



SUNBRINGER

HANNAH
KANER

NUMBER ONE BESTSELLING SERIES

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HarperVoyager
An imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers Ltd
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published by HarperCollinsPublishers Ltd 2024

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Source ISBN: 9780008521516

Ebook Edition © February 2024 ISBN: 9780008521530

Version: 2024-02-06

Praise for *Godkiller*

‘An explosive debut that will leave you reeling’

Saara El-Arifi, *Sunday Times* bestselling author of *The Ending Fire Trilogy*

‘Violent, bawdy, beautifully imagined, and intensely felt, *Godkiller* is a bone-rattling fantasy thriller that flies by in a breathtaking rush’

Joe Hill, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Fireman*

‘A fresh and confident debut, *Godkiller* will have you in its grasp from the first pages. Led by a cast of spirited characters, it leaps and bounds to the beat of its own golden heart, building to an epic clash of wills. Hannah Kaner has taken her first great strides in what is sure to be an extraordinary journey’

Samantha Shannon, *Sunday Times* bestselling author of *The Priory of the Orange Tree*

‘Epic and intimate, tender and sharp, *Godkiller* is a triumph of storytelling and the beginning of a story that I can’t wait to follow’

Hannah Whitten, *New York Times* bestselling author of *For the Wolf*

‘Holy heck, this book is *so good*. A disabled bisexual mercenary heroine who murders gods, a former soldier turned baker with a troubled past, a noble child linked to the god of white lies ... You need this story in your life!’

Katee Robert, *New York Times* bestselling author of the *Dark Olympus series*

‘Devastating and triumphant, *Godkiller* will eviscerate you’

Tasha Suri, award-winning author of *The Jasmine Throne*

‘I absolutely adored *Godkiller*. This novel has everything – adventure, wonderful characters, tenderness, humour, passion. I was gripped by both the story and world building ... it is truly spellbinding’

Elodie Harper, internationally bestselling author of *The Wolf Den Trilogy*

‘Character-driven fantasy with a fresh approach to magic and gods? Sign me up! *Godkiller* is a delicious, heartfelt adventure with a cast of complicated characters you’ll fall in love with’

Jen Williams, award-winning author of *The Winnowing Flame Trilogy*

‘Kaner thrusts readers into a grisly world of treacherous gods in her enthralling debut ... [her] bewitching world forms an ideal backdrop to the adventures of her dynamic and appealing cast. This marks Kaner as a writer to watch’

Publishers Weekly

‘In this debut trilogy launch, already a bestseller in the UK, Kaner provides a satisfying payoff, along with twists setting up a sequel with much higher stakes’

Library Journal

‘This debut, a cross between *The Witcher* and Samantha Shannon’s *The Roots of Chaos* series, will attract many speculative readers, especially those compelled by folklore and found family ... The setting of *Godkiller* feels epic and lived in, suggesting much more story to be revealed in future installments of the planned trilogy’

Booklist

‘A wonderful, gritty, explosively violent, and beautifully realized debut built around a mismatched trio’s classic quest’

Daily Mail

‘Kaner’s debut offers all the bloodshed, demons and magic a fantasy fan could want, while championing contemporary values such as inclusivity’

Financial Times

‘Dark, gritty and highly immersive’

The Fantasy Hive

Dedication

*For my mother,
who taught me courage, grit and power.*

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Map



Arren

ARREN'S HEART SCREAMED.

He fell back from the fireplace. The god in his chest was howling: *Hseth! Hseth! Hseth!*

'Stop!' Arren cried. He grappled with the tangle of twigs, moss and flame that filled the rift in his ribs. Fire licked the sides of his fingers, burning him.

Hestra, the god of hearths who lived where his heart had once beaten was usually quiescent, but now she shrieked the name of another. *Hseth*. The great Talician god of fire.

'Please,' said Arren. 'Stop!'

She did not stop. Worse. Sparks ran down his stomach and landed on the floor. There, lint, straw, pine roots and tiny bits of bone sprouted, catching light in the fireplace where he had been kneeling. She was crawling out of his chest.

What had happened? They had been waiting for Hseth to return in glory, filling Arren with the power of the strongest fire deity to have ever existed, in exchange for the life of his friend.

