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PIERCE
BROWN

DARK AGE



A RED RISING NOVEL

DARK AGE

PIERCE BROWN



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Acknowledgments

By Pierce Brown

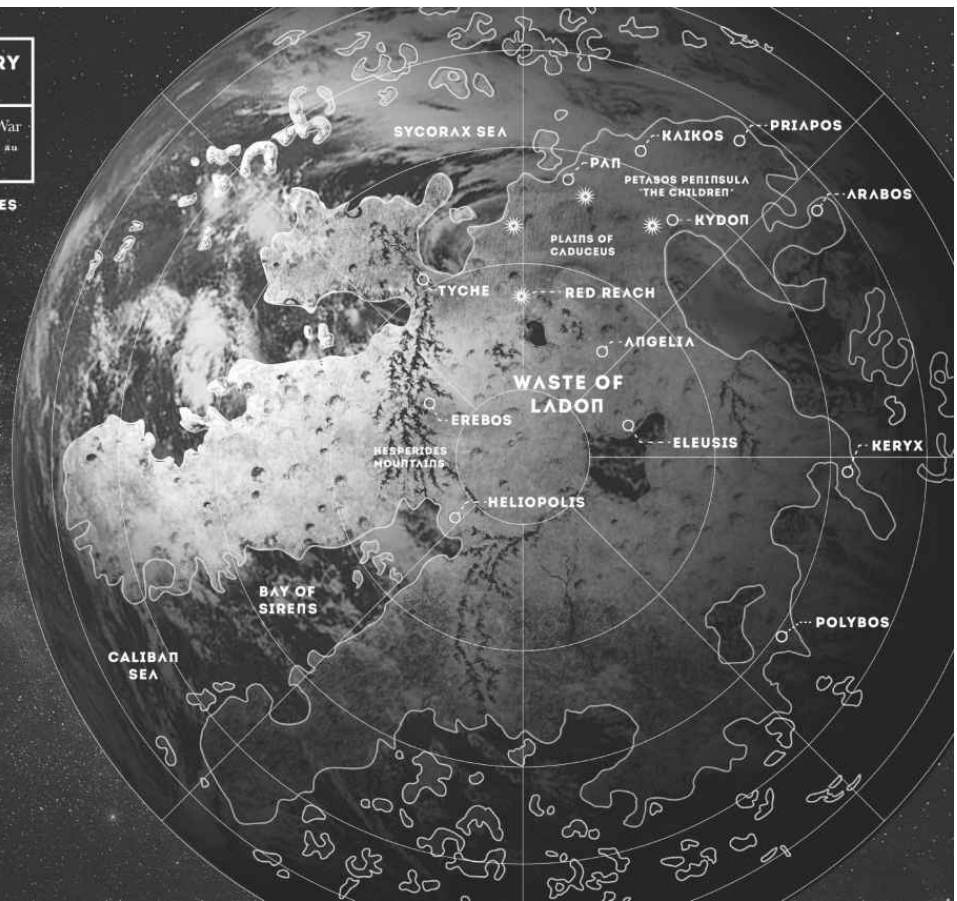
About the Author

THE PLANET MERCURY
CONTINENT OF HELIOS

In the eleventh year of the Solar War
Commissioned by Sovereign Virginia au
Augustus, 754 PCE

○ --- CITIES

✴ --- BASES



DRAMATIS PERSONAE

THE SOLAR REPUBLIC

DARROW OF LYKOS/THE REAPER Former ArchImperator of the Solar Republic, husband to Virginia, a Red **VIRGINIA AU AUGUSTUS/MUSTANG** Reigning Sovereign of the Solar Republic, wife to Darrow, Primus of House Augustus, sister to the Jackal of Mars, a Gold **PAX** Son of Darrow and Virginia, a Gold **KIERAN OF LYKOS** Brother to Darrow, Howler, a Red **RHONNA** Niece of Darrow, daughter of Kieran, lancer, Pup Two, a Red **DEANNA** Mother to Darrow, a Red **SEVRO AU BARCA/THE GOBLIN** Imperator of the Republic, husband to Victra, Howler, a Gold **VICTRA AU BARCA** Wife to Sevro, nee Victra au Julii, a Gold **ELECTRA AU BARCA** Daughter of Sevro and Victra, a Gold **DANCER/SENATOR O'FARAN** Senator, former Sons of Ares lieutenant, husband to Deanna, Tribune of the Red bloc, a Red **KAVAX AU TELEMANUS** Primus of House Telemachus, client of House Augustus, a Gold **NIOBE AU TELEMANUS** Wife to Kavax, client of House Augustus, a Gold **DAXO AU TELEMANUS** Heir of House Telemachus, son of Kavax and Niobe, senator, Tribune of the Gold bloc, a Gold **THRAXA AU TELEMANUS** Praetor of the Free Legions, daughter of Kavax and Niobe, Howler, a Gold **ALEXANDAR AU ARCOS** Eldest grandson of Lorn au Arcos, heir to House Arcos, allied to House Augustus, lancer, Pup One, a Gold **CADUS HARNASSUS** Imperator of the Republic, second in command of the Free Legions, an Orange **ORION XE AQUARII** Navarch of the Republic, Imperator of the White Fleet, a Blue **COLLOWAY XE CHAR** A pilot, reigning kill-leader of the Republic Navy, Howler, a Blue **GLIRASTES THE MASTER MAKER** Architect and inventor, an Orange **HOLIDAY TI NAKAMURA** Dux of Virginia's Lionguard, sister to Trigg, client of House Augustus, Centurion of the Pegasus Legion, a Gray **QUICKSILVER/REGULUS AG SUN** Richest man in the Republic, head of Sun Industries, a Silver **PUBLIUS CU CARAVAL** Tribune of the Copper bloc, senator, a Copper **THEODORA** Leader of the Splinter operatives, client of House Augustus, a Rose Pink **ZAN** ArchImperator of the Republic following Darrow's removal, commander of Luna's defense fleet, a Blue **CLOWN** Howler, client of House Barca, a Gold **PEBBLE**

Howler, client of House Barca, a Gold **MIN-MIN** Howler, sniper and munitions expert, client of House Barca, a Red **SCREWFACE** Howler, client of House Augustus, a Gold **MARBLES** Howler, hacker, a Green **TONGUELESS** Former prisoner at Deepgrave, an Obsidian **FELIX AU DAAN** Bodyguard to Darrow, client of House Augustus, a Gold

THE SOCIETY

ATALANTIA AU GRIMMUS Dictator of the Society, daughter of the Ash Lord Magnus au Grimmus, sister to Aja and Moira, former client of House Lune, a Gold **LYSANDER AU LUNE** Grandson of former Sovereign Octavia, heir to House Lune, former patron of House Grimmus, a Gold **ATLAS AU RAA/THE FEAR KNIGHT** Brother to Romulus au Raa, Legate of the Zero Legion (“the Gorgons”), former ward of House Lune, client of House Grimmus, a Gold **AJAX/THE STORM KNIGHT** Son of Aja au Grimmus and Atlas au Raa, heir of House Grimmus, Legate of the Iron Leopards, a Gold **KALINDORA AU SAN/THE LOVE KNIGHT** Olympic Knight, aunt to Alexandar au Arcos, client of House Grimmus, a Gold **JULIA AU BELLONA** Cassius’s estranged mother and Darrow’s enemy, Primus of the House Bellona remnant, a Gold **SCORPIO AU VOTUM** Primus of House Votum (the metal mining magnates and builders of Mercury), a Gold **CICERO AU VOTUM** Heir to House Votum, son of Scorpio, Legate of the Scorpion Legion, a Gold **ASMODEUS AU CARTHII** Primus of House Carthii (the shipbuilders of Venus), a Gold **RHONE TI FLAVINIUS** Lunese subPraetor, former second officer of the XIII Dracones Praetorian Guard under Aja, a Gray **SENECA AU CERN** Dux of Ajax, Centurion of the Iron Leopards, a Gold **MAGNUS AU GRIMMUS/THE ASH LORD** Former ArchImperator to Octavia au Lune, the Burner of Rhea, a Gold, killed by the Howlers and Apollonius au Valii-Rath **OCTAVIA AU LUNE** Former Sovereign of the Society, grandmother to Lysander, a Gold, killed by Darrow **AJA AU GRIMMUS** Daughter of Ash Lord Magnus au Grimmus, a Gold, killed by Sevro **MOIRA AU GRIMMUS** Daughter of Ash Lord Magnus au Grimmus, a Gold, killed by Ragnar

