

# flashbang!

A Collection of Very Short Stories

VOLUME II



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This collection of stories includes the following content warnings:  
General themes of horror; body horror; death; warfare; allusion to violence; mention of suicide; depiction of paranoia; police presence.



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# A Hero's Oath

by Kelsey Clarey

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Althea gazed up at the painting before her, eyes lingering on the woman at the center of it. The bright halo around her vivid red hair displayed her awe inspiring divinity, but Althea's eyes were always drawn more to her face. It was round and soft, bright and full of love. In almost every depiction Althea had seen of her, the Heroine was depicted with such a gentle manner to her. It was an image that always made Althea feel a sense of comfort and peace, as if she knew that no matter what there was always someone out there in the cosmos that loved her and would protect her.

The slamming of a door from another part of the temple pulled Althea out of her silent reverie, her head turning sharply to the door leading from the shrine she was waiting in to the High Priestess' office. From the sounds of it, the interview that had just taken place had not ended well. Silence hung for a moment before the door opened and the High Priestess stood in the entryway, initially looking a bit

disheveled before fixing a friendly if beleaguered smile on her face. “Althea,” she began, stepping to the side and gesturing for the young woman to enter her office. “Are you ready?”

“As much as I can be, My Lady.” Althea replied, rising to her feet with one last look at the goddess’ portrait. After a composing breath, she made her way into the office. Inside two chairs sat on either side of a small table, already spread out for tea. This was not quite what Althea had expected, but she tried not to let it show as she moved to take a tea.

“I’ve spoken with your instructors.” The Priestess stated matter of factly as she sat and poured tea for both of them. “They had many glowing reports to give about you.”

“Thank you, My Lady.” Althea said as she raised her cup to her lips, trying not to let herself blush.

“How long have you been here with us now?”

“Most of my life.” Althea paused, suddenly a little uncertain of what this question was actually supposed to mean. “Well, I’ve lived at the temple since I was a child. I’ve been training as a paladin for about three years now.”

The Priestess nodded, seemingly deep in thought for a moment. “Training with quite the determination, I’ve been told.”

“Yes, My Lady.” Althea was confused. The Priestess obviously knew all of this already. This interview was the final test she had to pass before properly taking her oath and she

had heard it was difficult, but so far she wasn't even really sure what was being asked of her.

“If I may ask, what is it that drives this determination of yours?”

Althea replied almost automatically with the standard line she had said during prayer and training time and time again. “To serve The Heroine, of course. To honor her and protect the world she holds so dear.”

The priestess gave an almost sly smile behind her tea cup. As if she was amused about something. “Yes, but why do you wish to do that?” She asked. “What is it that drives you along this path?”

Althea hesitated. This was a question she had not been prepared for. She knew how many of her peers would respond. In the barracks there was often talk of glory, riches, and renown. Everything that the heroes in the stories were blessed with. The rewards reaped for serving their Goddess. So many of them seemed to live with gold and stars in their eyes, but Althea had never shared those dreams. Ever since she had first been taken to the temple as an orphaned child it had meant something different to her. This place was home to her, and The Heroine with her gentle face, loving heart, and maternal warmth felt like the surrogate parent she had so desperately looked for back then. That was what Althea loved most about her goddess.

“I want to help people.” The words practically tumbled from her mouth. “Not just protecting them physically, but looking out for them. Providing those in need of whatever they’re looking for. This temple, you, the Heroine herself -- you’ve all provided me with a good life, I want to give that to others as well.”

“So it would be fair to say that you are driven by love?”

Althea nodded, silent for just a second before responding. “Yes.”

“You would swear an oath that would dedicate you to not only the service of this temple, but the entire world, out of nothing more than love for those that need it.”

“Yes.”

The Priestess smiled, pulling out a small box and sliding it across the table. Althea’s eyes lingered on it as she slowly lifted the lid to reveal the pin of a drawn arrow backed by a ten pointed star. “Congratulations, Althea.” The priestess said. “You’ve passed your final test.”

Althea looked up, her eyes meeting the priestess’. “I— how?” She asked, gingerly lifting the pin from its case.

“Despite what many would have you believe, heroism isn’t about the grand deeds or battles won or riches obtained.” The Priestess explained, walking around the table to help Althea fasten the pin to her tunic. “There’s a reason the Heroine is so often depicted as a wife, mother, and friend. The greatest



heroes are those that act because they have something they wish to protect. Heroism means being motivated by love, not glory.”

Althea could only nod, a smile as bright as the Heroine’s halo spreading across her face. “I swear I won’t forget that, My Lady.”

The Priestess smiled, squeezing her shoulder gently. “I know you won’t. Now get going, you have an oath to uphold.”

Sample file

# Age of A.I.

by J.J. McMillan

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## The Internet

The 1960s saw the United States Department of Defense commission a system that transferred data between different computers via a network. It was called the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network or ARPANET. It was known as the Department of Defense Model and used Transmission Control Protocol and Internet Protocol, later known as TCP/IP or The Internet Protocol. This system of networked computers was used throughout the 1970s by the United States Department of Defense. The 1980s saw its expanded use in universities and colleges. In the 1990s was commercialised into the beginnings of what was to become "the internet." This network eventually connected everything from a person's phone to a network of thousands of high tech freezers used to store valuable vaccines.