Not a friend. Not anymore.

But Hseth had not returned, and neither had her promises. Arren's god, Hestra, spilled out onto the hearthstone, dragging her heat and light from him and leaving a void of darkness. As she built herself outside of him, he fell back against a low table, gasping. First, she was a bud, a cocoon of twigs. Then the cocoon cracked open, splitting into the limbs of dried grass, moss and kindling. A face of branches and eyes of flame.

'Hestra,' he wheezed. With her gone from his chest, he could feel his blood cooling, the strain of his breaths. His death, it came at him like a wave, long held back by flame. 'Please.'

In Blenraden, the morning sun had struck open the sky, but here in Sakre, in the far west of Middren, the windows were still thick with the grey before dawn. The only wakeful ones would be the guards outside his room or the folks in the kitchens. They must not see him like this. He had built himself up as a godslayer, a breaker of shrines. No one could know he needed a god to live.

Hestra did not heed him. He reached for her, but she stepped backwards into the fireplace and disappeared in a hiss of anger.

And he was left with nothing. Less than nothing. She had vowed to keep him alive, had entreated him to speak to Hseth and understand the will of a god, his potential. She had helped him betray every law he had ever made. In a moment, all of it was gone. Without a word, she had left him to die.

The whims of gods. As fickle as a false spring.

Arren had never been so easily turned. But look what it had earned him: in Hestra's absence, the world grew loud. Gone was the crackling of his heart, the warm rushing of his blood. Instead, he could hear the snap of embers in the fire, the sparks that hissed minutely as they died on the stones, the rain that thrashed against the window, thinning as the sky brightened. Most of all he could hear the desperate dredging of his lungs as they tried for air. It did no good, not without Hestra, his secret, his shame. Without her, he would be dead before the sun rose. All his hopes lost.

Help, he thought. Unbidden, his friend's name crept into his mind. *Help me, Elogast.*

Elogast was not coming. He was in the east. Betrayed and wounded. Betrayed by him.

Arren was alone. He had sacrificed his closest friend, his brother, his one remaining love, for the power to change the world, and it had gained him only a pathetic death in a locked room.

A tap at the door to his chambers. Soft, tentative at first. He couldn't answer. Then knocking came harder.

'Your majesty?'

The guards. They had heard.

‘There were noises? My king?’

They could not find out this secret. Not yet. They weren’t ready.

The door shook on its hinges, the guard shaking the lock. Arren tried to drag himself upright.

‘Don’t ... come in,’ he tried, but barely managed a croak of air. He fell on his side, knocking the table, and the compasses and writs he had spread across it clattered to the floor. His vision blurred. Hseth had promised him, *promised him*. Talicia and Middren, united as one, coast to coast claim of the Trade Sea. The beginnings of an empire, of indisputable love and power. He should have known their promises would come to nothing.

The door splintered, slamming back on its hinges and smashing into the wall hard enough to shake the dust from the tapestries. In came Knight Commander Peta, shoulder first. She drew her slender sword and cast around for an intruder, finding none. Just a mess of twigs, a crackling fire.

‘My king,’ she gasped in her alarm, dropping to her knees beside him. He struggled for air, for control, but he could not hide it now: no blood, no covering, just an open, empty wound. Peta’s eyes found the chasm in his chest, the darkness where death should be.

It had been years since the axe of the god of war had gone deep into his bones, ripping through his breastplate and cracking his ribs into pieces. The marks remained where the metal of his armour had made a mess of his skin, healing into dark red scarring threaded with Hestra’s smoke-script. That, a vivid black. A god’s promise.

‘Please,’ Arren whispered, though he did not know what he was asking for.

Peta’s face paled with horror, her hands hovering over his shoulders. Her eyes and mouth were lined by a life of hard living, her grey hair cropped, no-nonsense, close to her skull, and shining in the light that had crept through the dispersing clouds. She was upright and fierce, desperately loyal. One of the few aged generals who had not run in the worst days of the war, nor had she faltered at hanging would-be assassins from the gallows, one of them her own cousin. She had even passed his command to burn the Craier steadings to the ground. And he had lied to her.