THE RIM DOMINION

DIDO AU RAA Co-consul of the Rim Dominion, wife to former Sovereign of the Rim Dominion Romulus au Raa, née Dido au Saud, a Gold **DIOMEDES AU RAA/THE STORM KNIGHT** Son of Romulus and Dido, Taxiarchos of the Lightning Phalanx, a Gold **SERAPHINA AU RAA** Daughter of Romulus and Dido, Lochagos of the Eleventh Dust Walkers, a Gold **HELIOS AU LUX** Co-consul of the Rim Dominion, with Dido, a Gold **ROMULUS AU RAA/THE LORD OF THE DUST** Former Primus of

House Raa, former Sovereign of the Rim Dominion, a Gold, killed by ceremonial suicide

THE OBSIDIAN

SEFI THE QUIET Queen of the Obsidian, leader of the Valkyrie, sister to Ragnar Volarus, an Obsidian **VALDIR THE UNSHORN** Warlord and royal concubine of Sefi, an Obsidian **OZGARD** Shaman of the Firebones, an Obsidian **FREIHILD** Skuggi spirit warrior, an Obsidian **GUDKIND** Skuggi spirit warrior, an Obsidian **XENOPHON** Advisor to Sefi, a White *logos* **RAGNAR VOLARUS** Former leader of the Obsidian, Howler, an Obsidian, killed by Aja

OTHER CHARACTERS

EPHRAIM TI HORN Freelancer, former member of the Sons of Ares, husband to Trigg ti Nakamura, a Gray **VOLGA FJORGAN** Freelancer, colleague of Ephraim, an Obsidian **APOLLONIUS AU VALII-RATH/THE MINOTAUR** Heir to House Valii-Rath, verbose, a Gold **THE DUKE OF HANDS** Syndicate operative, master thief, a Rose Pink **LYRIA OF LAGALOS** Gamma from Mars, client of House Telemachus, a Red **LIAM** Nephew of Lyria, client of House Telemachus, a Red **HARMONY** Leader of the Red Hand, former Sons of Ares lieutenant, a Red **PYTHA** Pilot, companion to Cassius and Lysander, a Blue **FIGMENT** Freelancer, a Brown **FITCHNER AU BARCA/ARES** Former leader of the Sons of Ares, a Gold, killed by Cassius au Bellona

THE SOVEREIGN

“CITIZENS OF THE SOLAR REPUBLIC, this is your Sovereign.”

I stare half blind into a firing squad of fly-eyed cameras. Out the viewport behind my stage, battle stations and ships of war float beyond the upper atmosphere of Luna.

Eight billion eyes watch me.

“On Friday evening last, the third day of the Mensis Martius, I received a brief indicating that a large-scale Society military operation was under way in the orbit of Mercury. The largest in materiel and manpower since the Battle of Mars, five long years ago.

“We are responsible for this crisis. Lured by the false promises of an enemy plenipotentiary, we allowed our resolve to weaken. We allowed ourselves to believe in the better virtues of our enemy, and that peace was possible with tyrants.

“That lie, seductive though it was, has been exposed as a cruel machination of statecraft designed, perpetrated, and executed by the newly appointed Dictator of the Society remnant, Atalantia au Grimmus—daughter of the Ash Lord. Under her spell, we compromised with the agents of tyranny. We turned on our greatest general, the sword who broke the chains of bondage, and demanded he accept a peace he knew to be a lie.

“When he did not, we cried *Traitor! Tyrant! Warmonger!* In fear of him, we recalled the Home Guard elements of the White Fleet from Mercury back to Luna. We left Imperator Aquarii at half strength, exposed, vulnerable. Now, her fleet, the fleet which freed all our homes, floats in ruins. Two hundred of *your* ships of war destroyed. Thousands of *your* sailors killed. Millions of *your* brothers and sisters marooned upon a hostile sphere. Quadrillions of *your* wealth squandered. Not by virtue of enemy arms, but by the squabbling of *your* Senate.

“I have heard it said in these last months, in the halls of the New Forum, on the streets of Hyperion, on the news channels across our Republic, that we should abandon these sons and daughters of liberty, these Free Legions. I have heard them called, in public, without shame, ‘the Lost Legions.’ Written off by you, despite the courage they have summoned, the endurance they have shown, the horrors they have suffered *for you*. Written off because we fear to part with our ships will invite invasion of our homeworlds. Because we fear to once again see Society iron over our skies. Because we fear to risk the comforts and freedoms the men and women of the Free Legions purchased for us with their blood...

“I will tell you what I fear. I fear time has diluted our dream! I fear that in our comfort, we believe liberty to be self-fulfilling!” I lean forward. “I fear that the meekness of our resolve, the bickering and backbiting on which we have so decadently glutted ourselves, will rob us of the unity of will that moved the world forward to a fairer place, where respect for justice and freedom has found a foothold for the first time in a millennium.

“I fear that in this disunity we will sink back into the hideous epoch from which we escaped, and that the new dark age will be crueler, more sinister, and more protracted by the malice which we have awoken in our enemies.

“I call upon you, the People of the Republic, to stand united. To beseech your senators to reject fear. To reject this torpor of self-interest. To not quiver in primal trepidation at the thought of invasion, to not let your senators hoard *your* wealth for themselves and hide behind *your* ships of war, but to summon the more wrathful angels of their spirits and send forth the might of the Republic to scourge the engines of tyranny and oppression from the Mercurian sky and rescue our Free Legions.”

At that moment, three hundred eighty-four thousand kilometers from my heart, in orbit one thousand kilometers above the wayward continent of South Pacifica, projectiles skinned with Sun Industries stealth polymer race into the void at 320,000 kilometers per hour toward Mercury, ferrying not death, but supplies, radiation medicine, machines of war, and, if my husband is alive, a message of hope.

You have not been abandoned. I will come for you.

Until then, endure, my love. Endure.

PROLOGUE

TWO MONTHS EARLIER

DARROW

Blood Red

A GRAVEYARD OF REPUBLIC WARSHIPS floats in the shadow of Mercury.

Of the triumphant White Fleet that liberated Luna, Earth, and Mars, nothing remains but twisted shards and blackened hollows. Shattered by the might of the Ash Armada, the broken ships spin in orbit around the planet they liberated only months before. No longer filled with Martian sailors and legionnaires loyal to Eo's dream, their cold halls are naked to vacuum and populated only by the dead.

This is the last laugh of the Ash Lord, and the debut of his heir.

While I burned the old warlord to death in his bed on Venus with Apollonius and Sevro, his daughter Atalantia stepped out from his shadow to take up his office of Dictator. She slipped the greater part of their armada away

from Venus and used the sun's sensor-distorting radiation to ambush the White Fleet in orbit over Mercury.

Orion, my fleet's commander and the greatest naval tactician in the Republic, never saw them coming. It was a massacre, and I was three weeks too late to stop it. The frantic Mayday calls of my friends tortured me as I crossed the void, slipping farther and farther away from my son and wife toward bedlam.

The White Fleet may be gone, but the Free Legions they ferried to Mercury are not dead yet. Soon I will join them on the surface of Mercury, but first I have work to do.

It would be easier with Sevro. Everything violent is.

My breath rasps in my vacuum-proof suit as I traverse the graveyard. My magnetic boots land silently along the broken spine of a Republic dreadnought, and I peer into a great fissure in the hull to check on the progress of my lancer. The wound in the hull is thirty decks deep. Jetsam floats in the darkness—bits of metal, mattresses, coffeepots, frozen globes of machine fluid, and severed limbs. No sign of Alexandar.

