



**"The start of  
something truly epic."  
—FONDA LEE**

**"A bang-up read.  
I want more."  
—PAOLO BACIGALUPI**

# THE MERCY OF GODS

**JAMES S. A.  
COREY**

**A U T H O R   O F   T H E   E X P A N S E**





# THE MERCY OF GODS

Book One of the Captive's War

**JAMES S. A.  
COREY**



[orbitbooks.net](http://orbitbooks.net)



This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2024 by Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck

Cover design by Lauren Panepinto

Cover illustration by Daniel Docu

Cover copyright © 2024 by Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Hachette Book Group supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact [permissions@hbgusa.com](mailto:permissions@hbgusa.com). Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Orbit

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas

New York, NY 10104

[orbitbooks.net](http://orbitbooks.net)

First Edition: August 2024

Simultaneously published in Great Britain by Orbit

Orbit is an imprint of Hachette Book Group.

The Orbit name and logo are registered trademarks of Little, Brown Book Group Limited.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

The Hachette Speakers Bureau provides a wide range of authors for speaking events. To find out more, go to [hachettespeakersbureau.com](http://hachettespeakersbureau.com) or email [HachetteSpeakers@hbgusa.com](mailto:HachetteSpeakers@hbgusa.com).

Orbit books may be purchased in bulk for business, educational, or promotional use. For information, please contact your local bookseller or the Hachette Book Group Special Markets Department at [special.markets@hbgusa.com](mailto:special.markets@hbgusa.com).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Corey, James S. A., author.

Title: The mercy of gods / James S.A. Corey.

Description: First edition. | New York, NY : Orbit, 2024. | Series: The captive's war ; book 1

Identifiers: LCCN 2023052525 | ISBN 9780316525572 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780316525558 (e-book)

Subjects: LCSH: Scientists—Fiction. | Alien abduction—Fiction. | Extraterrestrial beings—Fiction. | LCGFT: Science fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3603.O73429 M47 2024 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20240129

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023052525>

ISBNs: 9780316525572 (hardcover), 9780316580649 (BarnesAndNoble.com signed edition), 9780316525558 (ebook)

E3-20240607-JV-NF-ORI

# Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

## **PART ONE: BEFORE**

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

## **PART TWO: CATASTROPHE**

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

## **PART THREE: PUZZLES**

[Thirteen](#)

Fourteen

Fifteen

Sixteen

Seventeen

Eighteen

Nineteen

#### **PART FOUR: TURNABOUT**

Twenty

Twenty-One

Twenty-Two

Twenty-Three

Twenty-Four

Twenty-Five

#### **PART FIVE: FISSURE**

Twenty-Six

Twenty-Seven

Twenty-Eight

Twenty-Nine

Thirty

Thirty-One

#### **PART SIX: SMALL BATTLES IN THE GREAT WAR**

Thirty-Two

Thirty-Three

Thirty-Four

Thirty-Five

Thirty-Six



[Acknowledgments](#)

[Discover More](#)

[Also by James S. A. Corey](#)

*For Ursula K. Le Guin and Frank Herbert, the teachers we  
never met*

**Explore book giveaways, sneak peeks, deals, and more.**

[Tap here to learn more.](#)



# PART ONE

## BEFORE

You ask how many ages had the Carryx been fighting the long war? That is a meaningless question. The Carryx ruled the stars for epochs. We conquered the Ejia and Kurkst and outdreamt the Eyeless Ones. We burned the Logothetes until their worlds were windswept glass. You wish to know of our first encounter with the enemy, but it seems more likely to me that there were many first encounters spread across the face of distance and time in ways that simultaneity cannot map. The ending, though. I saw the beginning of that catastrophe. It was the abasement of an insignificant world that called itself Anjiin.

You can't imagine how powerless and weak it seemed. We brought fire, death, and chains to Anjiin. We took from it what we deemed useful to us and culled those who resisted. And in that is our regret. If we had left it alone, nothing that came after would have been as it was. If we had burned it to ash and moved on as we had done to so many other worlds, I would not now be telling you the chronicle of our failure.

We did not see the adversary for what he was, and we brought him into our home.

