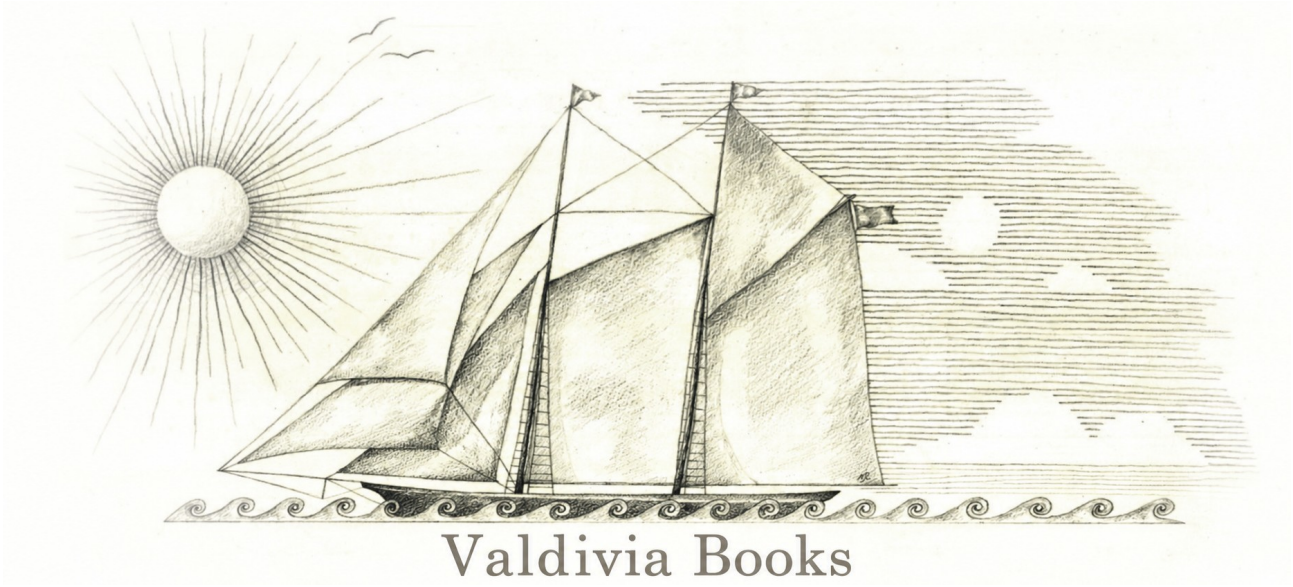


The Masks we Show

Draft Prose Sample

by

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This sample presents the prose.
Typography and page layout may differ in the published edition.

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The Masks we Show

Sample draft Prose:

Ryder pushed through the pathology doors looking like a man who had already been disappointed by the day and was now merely waiting to discover how imaginative it intended to become.

Dr Mercer looked up from the stainless-steel bench and smiled.

That was never good.

People who worked around dead bodies all day should not, Ryder had long believed, look quite so pleased with themselves before breakfast.

“You’ve got something.”

Mercer’s smile widened.

“Oh, I have considerably more than something.”

“Wonderful.”

“I’ve identified the weapon.”

Ryder stopped.

“At least that’s something useful.”

Mercer raised one finger.

“And…”

Ryder waited.

“I can show you the weapon.”

There was a pause.

Somewhere behind Mercer, refrigeration hummed.

Ryder looked at him.

Mercer looked delighted.

Ryder narrowed his eyes.

“What?”

The pathologist gave him a look of theatrical disappointment, as though Ryder had failed to recognise the opening bars of Beethoven.

“William Tell?”

Ryder stared at him for another second.

Then it arrived.

“A crossbow?”

Mercer beamed.

Ryder closed his eyes.

“Please tell me you haven’t spent twenty quid of the investigation budget on a child’s toy so you can show me what a crossbow looks like.”

The smile disappeared.

“A toy?”

“Oh, Christ.”

“A toy?”

Mercer turned towards the bench.

Ryder knew immediately that he had made a mistake.

“This,” Mercer said, lifting something black and remarkably small from beside a tray of instruments, “is not a toy.”

It sat across his hands like something that had been designed by an engineer who had grown bored halfway through building a much larger weapon and decided to see what would happen if he folded the thing in half.

“This baby retails,” Mercer continued, “at four hundred and forty-nine pounds and ninety-nine pence.”

Ryder stared at him.

“You spent four hundred and fifty quid?”

Mercer had already left the financial universe.

“One hundred and twenty pound draw weight.”

He pulled the cocking mechanism back.

It moved surprisingly easily.

Mercer was not a large man. In a strong wind Ryder suspected he would have required tethering.

“And before you ask, no, you don’t need arms like Schwarzenegger. Clever little system. Maximum force required is under forty pounds.”

He seemed almost personally proud of it.

Ryder glanced at the weapon again.

“All right.”

Mercer reached for one of the short carbon bolts on the bench.

“High impact.”

“That sounds reassuring.”

“One hundred and forty grain.”

He slid it into place.

Ryder's attention sharpened despite himself.

Mercer had stopped talking to him now. Not really. Ryder had become an audience.

"There's also a red-dot sight."

A small red point appeared on the far wall.

It wandered.

Found the plastic skeleton standing in the corner.

Ryder looked from the dot to Mercer.

"Don't."

Mercer did not appear to hear him.

"With one of these bolts you're looking at approximately three hundred and fifty to three hundred and sixty feet per second…"

The red dot moved slowly up the skeleton's chest.

"…which, given the size of the thing…"

"Mercer."

"…is really quite—"

The trigger clicked.

The skeleton's head snapped backwards.

There was a sound like someone kicking a cupboard down a flight of stairs.

The bolt disappeared through the plastic skull, through the partition behind it—

—and something smashed spectacularly in the next room.

Silence.

Then:

"What the HELL?"

Mercer froze.

Ryder stared at him.

Mercer stared at the hole in the wall.

Someone next door began shouting.

Mercer lowered the crossbow.

"Sorry!"

More shouting.

"Sorry!"

Ryder looked at the skeleton.

Its lower jaw was hanging slightly sideways.

He looked at the neat hole in the partition.

Then at Mercer.

Mercer very carefully placed the crossbow onto the stainless-steel table.

All trace of James Bond had gone.

He straightened his coat.

“Needless to say,” he said, recovering something approximating medical dignity, “it is more than capable of producing the injuries sustained by our victim.”

Ryder remained silent for a moment.

“Right.”

He nodded once.

“Good.”

Another pause.

“Brilliant.”

He turned towards the door.

“So we’re looking for Robin Hood.”

“Technically—”

“No.”

Ryder opened the door.

Behind him came a small cough.

“Sir?”

He kept walking.

“There is the matter of the requisition form.”

Ryder did not turn around.

“You’re clever.”

He stepped through the doorway.

“Work it out.”

The door swung shut behind him.

Mercer looked down at the crossbow.

Then at the wall.

Then, somewhat reluctantly, towards the sound of approaching footsteps from next door.