‘My king, I ... When?’ Her calloused hand hovered over the gaping space in his chest. When did this happen? How long had he lied for? It was too late now. He was dying again, and Elo wasn’t here to hold him.

‘The war,’ Arren managed. His vision swam, darkness crowding in at his eyes. Let them know, let them all know. He had tried to live. They should be grateful.

But the look on her face was not the disgust he expected. It was awe.

Arren had seen that look before. Given to his mother when she was queen. Given to gods. His commander did not hate him. She admired him.

Hestra and Hseth had assured him he would be dragged through the streets as a traitor if the world found he had harboured a god. They would think him weak like his mother, disloyal like Elo. He had believed them.

Arren’s brain raced as he neared death. It was what Elo always praised him for, his quick thinking, his decisiveness. What if Hseth had been wrong? What if he did not need her power to be loved? What if there was a story here, capable of winning their faith? That was how gods were made.

‘I gave my life for Middren,’ he said, resting his fingers on his open chest. ‘All I have done ... for Middren ...’

Peta nodded. ‘I know ...’ she said.

The other knights were beginning to understand. Arren heard a creak as one, then another, then all of the guards fell to their knees.

But it was too late. Too late for this last grasp at hope, at love. His hand dropped to the floor. His breath faded. None of them dared say a word.

A spark from the fire leapt out just as the dawn broke through the clouds. The ember ran across the wooden floor, the carpet, racing up Arren’s arm and into the cavity where his heart had been. There, it bloomed.

Hestra. She took root in his heart and once more her power filled him, warming his blood and sending it rushing. His gasping lungs swelled with air, bringing light and life to his body. He breathed.

He gripped the commander’s arm, dizzy with the sudden change. Death to life. Dark to light, as the sun illuminated all of them in gold.

Another chance.

Arren forced strength into his voice. 'It is well,' he said, and sat up. 'I am well.' He had learned this on the battlefield, suffused with fear, breaths from death, to channel strength, power, certainty. He stood on shaking legs without Peta's help, trying not to show how terrified he had been. His commander stepped back, scared to touch him.

He would show no shame; nothing good would be built on shame. He stood tall, softened the planes of his face from pain into something gentler, then held out his shaking hands and showed his bare chest fully. The darkness within was now lit by Hestra's fire, crowded with green moss and twigs.

The guards looked up at him, agape, uncertain. Uncertainty he could use. He saw himself in their eyes: a tale they could whisper, a myth he could build.

Hseth is dead. Hestra did not care for the crisis she had caused. Instead, her thoughts slammed into Arren's mind, agonising. No acknowledgement, no apology. *The great god of fire is dead. Her shrines broken, her power gone.*

Dead. Arren gritted his teeth. One damned crisis at a time.

'We failed you,' Peta whispered. Two of their guards deepened their bow, another gasped, horrified at the thought.

'No,' said Arren quickly. 'No, Knight Commander. I gave my life, willingly, to kill the god of war and save our lands from destruction.' That was not all true – Arren had not killed the god of war – but the truth didn't matter. All that mattered was the story. The myths that made gods, brought them to life in their shrines. Stories bind hope and love to make it faith.

Peta touched her hand to the badge that pinned her cloak at her shoulder, the stag's head before a rising sun, the symbol of Arren's kingship. His defeat of the god of war, the gods he had risen beyond. Before his symbol had been a young lion, but that he had come to share with Elo; the king's lion, so his friend had been called. Arren had to be something else.

'I did what I must,' he said softly. How many times had Hseth said such a thing to him? 'A sacrifice is not a loss. We had to fight the tide of darkness,

the chaos of the gods. We still fight it, we still must fight it.' Hestra flared in his chest, and he put a hand there.

Wait, he thought towards her, hoping she understood him.

'To bring sunlight back to us, to Middren,' said Arren, threading his hopes together, 'to bring ourselves back from those nights of terror, we all must be willing to give our lives, even if it hurts us, even if it challenges our very soul.'

Hestra was still. Arren let the light of the sun brighten his curling mess of hair, let the flicker of the god's flame twist impossibly in his heart. He was vulnerable. A single briddite blade would end him here and now.

'If you, too, will make such offerings,' he said, 'then pledge to me.' He splayed out his hand and put it over the rift in his heart. Like sunrays, like his symbol. His story.