—From the final statement of Ekur-Tkalal, keeper-librarian of the human moiety of the Carryx

## One

Later, at the end of things, Dafyd would be amazed at how many of the critical choices in his life seemed small at the time. How many overwhelming problems had, with the distance of time, proved trivial. Even when he sensed the gravity of a situation, he often attributed it to the wrong things. He dreaded going to the end-of-year celebration at the Scholar's Common that last time. But not, as it turned out, for any of the reasons that actually mattered.

"You biologists are always looking for the starting point, asking the origin question, sure. But if you want to see origins," the tall, lanky man at Dafyd's side said, pointing a skewer of grilled pork and apple at his chest. Then, for a moment, the man drunkenly lost his place. "If you want to see origins, you have to look away from your microscopes. You have to look up."

"That's true," Dafyd agreed. He had no idea what the man was talking about, but it felt like he was being reprimanded.

"Deep sensor arrays. We can make a telescope with a lens as wide as the planet. Effectively as wide as the planet. Wider, even. Not that I do that anymore. Near-field. That's where I work now."

Dafyd made a polite sound. The tall man pulled a cube of pork off the skewer, and for a moment it looked like he'd drop it down into the courtyard. Dafyd imagined it landing in someone's drink in the Common below.

After a moment, the tall man regained control of his food and popped it into his mouth. His voice box bobbed as he swallowed.

"I'm studying a fascinating anomalous zone just at the edge of the heliosphere that's barely a light-second wide. Do you have any idea how small that is for conventional telescoping?"

“I don’t,” Dafyd said. “Isn’t a light-second actually kind of big?”

The tall man deflated. “Compared with the heliosphere, it’s really, really small.” He ate the rest of the food, chewing disconsolately, and put the skewer down on the handrail. He wiped his hand with a napkin before he extended it. “Llaren Morse. Near-field astronomic visualization at Dyan Academy. Good to meet you.”

Taking it meant clutching the man’s greasy fingers in his own. But more than that, it meant committing to the conversation. Pretending to see someone and making his excuses meant finding another way to pass his time. It seemed like a small choice. It seemed trivial.

“Dafyd,” he said, accepting the handshake. When Llaren Morse kept nodding, he added, “Dafyd Alkhor.”

Llaren Morse’s expression shifted. A small bunching between his eyebrows, his smile uncertain. “I feel like I should know that name. What projects have you run?”

“None. You’re probably thinking of my aunt. She’s in the funding colloquy.”

Llaren Morse’s expression went professional and formal so quickly, Dafyd almost heard the click. “Oh. Yes, that’s probably it.”

“We’re not actually involved in any of the same projects,” Dafyd said, half a beat too quickly. “I’m just putting in my time as a research assistant. Doing what I’m told. Keeping my head down.”

Llaren Morse nodded and made a soft, noncommittal grunt, then stood there, caught between wanting to get out of the conversation and also to keep whatever advantage the nephew of a woman who controlled the funding purse strings might give him. Dafyd hoped that the next question wouldn’t be which project he was working for.

“Where are you in from, then?” Llaren Morse asked.

“Right here. Irvian,” Dafyd said. “I actually walked from my apartments. I’m not really even here for the—” He gestured at the crowd below them and in the galleries and halls.

“No?”

“There’s a local girl I’m hoping to run into.”

“And she’ll be here?”

“I’m hoping so,” Dafyd said. “Her boyfriend will.” He smiled like it was a joke. Llaren Morse froze and then laughed. It was a trick Dafyd had,



disarming the truth by telling it slant. “What about you? You have someone back at home?”

“Fiancée,” the tall man said.

“Fiancée?” Dafyd echoed, keeping his voice playful and curious. They were almost past the part where Dafyd would need to say anything more about himself.

“Three years,” Llaren Morse said. “We’re looking to make it formal once I get a long-term placement.”

“Long-term?”

“The position at Dyan Academy is just a two-year placement. There’s no promise it’ll fund after that. I’m hoping for at least a five-year before we start putting real roots down.”

Dafyd sank his hands in his jacket pockets and leaned against the railing. “Sounds like stability’s really important for you.”

“Yeah, sure. I don’t want to throw myself into a placement and then have it assigned out to someone else, you know? We put a lot of effort into things, and then as soon as you start getting results, some bigger fish comes in and swallows you.”

And they were off. Dafyd spent the next half hour echoing back everything Llaren Morse said, either with exact words or near synonyms, or else pulling out what Dafyd thought the man meant and offering it back. The subject moved from the academic intrigue of Dyan Academy to Llaren Morse’s parents and how they’d encouraged him into research, to their divorce and how it had affected him and his sisters.