The rigid corpse of a sailor in a mechanic's kit drifts upward feet-first. His legs have been congealed into a single crooked stump from the heat of a particle blast. His mouth is locked in a silent scream, as if to ask, "Where were you when the enemy came? Where was the Reaper I swore to follow?"

He was deceived by his enemies, by his allies, by himself.

While the Republic Senate fooled itself into believing peace could be made with fascist warlords, I pretended killing the Ash Lord would end war in our time. That I held the key to unlocking a future where I could put down the slingBlade and return to my child and wife to be a father and a husband. My desperation let me believe that lie. The

Senate's naïveté let them believe Atalantia's. But I know the truth now.

War *is* our time. Sevro thought he could escape it. I thought I could end it. But our enemy is like the Hydra. Cut off one head, two more sprout. They will not sue for peace. They will not surrender. Their heart must be excised, their will to fight ground to the finest dust.

Only then will there be peace.

Lights flicker in the chasm beneath my feet. Several minutes later, a Gold in an EVA suit drifts upward to set down with me on the hull. For fear of enemy sensors, he puts his faceplate to mine to give his sound waves a medium.

"Reactor is primed and ready for necromancy."

"Well done, Alexandar."

He nods stoically.

The young soldier is no longer the callow, insecure youth who entered my service as a lancer four years ago. After war, most men shrink. Some from the rending of flesh. Some from the loss of fellows. Some from the loss of autonomy. But most in shame at discovering their own impotence. Confronted with horror, their dreams of destiny crumple. Only a cursed few relish the dark thrill in discovering they are natural-born killers.

Alexandar is a killer. He has proven himself the worthy heir to the legacy of his grandfather Lorn au Arcos. And I have begun to wonder if he will inherit my burden. He alone held back the tide atop the Ash Lord's spire when Thraxa, Sevro, and I had been knocked to our knees. It woke the hunger in him. Now, he craves revenge on Atalantia for the murder of our fleet.

I miss that purity of purpose.

What was it that Lorn said again? "The old rage in colder ways, for they alone decide how to spend the young."

How many more must I spend? What is Alexandar's life worth? What is mine worth? As if to find the answer, I glance to my right. Past the hull of the drifting dreadnought, the eastern rim of Mercury throbs like a molten scythe.

The planet is barely larger than Luna, but this close it seems a giant. The shadows of a Society minesweeper pass over its face. It searches for the atomic mines Orion left in orbit to cover our army's frantic retreat after Atalantia's ambush. Few mines remain. When they are gone, only the tropospheric shields that cover the prized continent of Helios will forestall the wrath of the Ash Armada. The black ships prowl beyond the graveyard, safely out of reach of Republic ground cannons, waiting to launch an Iron Rain against my marooned army.

When the shields fall, so will the planet.

Ten million of my brothers and sisters will face annihilation.

That is why Atalantia has come. To crush the White Fleet. To kill the Free Legions. To take back Mercury and with its metals and factories, feed the Gold war machine on Venus to prepare for a single, irresistible thrust toward the heart of the Republic.

A tiny laser flickers against the hull between Alexandar's feet. I put my helmet to his again. "They're moving her," I say. His eyes harden. "Time to go."

Together, we push off the hull to float back into the graveyard. We cross through seas of frozen corpses and shattered ripWings to land two kilometers from the dreadnought on the broken fuselage of a dead torchShip. We skip along its surface until we reach a dark hangar bay. Inside, a prototype black shuttle waits—the *Necromancer*, the personal deepspace shuttle of the Ash Lord, which I stole from his fortress and rode from Venus to Mercury. Today I will make it earn its name.

"Anteater to Dark Tango, do you register?" The Fear Knight's voice is cold and intelligent as it echoes over the speakers in the *Necromancer's* ready bay. The voice matches the man. Atlas au Raa, Atalantia's most effective field commander, is a far cry from his honorable brother, Romulus. Implanted on the surface with his Zero Legion guerrillas, Atlas sows chaos behind our lines and is responsible for my delayed reunion with my army. They don't even know I am here. But neither does the enemy.

The planet was blockaded by the Ash Armada when I arrived to Mercury three weeks ago. Fortunately, the *Necromancer's* stealth capabilities are the most advanced in the Society armada, and the debris field hid our approach.

Hiding in the graveyard, I have used the decryption software on the *Necromancer* to eavesdrop on the Fear Knight's correspondence. He reports his horrors, his impalements, his mutilations, with the detachment of a doctor administering medicine to a patient. Today, he discusses a different matter.

"Dark Tango registers, go for Anteater." A thin Copper voice answers for Atalantia. Some sinister blackops administrator on the *Annihilo*.

"Slave Two is packaged and prepped for delivery," Atlas drawls. *"Blood Medusa primed. Dance floor's looking crowded, confirm escort landfall and chaperone overwatch."*

"Landfall confirmed. Escorts: Love, Death, and Storm delivered to chalk, minus twenty. ETA to handshake forty minutes. Chaperone overwatch primed. Request escort handshake confirmation. Delivery active pending your go."

"Registers. Will confirm handshake. Anteater out."

The audio clicks off.

Slave Two they call my friend. Since the day Sevro and I hijacked Orion's ship in our escape over Luna, the Blue has been my confidante, my stalwart ally, my saving grace against the incredible sophistication of Gold naval Praetors. Now she is their captive.

Slave Two. Those motherfuckers.

Before we arrived, Orion was kidnapped by the Fear Knight from her headquarters in Mercury's capital of Tyche. Her personal guard slaughtered. Her fingers left on her bed to mock the Free Legions.

Unable to extract her to orbit, the Fear Knight managed to stay a step ahead of the trackers my commanders sent in pursuit. I listened to the bastard's reports as he skinned some of them alive and tortured Orion in his hidden mountain bases. Today, he attempts to ferry her to orbit to face Atalantia's arcane psychotechs. It will be a neural extraction—a science in which only my wife is Atalantia's equal. Orion may have resisted torture, but when Atalantia peels through the layers of her mind, the planetary defense architecture of the Republic will be laid bare.

I cannot permit that to happen.

"Fascist assholes," my niece, Rhonna, mutters and tightens her synaptic gloves in Alexandar's direction.

"It was the baked Red peasants who gave up Orion. Not Golds," Alexandar says as he scalps a warhawk onto the giant head of Thraxa au Telemachus with his razor. It matches my own. Thraxa admires it in the reflection of her notched warhammer: Wee Lass.

"The whole planet is an asshole," Rhonna replies. "You should think of buying a villa, Princess."

He blows her a kiss in reply.

"Atalantia's got some flair, at least," Collway drawls. Never one for wasted effort, the best fighter pilot in the Republic lies on a crate of pulseArmor smoking a burner.

His slim limbs splay every direction while pale blue eyes gaze dreamily at the curling smoke. “Remember Dreadhammer and Lightbane? Jove, was the Ash Lord on the nose. If he called it a nose. Probably called it Airdevourer or Consumer of Lifegas—”

Thraxa’s Wee Lass thumps the deck, leaving two big divots.

Everyone shuts up.

My apex killer is horny for battle. Thraxa’s face is painted orange. Her thigh-thick neck bent forward like a sunblood stallion at the Hippodrome starting block. While I regret my fondness for violence out of a Red sense of guilt, the old-blood Gold bathes in its furor. Not the glory Cassius loved, or the noble fight Alexandar chases, or the cathartic revenge Sevro needs, but the primal essence of battle itself. Never is Thraxa more alive than after thirty days in the field, crusted with saddle sores and sweat, hunting men who have never been prey.

“I like to kill people I don’t like,” she once said when Pax asked why she follows me. “And your daddy brings ’em like flies.”

I survey the rest of my meager force. All save Collway wear the warhawk Sevro made famous. Alexandar, Collway, and Thraxa are ready. Are Rhonna and Tongueless? The old Obsidian sits cross-legged on the floor.