Peta dropped to her knees and copied him: hand over heart, fingers spread wide. The others followed, hand after hand. Hestra's flames stirred again, this time with delight, sensing what she also desired, more than anything. Faith. For a moment, in their eyes, they were both more than they had ever been. More than his mother's unloved son. More than a lucky prince who won a war and no longer had the commander who won it with him. More than a little god of littler shrines, chipped away and forgotten. Together, they were greater than his flesh, brighter than his crown. All he had ever wanted to be.

'Sunbringer,' said Peta. Arren almost laughed with half pleasure, half delirium. This was more than an alliance with Hseth, a reliance on her power.

This was him.

The others murmured with her. 'Sunbringer.'

'Sunbringer.'

It was not enough, not yet. He needed more. He needed a nation.

He must become a god.

Skediceth

THE RINGING OF HAMMER ON METAL MARKED THE END OF their journey.

Twenty-three days. Back over mountains forests and rivers.

Skedi wasn't the only outlaw these days. Inara Craier, his heart's companion, knew now that it was the king who had burned her home, and she had not been meant to survive. Her life itself it seemed was kept secret from Middren. Elogast too, the knight on the run, grizzled with pain and anger, and set on stopping Arren's bloody ambitions before they swallowed the Trade Sea whole. For all the journey they had relied entirely on Skedi to hide their presence with his sweet white lies.

For the first time, he was needed, truly needed. And, now he was not so alone, he did not mind hiding. Nor did he regret leaving Blenraden behind, with its spectres of forgotten gods and broken shrines. It had been a fool's errand to think he could find a home there on his own in a dying city, where no one needed lies.

So, when they had seen Lesscia rising on the horizon, as beautiful as a flower open on the wide river, dread filled him from his belly to his ears, and shivered the tips of his wings. On the road, they had been dealing with only 'now'. Surviving. Being safe.

Lesscia was 'next'. Skedi was afraid of 'next' and his place in it.

Still, he helped them shuffle past the makeshift steadings that crowded safer parts of the marshland, and through the afternoon crowds and food trade of the outermarket, whispering the lies he had practised to death: *we are no one special, no one interesting, you have tasks to do, errands to run, places to be*. He was too weary to discern whether it was his small power or the business of the city that protected them.

The evening bells had not yet rung as they passed by the guards at the gates, so the streets were brimful of noise. Runners carrying messages or delivering merchandise sped past, their barrows clattering on the flat cobblestones as they whistled loudly at people to get out of their way. Pilots of canal boats bellowed to each other over full hulls, ferrying to and from the harbour, side to side of the canals, under bridges and crashing against stone jetties. Inside the city, too, were artisans; tilers sitting smoking by their samples outside the factories, brushmakers selling the finest rabbit-fur ends, haggling with newcomers on prices. And researchers, biographers, merchants, travellers, arguing everywhere over hot tea, peach-infused hipgin, or charcoal-laced water, depending on their stomach.

It was a relief to find their way back to the residential lanes near Kissen's home, where the ways were quiet and calm. They walked beneath the drips of hanging washing, or children playing in the street with black and white kittens. Kissen's horse, Legs, swished his tail, impatient, knowing where he was going. He all but dragged Inara towards the smithy where Kissen had first brought them. Where her sisters were waiting for her to come back.

Inara's quick steps faltered as they heard the song of the hammer, the sure clanging of a smith at work, and reached the large gate on its metal runners. It was open, and above it hung a crisply worked sign of gears and a hammer, telling passersby what lay beyond. Yatho didn't work near the other smithies, where the ginnels were too narrow for her wheelchair. And smithing, Skedi had learned, wasn't a common practice in Lesscia, the city of knowledge, so her experimental, intricate work had a home all of its own.

It was there, their destination, that Inara stopped completely. Skedi looked up through the satchel in which he had been hidden. He could see her colours, her emotions, churning in conflicting shades. Hard to read. Inara's colours had once been jewel-like: corals and amethyst, citrine and emerald. Bright, unfettered joys and woes of childhood. No more. Day by day, the shine of her emotions had clouded with forest-murk and glimmers of the orange flame that had burned her home and had fallen with Kissen into the