The other man never noticed that Dafyd wasn’t offering back any information about himself.

Dafyd listened because he was good at listening. He had a lot of practice. It kept the spotlight off him, people broadly seemed more hungry to be heard than they knew, and usually by the end of it, they found themselves liking him. Which was convenient, even on those occasions when he didn’t find himself liking them back.

As Morse finished telling him about how his elder sister had avoided romantic entanglements with partners she actually liked, there was a little commotion in the courtyard below. Applause and laughter, and then there, in the center of the disturbance, Tonner Freis.

A year ago, Tonner had been one of the more promising research leads.

Young, brilliant, demanding, with a strong intuition for the patterns that living systems fell into and growing institutional support. When Dafyd's aunt had casually nudged Dafyd toward Tonner Freis by mentioning that he had potential, she'd meant that ten years down the line when he'd paid his dues and worked his way to the top, Freis would be the kind of man who could help the junior researchers from his team start their careers. A person Dafyd could attach himself to.

She hadn't known that Tonner's proteome reconciliation project would be the top of the medrey council report, or that it would be singled out by the research colloquy, high parliament review, and the Bastian Group. It was the first single-term project ever to top all three lists in the same year. Tonner Freis—with his tight smile and his prematurely gray hair that rose like smoke from an overheated brain—was, for the moment, the most celebrated mind in the world.

From where Dafyd stood, the distance and the angle made it impossible to see Tonner's face clearly. Or the woman in the emerald-green dress at his side. Else Annalise Yannin, who had given up her own research team to join Tonner's project. Who had one dimple in her left cheek when she smiled and two on her right. Who tapped out complex rhythms with her feet when she was thinking, like she occupied her body by dancing in place while her mind wandered.

Else Yannin, the research group's second leader and acknowledged lover of Tonner Freis. Else, who Dafyd had come hoping to see even though he knew it was a mistake.

"Enjoy it now," Llaren Morse said, staring down at Tonner and his applause. The small hairs at the back of Dafyd's neck rose. Morse hadn't meant that for him. The comment had been for Tonner, and there had been a sneer in it.

"Enjoy it now?" But he saw in the tall man's expression that the trick wouldn't work again. Llaren Morse's eyes were guarded again, more than they had been when they'd started talking.

"I should let you go. I've kept you here all night," the tall man said. "It was good meeting you, Alkhor."

"Same," Dafyd said, and watched him drift into the galleries and rooms. The abandoned skewer was still on the guardrail. The sky had darkened to starlight. A woman just slightly older than Dafyd ghosted past, cleaning the

skewer away and disappearing into the crowd.

Dafyd tried to talk himself out of his little feeling of paranoia.

He was tired because it was the end of the year and everyone on the team had been working extra hours to finish the datasets. He was out of place at a gathering of intellectual grandees and political leaders. He was carrying the emotional weight of an inappropriate infatuation with an unavailable woman. He was embarrassed by the not-entirely-unfounded impression he'd given Llaren Morse that he was only there because someone in his family had influence over money.

Any one was a good argument for treating his emotions with a little skepticism tonight. Taken all together, they were a compelling case.

And on the other side of the balance, the shadow of contempt in Morse's voice: *Enjoy it now.*

Dafyd muttered a little obscenity, scowled, and headed toward the ramp to the higher levels and private salons of the Common where the administrators and politicians held court.

The Common was grown from forest coral and rose five levels above the open sward to the east and the plaza to the west. Curvilinear by nature, nothing in it was square. Subtle lines of support and tension—foundation into bracing into wall into window into finial—gave the whole building a sense of motion and life like some climbing and twisting fusion of ivy and bone.

The interior had sweeping corridors that channeled the breeze, courtyards that opened to the sky, private rooms that could be adapted for small meetings or living quarters, wide chambers used for presentations or dances or banquets. The air smelled of cedar and akkeh trees. Harp swallows nested in the highest reaches and chimed their songs at the people below.

For most of the year, the Common was a building of all uses for the Irvian Research Medrey, and it served all the branches of scholarship that the citywide institution embodied. Apart from one humiliating failure on an assessment in his first year, Dafyd had fond memories of the Common and the times he'd spent there. The end-of-year celebration was different. It was a nested series of lies. A minefield scattered with gold nuggets, opportunity and disaster invisibly mingled.