From prison guard to prisoner to an unlikely asset, Tongueless proved his worth on the Ash Lord’s island. He is a true patriot for the Republic, but I fear he may not be ready for what’s coming. I fear we’re not. Without Sefi’s mate, Valdir, and his Obsidians, without Sevro, Victra, Pebble, Clown, and Holiday the company feels smaller than it should. I am missing my best weapons, and friends.

“The enemy is in motion,” I say. “The Fear Knight will attempt to deliver Orion to the *Annihilo* within the hour. If

we can rescue her, we will. If we cannot, we terminate. They will not get that intel." I look them each in the eye to measure their will. "You know the plan. You each have kill clearance. Remember why we are here. Our mission is not to save ourselves. It is to protect the Republic, at any cost."

They nod, but I wonder if they understand the extent to which I expect them to honor that principle. There will be those whose consciences will deceive them into holding higher other principles.

I need a core I can depend upon.

"Intel suggests we will encounter at least three Olympic Knights and Gorgon operators." The Gorgons comprise the Fear Knight's blackops legion. Their ranks consist of Shamed Golds from the Institutes, and Grays and Obsidians with antisocial tendencies deemed corrosive to the fighting spirit of the regular legions. "No one is to engage an Olympic unless you're with me."

"Will Fear be there himself?" Thraxa asks.

"His name is Atlas," I reply. "It's possible, but I doubt Atalantia will give up her best ground operator before her Rain. But she is sending Ajax."

Alexandar and Thraxa tense.

"Do we have confirmation from Screwface?" Rhonna asks.

"Screwface is still silent," I say. She looks down, fearing the man is dead. It is likely, since our only mole on the *Annihilo* failed to warn us of Atalantia's ambush. "Any more questions?" None. Refreshing change of scenery. "Good. To your slots. Let's get our girl back."

Rhonna scoops up her vacuum sack, fist-bumps Char and Tongueless, and slides down the ladder to the starShell bay. I feel a pang of guilt. I told my brother I'd keep her safe. If I wasn't so short-staffed, I could concoct a reason to keep her on the *Necromancer*. But for Orion, even my niece is

worth risking, especially considering her role today may be more important even than my own.

I grab Alexandar's arm as the rest head out and gesture to Thraxa's paint stamp. I ask him to do the honors. "I know you were close to Kalindora," I say as he picks up the contraption. He nods at the mention of the Love Knight, his mother's younger sister.

He toggles through the options on the paint stamp. "She spent every summer with us in Elysium, always begging Grandfather to train her. But she was best friends with Atalantia and Anastasia. He didn't want to give Octavia another weapon." Alexandar looks up. "When he took the house to Europa, she chose her Sovereign over her family. She is no blood of mine." He points the paint gun at my face. "What'll it be? Goblin black, Valkyrie blue, Minotaur purple, Julii jade..."

"Blood Red."

—

In the spitTube again.

Waiting for the kill.

I hate this part.

A moving mind is always fed. At rest, mine eats itself.

How many times have I been here? Sealed in a womb of metal, not for birth but to eat the living? The confines afflict me with dread. Dread not of what lies beyond—you can never prepare for that game—but that this will be my eternal tomb.

Cursed to live to kill. Is this who I will always be?

Is this the life I crave? To rise before the sun? To smile at the cock and fart jokes of killers as they grow younger and I grow older? To sleep under tanks, in the ruins of cities, amongst the corpses?

I no longer believe in the Vale. I am the walking dead.

Woe to those who cross my shadow.

I miss the promise of life. The smell of rain. The murmur of waves on a shore. The sound of a full house. It is a life I have rented, but never owned.

My wife and son are real. Not ghosts in my head. They are out there breathing right now. Where are you, Pax? Is it bright where you walk? Are you afraid? Has your mother found you? Your uncle? Do you wonder if your father will come? Do you hate him for having left? Will you ever understand?

I have stolen pieces of him and his mother, which I hold for ransom, promising to one day return. I know that is a lie. Mercury will be my end.

I reach for his key, forgetting I set it in my luggage three weeks ago. My thoughts drift to his mother. Unlike Sevro, Virginia did not accuse me of parental malfeasance. She knows the shearing forces at work on my heart. How can I be a father to Pax if I abandon the millions who chose to follow me to Luna? The responsibility to many outweighs the responsibility to one, even though it breaks something inside me. I feel alone knowing Sevro would not make the sacrifice. Am I alone in my conviction, or have I gone mad?

My wife and I corresponded during my passage from Venus to Mercury before I had to go dark as I approached the planet. Now it is too dangerous. I play the last words of her final correspondence. Her voice echoes through my helmet. *"Trust your wife to find our son. Trust your Sovereign to bring the armada. Trust in me enough to stay alive."*

I trust my wife. I do not trust my Sovereign.

She will find Pax with Victra and Sevro. But no rescue fleet will come for my marooned army. Most have forgotten the slingBlade of my people was not made to kill pitvipers.

It was made for hacking off limbs of trapped miners. My old mentor, Dancer, has not forgotten. Now the leading senator of the Vox Populi movement, he will amputate us to save the Republic.

Atalantia expects this. If she breaks the Free Legions here, if she feeds Mercury's resources into her war machine, who can match her in space and Atlas and the Ash Legion commanders on the ground when they sail on my mother, my brother, my sister, my son, my wife, my friends, my home?

I will not survive Mercury, I know that. The Free Legions will not survive Mercury. But we can make Atalantia pay so dearly for our deaths, that we break the back of the Gold military and secure a chance for our families, for our Republic and its fragile dream.

I put away my wife's face as I put away the key my son gave me for his gravBike when I sailed for Mercury, and stare at the red light until the enemy com crackles.

"Anteater to Dark Tango. Escort handshake confirmed. We are go in three, two..."

Fury begins upon the planet with a spark. A lone frigate rises from a hangar hidden in the desert mountains. An escort of six Gorgon ripWings follows, burning low across the desert toward the Sycorax Sea where the ground shields do not reach. In orbit above the planet, five dreadnoughts, led by Atalantia's *Annihilo*, plunge toward the western hemisphere.

Free Legion contrails form over the sea in response. Atalantia's strike force of dreadnoughts bombards an unshielded sliver of the planet. Ground cannons reply as Republic squadrons close in on the escaping corvette. Society ripWings descend from the *Annihilo*. It will be a hell of a party over the western hemisphere.

We won't be attending. And neither will the Olympic Knights.

As the battle plays in the background, I follow Colloway's scrutiny of the Waste of Ladon. *"Getting a ghost in the eastern Ladon. That's our bird. Hermes-class corvette."*

"Wait for it to get into the debris field." Sure enough, the corvette has no interest in the scrum over the western hemisphere. It pierces orbit over the eastern hemisphere and sprints for the debris belt. "Char, sick 'em."

"Boom goes the ion."

A thousand tons of high-grade engines and weaponry come alive in the hollow of the dead destroyer. Inertial dampeners throb as the *Necromancer* explodes out of its hiding place.

"Chin to collar." I remind my Howlers as Colloway weaves through the graveyard toward our quarry. They haven't spotted us yet in the debris. "I am the tip of the spear. Move at my pace. Kill all hostiles. Momentum is everything. We stop, we die." There's a shudder as our ship hits debris. I see an open line between Alex and Rhonna. I click in.

"Here's hoping this one's worth a wolfcloak," Alexandar says.

"Bah, he'll make us die puppies," Rhonna replies. *"Stay sharp, Princess."*

"And you, Ruster."

I click out.

"Eyes on target," Colloway drones. *"Pricks and slits, guard your tenders, spit pending."* The ship rumbles as its cannons fire. They've spotted us. It's a race now through the debris field toward their waiting armada. We spin like a top. Ordnance glancing off as the *Blood Medusa* returns fire. The seconds thicken. Each a test of patience. Three

weeks I have waited. Three weeks in darkness. Three weeks in torment. Three weeks for this kill.

