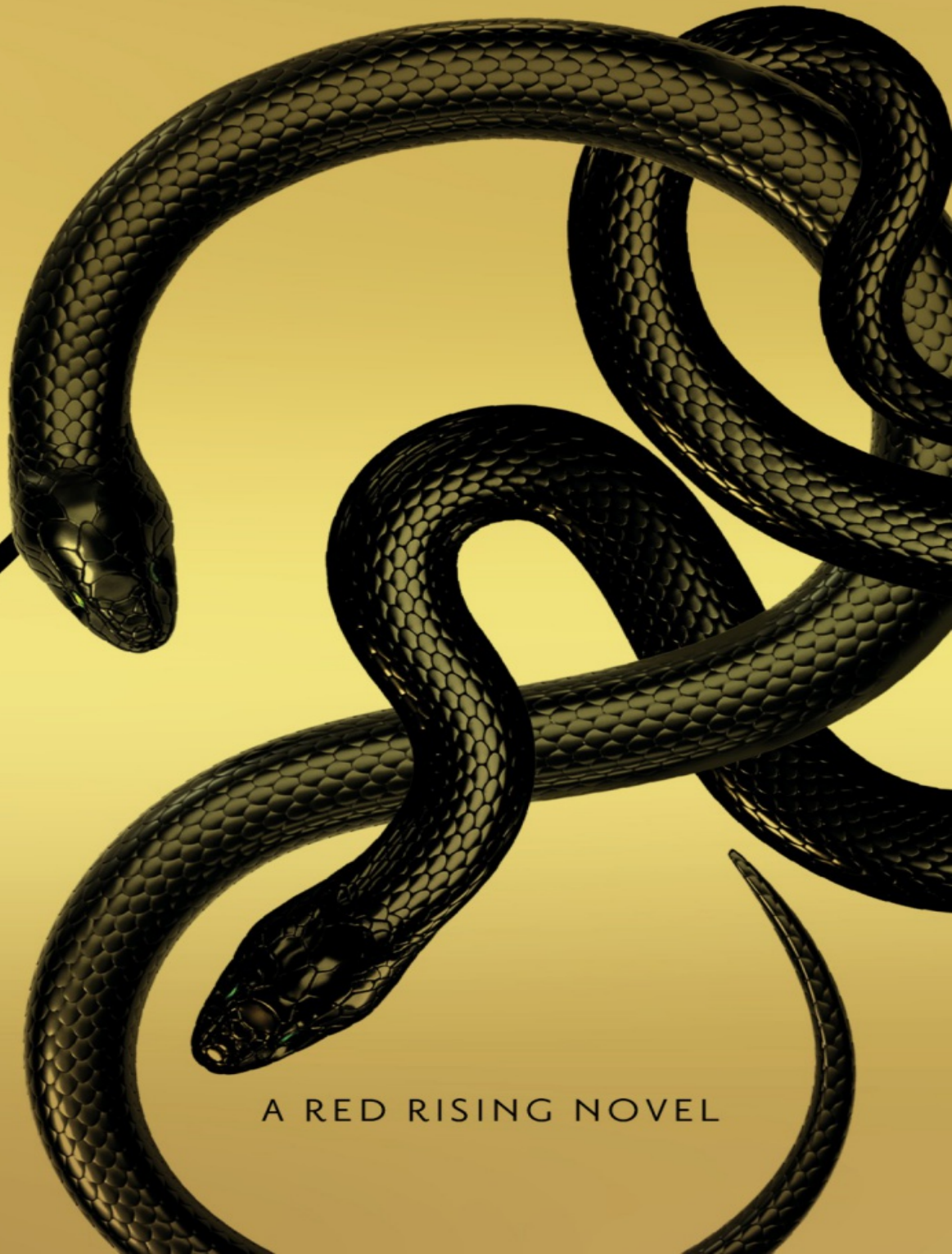


#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PIERCE
BROWN

DARKAGE



A RED RISING NOVEL

DARK AGE

PIERCE BROWN



DEL REY
NEW YORK

Dark Age is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

Acknowledgments

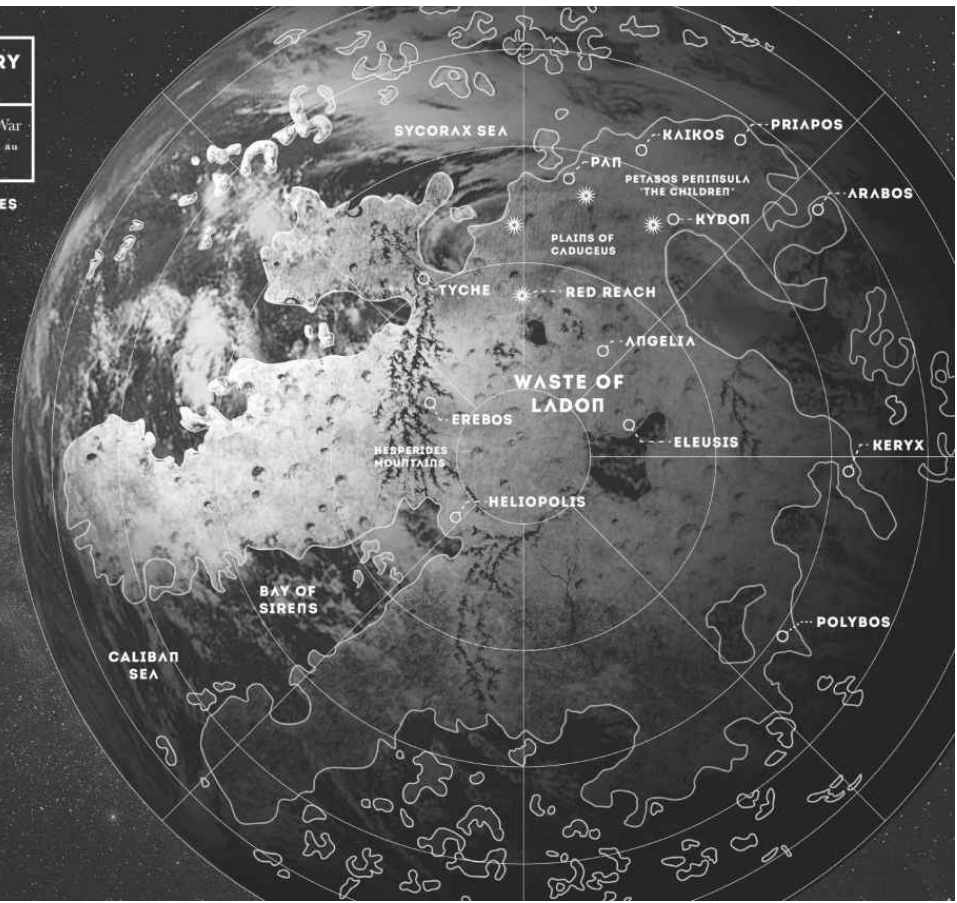
By Pierce Brown

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, née 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 Telemanus, client of House Augustus, a Gold

NIOBE AU TELEMANUS Wife to Kavax, client of House Augustus, a Gold

DAXO AU TELEMANUS Heir of House Telemanus, son of Kavax and Niobe, senator, Tribune of the Gold bloc, a Gold

THRAXA AU TELEMANNUS 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 AQUARI 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 Colloway wear the warhawk Sevro made famous. Alexandar, Colloway, 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.