First, it was presented as a chance for the most exalted scholars and

researchers of Anjiin's great medrey and research conservatories to come together to socialize casually. In practice, "casual" included intricate and opaque rules of behavior and a rigidly enforced though ill-defined hierarchy of status. And one of many ironclad rules of etiquette was that people were to pretend there were no rules of etiquette. Who spoke to whom, who could make a joke and who was required to laugh, who could flirt and who must remain unreachably distant, all were unspoken and any mistake was noted by the community.

Second, it was a time to avoid politics and openly jockeying for the funding that came with the beginning of a new term. And so every conversation and comment was instead soaked in implication and nuance about which studies had ranked, which threads of the intellectual tapestry would be supported into the next year and which would be cut, who would lead the research teams and who would yoke their efforts to some more brilliant mind.

And finally, the celebration was open to the whole community. In theory, even the greenest scholar-prentice was welcome. In practice, Dafyd was not only one of the youngest people there, but also the only scholar-associate attending as a guest. The others of his rank on display that night were scraping up extra allowance by serving drinks and tapas to their betters.

Some people wore jackets with formal collars and vests in the colors of their home medrey and research conservatories. Others, the undyed summer linens that the newly appointed high magistrate had made fashionable. Dafyd was in his formal: a long charcoal jacket over an embroidered shirt and slim-fitting pants. A good outfit, but carefully not too good.

Security personnel lurked in the higher-status areas, but Dafyd walked with the lazy confidence of someone accustomed to access and deference. It would have been trivial to query the local system for the location of Dorinda Alkhor, but his aunt might see the request and know he was looking for her. If she had warning... Well, better that she didn't.

The crowd around him grew almost imperceptibly older as the mix of humanity shifted from scholar-researchers to scholar-coordinators, from support faculty to lead administrators, from recorders and popular writers to politicians and military liaisons. The formal jackets became just slightly better tailored, the embroidered shirts more brightly colored. All the plumage of status on display. He moved up the concentration of power like

a microbe heading toward sugar, his hands in his pockets and his smile polite and blank. If he'd been nervous it would have shown, so he chose to be preoccupied instead. He went slowly, admiring art and icons in the swooping niches of forest coral, taking drinks from the servers and abandoning them to the servers that followed, being sure he knew what the next room was before he stepped into it.

His aunt was on a balcony that looked down over the plaza, and he saw her before she saw him. Her hair was down in a style that should have softened her face, but the severity of her mouth and jaw overpowered it. Dafyd didn't recognize the man she was speaking with, but he was older, with a trim white beard. He was speaking quickly, making small, emphatic gestures, and she was listening to him intently.

Dafyd made a curve around, getting close to the archway that opened onto the balcony before changing his stride, moving more directly toward her. She glanced up, saw him. There was only a flicker of frown before she smiled and waved him over.

"Mur, this is my nephew Dafyd," she said. "He's working with Tonner Freis."

"Young Freis!" Trim Beard said, shaking Dafyd's hand. "That's a good team to be with. First-rate work."

"I'm mostly preparing samples and keeping the laboratory clean," Dafyd said.

"Still. You'll have it on your record. It'll open doors later on. Count on that."

"Mur is with the research colloquy," his aunt said.

"Oh," Dafyd said, and grinned. "Well, then I'm very pleased to meet you indeed. I came to meet with people who could help my prospects. Now that we've met, I can go home."

His aunt hid a grimace, but Mur laughed and clapped Dafyd on the shoulder. "Dory here says kind things about you. You'll be fine. But I should—" He gestured toward the back and nodded to his aunt knowingly. She nodded back, and the older man stepped away. Below them, the plaza was alive. Food carts and a band playing guitar music that gently reached up to where they were standing. Threads of melody floating in the high, fragrant air. She put her arm in his.

"Dory?" Dafyd asked.

“I hate it when you’re self-effacing,” she said, ignoring his attempt at gentle mockery. Dafyd noted the tension in her neck and shoulder muscles. Everyone at the party wanted her time and access to the money she controlled. She’d probably been playing defense all night and it had stolen her patience. “It’s not as charming as you think.”

“I put people at ease,” Dafyd said.

