, the nearly invisible seams between the gleaming floor tiles to again get in touch with what was real in his world, what was *authentic* in an environment that now felt much like a marble-tiled grave.

He slept on the floor at night, usually on his stomach. The cool stone was a balm to his partially inflamed face. He continually sought in sleep some relief from the persistent agony. And when he relaxed enough to actually drift off, he regularly found himself in the company of a figure much larger than himself, seated on a pale block throne. Now and then, gold coins tumbled out of the figure's robe sleeves and bounced down gilded stairs and into the pit at his feet. The giant seemed not to register Elgin's presence. His eyes were without pupil or iris and were a gleaming, variegated white not

unlike mother of pearl. When Elgin addressed him, asking who he was, he replied, "I am Plutus, son of Demeter."

"Yes," Elgin added with a nod, "Greek god of wealth, blinded by Zeus." He paused a moment. The figure did not confirm or deny this. "I wonder," Elgin continued, "Where is the mistress? Where is *Athena*?"

"Ha! Would that the goddess of wisdom return!" said the giant, petulantly putting his chin on his fist, a gesture that shook out more coins. "We are rather short on wisdom in this circle. But," he said, changing his voice to mimic a female's, "she is displeased and has departed."

"Departed?" whispered Elgin. He stood at the edge of the pit, and looked down at a group of figures, some dressed like clergy, who pushed great square weights, an inch at a time, over close-cropped grass. Their faces were red from exertion. Most were bathed in their own sweat, their clothes darkened by it. Several had collapsed from exhaustion. Still, it was to them that the coins from Plutus' robe dropped. Some recovered themselves enough to collect this intermittent rain of gold. They stuffed the spoils into open slots on the surfaces of their strange square burdens, making them even heavier.

"She told me to expect you," the figure said, after he was certain Elgin had taken in the sight below.

"What is this?" Elgin asked, "What are they doing?"

"This?" the colossal figure repeated, turning in his throne. "This, my friend, is hell. Below you are the avaricious."

At this statement, Elgin would usually wake, sweating and breathing heavily into the darkness. He would again register, with terrible anguish, the throb of his ruined nose. And then came the horrifying conviction that he would very likely die there, in that empty palace room. *Eventually*, he often thought, *whatever is attacking my face will reach my brain and take it, too.*

But he was released, suddenly, before he truly grasped the understanding that he was free. On the day he was given safe

passage from the palace, he was also handed the letter sealed with the unfamiliar family crest, which explained that the British government had negotiated for his return but that his wife would not be waiting for him. He used the parchment to shield his face so those who transported him out of France could see neither his disfigurement nor his misery. In Honfleur, he purchased the veil he wore as he stood at the vacant entrance to Broomhall House. Once the veil covered him, his tears flowed more regularly, as they did when he stood on the steps looking up at the empty windows of his ancestral home.

Not many minutes after the coachman departed, he again heard the sound of horses' hooves and turning carriage wheels on Broomhall's long stone drive. It seemed the noise was drawing closer rather than moving further away. Elgin adjusted his hat, self-consciously pulled his veil hem to his jaw line, and composed himself. When he turned, he saw two pairs of brown dray horses moving towards him. Each pair pulled a long cart packed with two or three wooden crates. Elgin's heart leapt. Here were his Parthenon treasures. When the company halted in the roundabout, Elgin counted the crates and knew this was only a fraction of what had been removed.

"Are there more of you?" Elgin asked one driver, who unabashedly stared at the black veil.

The driver hesitated for another moment as he squinted into the dark, nearly opaque scrim, trying to determine what was there, what did not look quite right. In lieu of any spoken answer, he handed Elgin a letter composed in a cursive script Elgin recognized as Hunt's. The letter, quickly read, told of a storm in Piraeus that caused at least seven crates to sink into the Saronic Gulf, along with the ship that held them. Elgin looked up, somehow shocked more by this news than even that imparted by his wife's communication weeks before. He then turned to the crates standing in the carts before him and wondered what had actually been saved. Although the two drivers and their young assistant put ramps to the cart beds, Elgin knew they would not be able to shift the crates without help.

Elgin clambered onto the cart, and along with the three other men, pushed the great square weight with all the force they had. It moved grudgingly. After a quarter of an hour, they got the first crate to the wooden ramp guides, but found it would go no further. One especially determined push at a higher point on the box sent it crashing to its side on the stone drive, which caused Elgin to cry out as if he himself had been injured. He jumped down after it, called to the drivers for tools, and created a make-shift wedge to force the crate open. Once the top had been removed, Elgin got on his knees and crawled part of the way inside. He cast out straw onto the stones until the crate contents became partially visible to him.

Here, Elgin was confronted with a reflection of himself. Except for the figure's beard, the face he saw resembled his own in every way: the sorrowful eyes, the downturned mouth, the nose absent to the bridge. The shock of recognition ignited a white heat in Elgin's chest. He clawed away more straw to find the face belonged to the Centaur abducting a headless woman in pleated drapery. He put a palm against the cool stone and, with his other hand, traced the chipped concavity where the Centaur's nose had once been. The face remained unwavering in its expression, still bent on its undertaking. The metope bearing the Centaur and his Lapith prize was the first piece to enter Broomhall House. It was the only piece, after the illusion of Athena vanished, able to crystallize Elgin's faltering resolve.

