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DARK AGE

PIERCE BROWN

H
HODDER

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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

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 axebled 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."