“You’re at a point in your career that you should make people uneasy. You’re too fond of being underestimated. It’s a vice. You’re going to have to impress someone someday.”

“I just wanted to put in an appearance so you’d know I really came.”

“I’m glad you did,” and her smile forgave him a little.

“You taught me well.”

“I told my sister I would look out for you, and I swear on her dear departed soul I will turn you into something worthy of her,” his aunt said. Dafyd flinched at the mention of his mother, and his aunt softened a little. “She warned me that raising children would require patience. It’s why I never had any of my own.”

“I’ve never been the fastest learner, but that’s my burden. Your teaching was always good. I’m going to owe you a lot when it’s all said and done.”

“No.”

“Oh, I’m pretty sure I will.”

“I mean no, whatever you’re trying to soften out of me, don’t ask it. I’ve been watching you flatter and charm everyone all your life. I don’t think less of you for being manipulative. It’s a good skill. But I’m better at it than you, so whatever you’re about to try to dig out of me, no.”

“I met a man from Dyan Academy. I don’t think he likes Tonner.”

She looked at him, her eyes flat as a shark’s. Then, a moment later, the same tiny, mirthless smile she had when she lost a hand of cards.

“Don’t be smug. I really am glad you came,” she said, then squeezed his arm and let him go.

Dafyd retraced his steps, through the halls and down the wide ramps. His face shot an empty smile at those he passed, his mind elsewhere.

He found Tonner Freis and Else Yannin on the ground floor in a chamber wide enough to be a ballroom. Tonner had taken his jacket off, and he was leaning on a wide wooden table. Half a dozen scholars had formed a semicircle around him like a tiny theater with Tonner Freis as the only man



on stage. *The thing we'd been doing wrong was trying to build reconciliation strategies at the informational level instead of the product. DNA and ribosomes on one hand, lattice quasicrystals and QRP on the other. It's like we were trying to speak two different languages and force their grammars to mesh when all we really need are directions on how to build a chair. Stop trying to explain how and just start building the chair, and it's much easier.* His voice carried better than a singer's. His audience chuckled.

Dafyd looked around, and she was easy to find. Else Yannin in her emerald-green dress was two tables over. Long, aquiline nose, wide mouth, and thin lips. She was watching her lover with an expression of amused indulgence. Only for a second, Dafyd hated Tonner Freis.

He didn't need to do this. No one was asking him to. It would take no extra effort to turn to the right and amble out to the plaza. A plate of roasted corn and spiced beef, a glass of beer, and he could go back to his rooms and let the political intrigue play itself out without him. But Else tucked a lock of auburn hair back behind her ear, and he walked toward her table like he had business there.

Small moments, unnoticed at the time, change the fate of empires.

Her smile shifted when she saw him. Just as real, but meaning something different. Something more closed. "Dafyd? I didn't expect to see you here."

"My other plans fell through," he said, reaching out to a servant passing by with what turned out to be mint iced tea. He'd been hoping for something more alcoholic. "I thought I'd see what the best minds of the planet looked like when they let their hair down."

Else gestured to the crowd with her own glass. "This, on into the small hours of the morning."

"No dancing?"

"Maybe when people have had a chance to get a little more drunk." There were threads of premature white in her hair. Against the youth of her face, they made her seem ageless.

"Can I ask you a question?"

She settled into herself. "Of course."

"Have you heard anything about another group taking over our research?"

She laughed once, loud enough that Tonner looked over and nodded to Dafyd before returning to his performance. “You don’t need to worry about that,” she said. “We’ve made so much progress and gotten so much acclaim in the last year, there’s no chance. Anyone who did would be setting themselves up as the disappointing second string. No one wants that.”

“All right,” Dafyd said, and took a drink of the tea he didn’t want. One member of Tonner’s little audience was saying something that made him scowl. Else shifted her weight. A single crease drew itself between her eyebrows.

“Just out of curiosity, what makes you ask?”

“It’s just that, one hundred percent certainty, no error bars? Someone’s making a play to take over the research.”

Else put down her drink and put her hand on his arm. The crease between her eyebrows deepened. “What have you heard?”

Dafyd let himself feel a little warmth at her attention, at the touch of her hand. It felt like an important moment, and it was. Later, when he stood in the eye of a storm that burned a thousand worlds, he’d remember how it all started with Else Yannin’s hand on his arm and his need to give her a reason to keep it there.