A magnetic charge builds behind me.

The lights go green.

Yellow.

Red.

Gravity says hello.

I launch from the spitTube.

Momentum and sunlight and spinning metal. Our quarry barrel-rolls through the shards of a torchShip, exchanging fire with the *Necromancer*. Colloway sticks to its tail like a wicked shadow.

The Howler signatures are lost in the debris. I take over my suit's side thrusters and lock on to the corvette, trusting my team to follow. Five hundred meters out. Debris careens past. Globules of frozen blood and water from ship stores become blurs. The heartbeat monitors of my Howlers are jackhammering as they try to keep up.

"Match me," I say. "Match me."

In its desperation to escape the *Necromancer*, the *Medusa* nearly collides with the engine block of a destroyer. It hammers its starboard thrusters and turns at a right angle. Damn fine pilot. But the men inside will be slammed into walls if they're not secure.

I seize the opportunity.

"Breach," I say as I goose my gravBoots and leap forward. The *Medusa*'s hull grows larger. I aim for its centerline, directing Colloway to the breach point.

Systemic rage builds as I prepare for contact.

Atalantia thought she could steal my Imperator.

That her Fear Knight could keep my friend as a toy for torture.

That I would simply run back to Luna and let my men die.

That she could steal my son and there would be no consequences.

Well, here I am, you deviant bitch. Here I *bloody* am.

The motherfucking consequence.

"Five seconds to breach."

The hull of the corvette rips open as Colloway sends a miracle shot home. His warhead sprays out molecular crash webbing.

Two seconds.

One.

Breach.

I pierce the molten hole. The black blur of the molecular crash webbing expands like glossy, replicating fungus.

I smash into the webbing. My teeth bite through my mouthguard. My internal organs throb. The webbing absorbed my crash, but quickly becomes a liability, as Alexandar warned. It seals the breach and traps me upside down in its embrace. I can't reach the dispersal agent on my pulseArmor's thigh.

As the webbing expands, I see only blackness. Masked enemies in tattered desert gear crawl through it. A moment before, the Gorgons were being pushed out the breach into space. Now they are as trapped as I am. I can't reach the razor on my wrist. Not half a meter away, a sunburnt Obsidian with chromed-out desert eyes points a pistol at my head. I push the barrel away and, slowed by the webbing, thrust my left hand into his stomach until the flesh gives. He screams as I reach under his ribcage and squeeze his liver.

"Sound off," I bark.

"*Howler Three*," Thraxa says. "*Enemy contact, releasing counter-agent.*"

"*Pup Two. Landfall*," Rhonna says. "*Drilling on your go.*"

“Pup One? Tongueless?” Only static replies.

The crash webbing bubbles. Thraxa’s released the counter-agent. It dissolves into a black soup that hisses against the deck. Sheets of steam roll up. Released, my armor clunks to the floor, my hand still inside the screaming slaveknight. I pull out my razor and bury it in his face.

Others move in the steam as he twitches. Six enemies, all coming for me. I struggle to stand. Then, one by one, the six shapes divide into twelve. A lean figure glides through them all like a Lykos dancer.

“Pup One, reporting.”

Alexandar, fresh from bisecting a half-dozen of the Fear Knight’s best men, slams to a knee in front of me. He wipes the blood from his family blade and helps me to my feet.

The hole Colloway shot in the ship goes three decks deep. Sparks from broken instruments crackle. Molecular armor on the hull clatters as it seals the breach behind us, locking us in.

Tongueless clicks over the com and appears from two decks below. He boosts up and assembles the ripWing cannon he and Rhonna harvested from the graveyard, hooking the man-sized gun to his armor’s homemade exoskeleton. Thraxa pulls herself from a mangled wall. Her fox warhelm is dented. A sharp piece of metal sticks through her lower guts and out the back of her armor. She bends the points of the metal shard down and looks toward the sound of enemies coming up from the lower decks and down the main corridor.

I toss a grenade down to the lower decks. White light flares and a concussion thunders. I peek out into the main corridor.

Masked men in tactical gear move like a hunched organism down the hall. I dip my head back just as bullets

chew into the wall and it starts to melt.

“Tongueless, give ‘em a lick.”

Tongueless levers the ripWing cannon forward on its hydraulic arm while Thraxa braces him from behind. The cannon is meant for ships. Not men. It screams toroids of energy down the hall, bucking the Obsidian into Thraxa. The frame rate of the world stutters. Behind Tongueless, Thraxa pulls her warhammer from its magnetic holster. Alexandar salutes me with his blade and turns to the main corridor.

Kaleidoscopic carnage unfolds before us.

“Pup Two, go for drill,” I say to Rhonna.

“Copy.”

“Invert,” I order. All except Tongueless rotate boots to ceiling. “One hundred meters to the Package. Push.”

We charge into the wake of Tongueless’s maelstrom. Everything is upside down. The very air ripples with heat. Body parts steam all over the floor. Half-melted doorways tilt. The main corridor runs the spine of the ship. It is the most direct route to the prison cells. But it means we will be flanked in seconds. We must punch through, or it’s all on Rhonna.

There’s a blur at the far end of the corridor. Drones scream for us, spitting munitions. Three of us open up with our pulseFists. Shrapnel pings everywhere. Then the Gorgons come to play.

Dozens of elite guerrillas fire around corners, but we roll down the ceiling like an upside-down wrecking ball made of energy, razors, and hammers.

I fire point-blank into a Gorgon’s chest, killing the armored man behind him as well. The third bends impossibly and squeezes three shots at my head. But I’m already past him and firing my fist at an Obsidian.

A homing grenade clatters against my right thigh. I cut it off with my razor and Alexandar kicks it. It detonates ten meters in front of us, lifting us backward.

“Push.”

I was a killer at sixteen. A warlord by twenty. But the younger me wasn't this. He was still tender and new to war. If he was the Helldiver, I am the clawDrill.

I carve through hardcore veterans of the Zero Legion as if they were made of pastry. Still, they pour from every hall. Existence is smoke and fire. My armor pings. Internal warnings scream. I flicker my pulseShields on and off, letting them cool so I don't cook. The Gorgons will not die easy, and there are too many.

We're pinned. Flanked on three sides and can't push forward. Tongueless fires back down the main corridor, sweeping it clear. Something hits him from his right. A hole smokes in his armor. He stumbles as I fire at his assailant and overlap my shields to guard him as he recovers.

“Slide.”

Alexandar seamlessly takes point and fires down the hall. Thraxa rotates to take his position. Tongueless recovers and takes hers. Alexandar flickers down the hall like a possessed flame, lashing out his razor in abject slaughter, inverting gravity better than any man I've ever seen save maybe Sevro. He tries to break through the crack fireteam barring our path.

“Hull penetration,” Rhonna intones. “Breaching.”

The Gorgon fireteam perform a perfect Flavianian armorkill on Alexandar. Three nail him with electrical rounds before he reaches them, lowering his pulseShield. Two deliver mass slugs that stun him senseless. He teeters there like a drunk. Their centurion delivers the coup de grâce. His muzzle flashes. Three armor-penetrating digger rounds scream toward Alexandar's head.

Thraxa bolts forward and the rounds sizzle as they ricochet off her intact pulseShield. One penetrates and rips a hole through her left shoulder, spinning her sideways.

“Slide!”

I rotate into her place, rocketing into that damn fireteam on my gravBoots to kill the entire lot. As their bodies drip off my armor and my friends fight behind me, I look down the smoke-filled corridor to see a red heart burning in the gloom. A white skull joins it.

Two silhouettes bar our path to the prisons. The razors of the Olympic Knights glimmer like teeth. The heart and skull emblems of their office glow on their breastplates. The Love Knight and the Death Knight.

Where is the Storm Knight?

Where is Aja’s only son?

I pray to a silent god he is not with Orion.

I look left, Gorgons. Right, Gorgons. Then behind us to see three hundred and fifty pounds of apex predator crouched in the corridor, his black and gray leopard warhelm lowered for the hunt.

Ajax.

“Pup Two, we’ve got the Olympics. You’re clear. *On me,*” I bark.

We launch away from Ajax for Love and Death. Each side in gravBoots and inverting gravity at will. Metal rings as we crash together. Death and I slam into the wall, the ceiling, the floor, smashing Gorgons still in their desert gear. We fire our pulseFists at the same time and melt each other’s into oblivion. The force sends us reeling into the Love Knight and Alexandar, who engage in a far more graceful duel of blades. Alexandar turns Love to Thraxa, who is just completing a huge swing of her hammer. Then Death bowls into Thraxa from the side, guarding his wingman’s back.

Behind them, Tongueless unloads his cannon on Ajax. I've never seen one close so fast as Aja's boy. He ricochets along the ceiling toward Tongueless, and then slashes down to slide sparking across the floor, flat on his back. Because the recoil of the cannon pulls its barrel upward, Tongueless is slow to angle it back down.

Ajax counted on it.

He slides past Tongueless. His wrist flicks. His slide stops and he pivots to the Root Cutter stance of the Willow Way. One of the last and most complicated forms his mother would have taught him before my friends and I killed her.

Tongueless falls into four pieces, dead before he even hits the floor.

"Thraxa! Hold for me!" I shout as she charges Ajax. She is fast, impossibly strong, tough as nails. But Ajax was born of the unholy genetic union of two apex bloodlines: Raa and Grimmus. He is her superior in every martial way except experience, and in that he's gaining.

He swims past her hammer and scores two strikes to her armor. She reels back, shocked by his speed. I rush to help, but Alexandar is pinned back by Death and Love. They block my way. Ajax has Thraxa on the ground. He bats her hammer to the side.

I go Blood Red.

The razor blows shiver up my arm as I give the Death Knight my undivided attention. He does well to last seven seconds. The opening is small and inelegant. He meets a crashing overhead, and tries to deflect it instead of absorb the blow. He forgets the curve. My blade doesn't turn and my full weight jars his own blade into his armor. Before he can pull it out, I pivot and chop Death's head off.

I wheel around. Ajax was fifteen meters down the hall when I last saw him. He almost takes my head off as he

passes above. I deflect his blade at the last millisecond, but the salvo we share would make his mother's eyes gleam.

A very good killer can string together a set of three moves in an onset—a one-second set of preprogrammed, carefully cultivated strikes. Everyone has their signature. As one of the top fifty with a blade in the Core, Cassius could do five. I once saw Lorn do eight. Ajax does eight. It isn't to say he's as good as Lorn, but he is as fast; and fighting him is like being plunged into cold water.

Pure shock.

I don't really see the moves at this point. Even Gold eyes can't track blades this fast. By the time he flips down to bar my way to the prison block, I'm nicked three times. But so is he. He swishes his blade like a walking stick as the Love Knight takes the opportunity to pair up with him and form the Hydra fighting stance. Alexandar limps to my side. Thraxa groans from behind us as she stumbles to join us.

The two parties stare each other down in the narrow corridor. Everyone bleeds. *Come on, Rhonna. I don't want to pay this toll yet.*

"I hoped it would be like this," Ajax says from behind his helmet. His voice is almost as deep as his grandfather's. "First you. Then I work my way down the food chain. Your wife. Your shadow. Your Bellona."

As much as I want to cut off Atalantia's left and right hands by killing her best two knights, as much as I want to end Ajax before he becomes something I can't handle, dying here doesn't end the war.

I hail Rhonna. "Pup Two, status?" I say without taking my eyes off Ajax.

"Package is wrapped. Present deposited. Attaching cord now. Char, anytime, please."

"Coming in hot. Getting frisky out here. Two destroyers and four torches inbound."

"Popping off. Three, two, one."

I turn from Ajax and wrap Alexandar and Thraxa in a hug. I had hoped my presence would draw the Olympic Knights. They all want to be the one who takes me down. I thought I could still punch through. But with the knights the Core has these days, you always buy insurance.

While I drew their eyes, Rhonna's starShell landed on the hull beyond the prison block and welded through to steal Orion from behind their backs.

Duuuuuuuuuuuuuum

The aft section of the ship vaporizes behind Ajax and the Love Knight as Rhonna's bomb detonates. A maw to space opens and the pressure of the ship rips them out into vacuum. We tumble with them into the debris field. Everything's spinning, and all we can do is hold on to one another. I see flashes of the oncoming enemy ships. RipWings slip through the darkness, and the *Necromancer* races toward us. Just when I think it will hit us, it tips on its nose, inverts, and inhales us into its back-facing garage. The doors seal instantly and we ricochet like marbles. Rhonna's mech is locked magnetically to the floor with arms around a bag as if it were a baby.

I grip a rung to pull myself to the viewport just as the reactors Alexandar and I retrofitted activate. A dozen dead ships glow with sudden light. Their hulks begin to crumple from the inside, and then the reactors overload in a wash of blinding light.

The two onrushing destroyers and torchShips ripple as the energy waves wash across the graveyard. The corpses of my dead starships animate into frantic contortions. I howl with Alexandar and Thraxa as the derelict hulks splinter apart to cover our retreat, sending hundred-meter shards flailing into the enemy ships Atalantia sent into the graveyard.

From the other side of the graveyard, her fleet watches their kilometer-long destroyers burn as we roar for Mercury. Colloway hails all Republic craft that the Reaper is inbound. We need cover fire.

Dripping with sweat, I jump down to the floor. Alexandar helps pull Rhonna from her mech. Thraxa winces as she pulls the vacuum bag free of the mech's embrace. We set it gently on the floor. I close my eyes before I open the seal. Tongueless died for this. Though I knew him less well than he deserved, he will have saved more lives today than he'll ever know.

I unzip the bag.

Inside is a shriveled woman in a prisoner jumpsuit. An oxygen globe sealed over her head. I remove it. Her skin is ashen. Her face is half gone. It looks as if it has been eaten. But her eyes are as blue as I remember. They fill with tears as Orion reaches to touch my face with the stumps of her fingers. Through tattered lips, she sneers, "Hail Reaper."

PART I

MISCHIEF

Of iron is the last,
In no part good and tractable as former ages past.
For when that of this wicked age once open'd was the
vein, Therein all mischief rushed forth, then faith and
truth were fain, and honest shame to hide their heads;
for whom stept stoutly in, Craft, treason, violence,
envy, pride, and wicked lust to win.

—OVID, *METAMORPHOSES*, 1.129-34

1

DARROW

Till the Vale

I STAND AMIDST THE BLIND. Cloudy eyes set in sun-ravaged faces stare up at the sun, at the stone obelisks, at the meager cubes of protein cupped in their blistered hands, at their leader who brought them to this cursed place, and see nothing but darkness. Their retinas have been fried by the ordnance of our enemies.

They reach to touch my red cloak as if it will heal them. They are Reds, Grays, Browns, Coppers, and the few Obsidians who chose not to heed their queen's call to return to Earth. The legionnaires survived the Fear Knight's ambush in the Western Ladon, only to become 2,301 casualties that we must continue to feed, supply with medical aid, and protect. Why would Atlas au Raa kill when maiming pays dividends? My men look on the living casualties with despair. Others turn their heads away, as if looking at them might invite the same fate upon themselves.

Drop by drop he blackens the pigment of our souls.

I bend in front of a Gray with two cauterized stumps for legs. "You look like you got between a Telemachus and a pint of whiskey, legionnaire."

"Fear so, sir. I'd be back in the fight, had we the gear."

If he were a Gold or Obsidian, he'd be back in the fight by month's end, but we can't spend our near-extinguished supply of prosthetics on regular infantry. Bad investment. I once thought the greatest sin of war was violence. It isn't. The greatest sin is it requires good men to become practical.

"I still see it, sir. Like a ghost tail." The Gray rubs his eyes, remembering the Fear Knight's firebrand. "Bright as day. Can't sleep a wink."

"You and me both. But next time you open your eyes, it'll be Mars you see. You're from Hippolyte, yes?"

"Born and bred in the jade city, sir."

"Then we'll share oysters and cigars there soon. I promise." I pat him on the shoulder, murmur something inconsequential, and move on. I stop before an old Red man with a thin quilt about his shoulders despite the heat. Bald but for a crescent of thin gray hair, he rolls a burner with practiced ease. His eyes flick back and forth as he realizes I am there. He takes in a sharp breath. "Is it you?" He holds out a hand. I take it in mine. His burner begins to shake from nerves. I set my hand on his and motion a woman to toss me her ring lighter. The end of the burner curls with smoke as I give the old Red a light and toss the lighter back.

"Looks like you've had a day," I say.

He takes a deep drag. His hand steadies. "I'm Red, sir. Been blind most of me life. I'll get on fine-like. If there's other mouths need feedin', don't worry about me. I don't die."

His accent...

“What mine are you from, legionnaire?”

He grins. “Yours, as it happens.”

“Lykos?” I search his face. The crow’s feet around his eyes are peppered with blood-fly bites. “What’s your name?”

“Don’t ya recognize me, sir?” He takes another drag from his burner. It glows, burning hot and fast. His hand holds it the same way it did the day Eo died, between his ring and pinky fingers. I feel the movement of the deepmine winds. The smell of rust and swill. An echo of Eo’s laughter. It’s been a long time.

“Dago,” I whisper. “Dago of Gamma.” Could it really be the Helldiver I worshipped and loathed as a child? The man who taught me the meaning of defeat? Who won thirty-two laurels? Now here, on Mercury, in *my* army. Fifteen years later. For him it looks like it’s been forty. His age makes me feel the years.

“In the bloodydamn flesh, sir.” He shivers from his wound but manages that slash of a smile. Few teeth remain.

“What are— How long have you been—”

“Since Mars, sir. Five years.”

“And you never thought to find me.”

“Man ain’t shit if he slags with a Helldiver that’s got his eye on the laurel.” His laugh becomes a cough. “But you got it now, sir. Damn well you do.”

“Sir.” Felix, a pristine Gold of my bodyguard, appears behind me. Hailing from a minor house pledged to House Augustus, he is a dour cynic of a man. Just past forty, he has little love of the lowColors. But he is loyal to my wife, and he is Martian. These days there is no more trustworthy a breed. Two dozen more Gold bodyguards tower clean and strong as gods at the edge of the sea of the blind. The zenith and dregs of humanity. I feel guilt that I choose the zenith instead of my own people for protection. Practicality,

again. "Your shuttle is ready to depart. Your...fellow traveler is growing restless."

I want to stay, ask a thousand things of Dago, but I can't. I barely have time to visit the men as it is. Time was you could walk among the wounded and find Sevro sprawled in drink with them playing Karachi, poorly. His absence is felt everywhere, not just in the field. So many gaps for me to fill.

"Reaper..." Dago motions to me. I crouch back down. He pulls open his thighpack. Two cannisters sit inside. One filled with Martian soil. The other empty for his own ash. Most Martian soldiers fear dying on an alien sphere. How many corpses have I seen shriveled after bombardments, their hands clutched around home soil? How many cans of ash have I sent back to Mars to be spread in the sea? Dago offers me his home soil. It even smells of Mars, that faint hint of iron.

"I can't take that," I say.

"Where's your can then, eh?"

"Left it on Luna. This vacation was unexpected."

He takes a handful of the soil and reaches out to me. "It's from Lykos." He coughs blood into his quilt. "Yours as much as mine. Bring it back and we'll share a dram and some gob, eh?" He reaches for my hand, and flattens it so he can give me half of his dust. "Mars is with you, till the Vale." Others hear his words and begin to thump their chests over their hearts in the Fading Dirge, except it is an inversion. Not the fast beating to a slow stop as in death, but a slow pace quickening to a racing beat. I'm about to say something to Dago, when he lights another burner and blows the smoke in my face like old times.

"No time for words, sir. You got killin' to do."

I clench my fist around the dirt. "Till the Vale."

—

With Lykos soil in a secure pouch, I depart the desert, spoiling for a fight.

My shuttle bears north over the desert chalk. Behind, Heliopolis trembles in the warped horizon. A great shield wall, a kilometer high and fifteen long, blocks the mouth of two converging mountain ranges. House Votum crafted the wall to shield Heliopolis from the desert storms that come when spring cyclones descend from the Sycorax Sea in the far north to tear south through the Waste of Ladon down onto Heliopolis. Sparks shiver along the wall's crest as engineers weld guns from broken ships into place.

I lament the waste of firepower. The guns are only there to satisfy the demands of Heliopolis's inhabitants and the Master Maker Glirastes, not to counter an invasion. Heliopolis is the second-wealthiest city of Mercury, rich with architecture, famous for its chariot races, and the gateway to the coastal mines, but it is strategically insignificant for my aims. To the north is where I will break the enemy.

Heliopolis is a thorn in my boot. A hotbed of loyalist insurrection, plots, and back-alley murders. Behind its wall, the haughty city of limestone slouches south toward the Bay of Sirens and then the Caliban Sea. Refugees and soldiers boil through the dusty streets and stuff the city with a ripe summer stink. But there is another scent there in that desert city. Not gull shit or fish markets or the exhaust of war machines, but something else, something creeping that clings to the root of the brain.

Fear.

Fear in the eyes of my legions as they look up to orbit where Atalantia fine-tunes her invasion plans, or to the shadowed mountains where the Fear Knight and his guerrillas sharpen their impaling stakes, or to the streets

filled with Mercurians, any of whom could be a spy or an assassin.

If the death of the fleet was an amputation, this siege is death by exsanguination. Bit by bit, frontline exposure to the perversions of the Fear Knight's guerrillas and waiting for the Rain deteriorates their psyches. My loyal Martians patrol deserts and mountains and erect war machines and battleworks, waiting to be shot by snipers or hear the bug scream—that dread keening which signals a spider mine's activation. Each a better fate than being captured by the Gorgons, the Fear Knight's veteran impalers of Zero Legion.

Fear robs my men of their dignity, their nobility of purpose, their belief in our cause. Who can believe in the intangible with a garrote around their neck? They wait to die, slowly strangled by Atalantia and Atlas.

Some hold out hope that the Republic will send a fleet. There is a small chance, but if I hunker down and wait for my wife to move the gears of democracy, there will be nothing left of us when the enemy strikes. We will die like flies, and fear will spread as the shadows of Atalantia's fleet creep across the steps of the New Forum and their titanium boots tread the shores of my home.

So that makes it all very simple.

I must kill it before it kills us.

—

Our flight path takes us over the Waste of Ladon, the sunbelt that chokes the center of Mercury's main continent, Helios. Half buried in its sands lie the remains of the three armies the Waste has swallowed in its time. Soon I will feed it a fourth.

Somewhere in the Waste's axeblade central mountains, my Howlers herd the Fear Knight toward the tripwire of my

trap—the mining city of Eleusis. Sevro should have been leading them. Four commanders on two planets I’ve sent against Atlas. Four have been returned impaled hole to hole. Only Sevro and I can match the brutality of the Fear Knight. But I have too much weight to bear alone. So I have dispatched my best remaining small-group commander, Thraxa, to lead, and my best sword, Alexandar in case it comes to blows.

To the south, past Heliopolis, commandos install missile systems, mines, and anti-infantry microwave cannons in the tropic archipelagos and deep jungles that sprawl into the Caliban Sea. To the northeast along the Petasos Peninsula are the rising elevations and temperate climes of a tiara of heavily populated cities called the Children.

The capital of the planet, and headquarters for my army, remains Tyche. We have made the treasured seaside home of the Votum into a fortress. Even as we pass over crop latifundia far to its east, you can catch the glint of its spires, and the soothing sight of its guardian mountain: the *Morning Star*.

Due to Orion’s free-fall maneuver, the flagship of my fleet survived Atalantia’s ambush—what the troops are calling the Battle of Caliban, for all the ships that fell through atmosphere into the sea—and now keeps watch over Tyche as her systems undergo repairs with hopes of one day returning her to the stars.

Tyche is crucial not just as a fallback citadel, but for the gravLoop that runs south under the Hesperides Mountains connecting Tyche to Heliopolis. Safe from bombardment, it will be the single artery for reinforcements if the fight reaches Tyche, *and* it will serve as our escape route to Heliopolis if Tyche falls. The only other path is across the Waste of Ladon, and I’d rather have dinner with the Fear Knight than dare cross that devourer of armies.

I busy myself with reports in the *Necromancer's* warroom as the shuttle flies north. Beacons from submerged torchships blink on the command display as we reach the northern extremity of the Sycorax Sea. Across the warroom's data display, a Silver aide drones on about shortages of anti-radiation meds in the south. Most are being hoarded in Tyche for the inevitable fallout.

"Soon we'll have a surplus," I say.

"Have you discovered a new supply, sir?"

"No."

His eyes flutter as he understands.

I feel stuffy. My spirit aches to be released from this endless stream of supply logistics and construction delays. I need fresh air.

I find Rhonna outside the entrance to the garage bay. Orion must be inside. My niece issues a crisp salute. Since her part in Orion's rescue, her popularity with the army has increased, especially with the Blue and Orange sailors and officers. So far, it hasn't gone to her head. Credit her father, Kieran, for that. "How's she looking?" I ask.

"Quiet, sir," Rhonna replies. "Eats alone, when she eats. Spends more time in the shower than the mess. Like she can't get clean. Avoids the men when she can. Night terrors make her dope up to sleep. Never dozes in quarters. New spot every night. Guard detail can barely keep tabs on her."

"Atlas did take her from her quarters," I say. "I wouldn't be able to use a bed either. Have you told anyone about your orders?"

"No, sir. I know you told Imperator Harnassus she passed her psych evaluation. Quiet's the game."

"Good. Good. Has she spotted you?"

"Did you spot me yesterday when you were listening to Aunt V's hologram instead of sleeping like the medici ordered, sir?"

I frown. "Window?"

"Topiaries."

I rub my eyes. "Shit. I'm getting old."

"Or I'm getting quieter."

I suppose it was only a matter of time before everyone started catching up. I consider how young she looks, and how old I must be in her eyes. "Did you know I'm older than my father was when he died? Still think of him as an old man." I chuckle. "He'd be closer to your age, I reckon."

She glances down the corridor and chews her lip.

"Permission to speak like we're blood, sir."

"Don't like me discussing mortality?" She waits for my answer. "Granted."

"I didn't get you until we came back here. You were dead to us till I was near on nine. Everyone ran their gobs about you in Tinos. But I didn't get it. I didn't get that." She points at the slingBlade asleep like a pale snake around my arm. "You were just my uncle. Then we came down with Orion. And I could see it. Every bloody soul was waiting to give Mercury their carbon. Then they saw you jump out this ship." The hairs on her forearms stand on end at the memory. "You ain't old. You just need to let others haul their freight. Even the Reaper needs sleep, sir. Especially if he's gonna get us all home."

She still believes I can work miracles. But my exhaustion isn't made by these last days. A life of war is catching up with me. She doesn't know the weight I carry. How much I relied on Sevro to help carry it. How damaged our legions really are. How tactically sophisticated even the most basic Gray infantry centurion of the enemy is compared with ours, not to mention their Golds. We just don't have the same distribution of brainpower. Or firepower.

"Thank you for the concern, lancer. But I'd caution you against spying on me again." I move toward the door.

“Sir.”

I turn, growing annoyed. She stands at attention again.

“When the Rain falls, I request permission to ride with my cohort.”

“No. I need you at my side.”

“Because it’s safer there?” She watches me with the same hard scrutiny my mother wields. Aside from Victra, Lykos women are the most stubborn breed. “You need your men to do their jobs. That’s why you let Alexandar tail you onto the *Medusa*. It’s why you sent him off with Thraxa. To do his job. You can’t protect us from this.”

“You’re not Alexandar.”

“Yet you put me in a starShell and sent me at the *Medusa*.” She leans forward. “And now you feel guilt for that. For letting me come to Mercury at all.”

She hits the mark. She knows the promise I made her father.

“Sir, at your side I’m a one-point-two-meter, forty-kilogram liability with quiet feet and a dirty gob. In a starShell, I’m decent. In a Drachenjäger, I’m a full-metal god.” Blood flushes her cheeks. “I know you’re worried about my pa. But it was my choice to join you when Sevro bailed. My choice to be here. My choice to fight.” Her voice hardens. “And if they get through us, it’ll be iron over my pa’s head, over Dio’s head, my brothers’ and sisters’ heads. So fuck your guilt. And let me do my job.”

I didn’t have a choice but to use her to rescue Orion. I have a choice now.

“My pulseFist’s recoil stabilizer is still touchy,” I say. “See if you can calibrate it, lancer.” I couldn’t protect my son. So as long as I have the power to protect my brother’s daughter, I will. When the Rain comes, she’ll be sent to Heliopolis to wait out the storm.

—

I leave Rhonna steaming mad to find Orion sitting alone in the back of the cargo hold. Always stout, now stick-thin, the Blue woman is darker than the gloom outside. Her bare feet dangle out the open door.

Orion hears me enter and looks back. Her face is mottled with the resFlesh that has replaced the chunks Atlas took out. New metal fingers extend from her knuckles. "Trouble?" she asks.

"Pushy relations."

Without a smile, she turns back to watch the polar sky. Beyond the atmosphere of the planet, Atalantia's warships rove, waiting for us to just nip our heads outside the great shield chains so they can drop mass drivers down and make craters of us.

"Cold back here," I say over the whistling wind. Our ship passes over the edge of an ice shelf. "Why don't you head to mess? Collway says it's bad to sync on an empty stomach."

"I like the cold," she replies distantly. "And my autonomy."

"Fair enough." I settle in beside her to dangle my legs. I didn't lie to Harnassus and my high command. She did pass her first psych evaluation, but I have the suspicion Collway helped her cheat. For five days after her rescue, she spoke only in brittle, pixelated sentences, preferring the company of her protégé, Collway, to any other. Then she asked to return to duty. I thought it would bring her back to herself. It hasn't. Her duties may be completed on schedule, but she remains the same as all who survive the Fear Knight...altered.

I squint at mathematical notations written in the frost on the ship's hull.

"Reminds me of home when they would turn off the heating," Orion murmurs. "They liked to find new reasons to do that. First calculus I learned was on hull-frost. Fingers so numb I could barely hold the stylus."

"Calculus. Poor lass. I only needed algebra," I say, trying to draw her out of her daze. I wish I could say it was solely for her benefit. "Do it in marker on the side of the clawDrill cockpit with one hand." I make a motion of digging with the other. "Can't stop the drill, you see. Stop too long and you're jammed."

"You would need calculus to properly operate a clawDrill apparatus," she replies.

"Yeah, well, Pa said the rest is all instinct. Disagree, maybe you and I can have a duel back on Mars. There'll be new bunkers that need excavating."

She ignores the challenge and watches a herd of pale seahorses crossing an archipelago of ice. They shake their manes and angle their fins as their stunted legs launch them off the ice back into the water. "Fathers are important," she says. "My kind think the notion perverse." She goes to chew her fingernails only to bite the metal of her prosthetics. She looks at the digits as if seeing them for the first time. "Still, they call me Mother, don't they?"

"That's the civil half of the name."

She shrugs. "Children are disgusting. I would never have them. I cannot abide selfishness."

There is no way, Gold or Red, to understand the empathetic connection minds make in the synaptic drift. Orion's communication with her pilots in battle is nonverbal. Instead it is formed of a web where the electric currents in her brain bond and interact with those of the others. To have one side cut short is the cruelest of amputations. The ghosts of the dead linger in her synapses.