

THE FALL OF MERCURY

THE FURY

SILENT, SHE WAITS FOR the sky to fall, standing upon an island of volcanic rock amidst a black sea. The long moonless night yawns before her. The only sounds, a flapping banner of war held in her lover's hand and the warm waves that kiss her steel boots. Her heart is heavy. Her spirit wild. Peerless knights tower behind her. Salt spray beads on their family crests—emerald centaurs, screaming eagles, gold sphinxes, and the crowned skull of her father's grim house. Her Golden eyes look to the heavens. Waiting. The water heaves in. Out. The heartbeat of her silence.

THE CITY

Tyche, the jewel of Mercury, hunches in fear between the mountains and the sun. Her famed glass and limestone spires are dark. The Ancestor Bridge is empty. Here, Lorn au Arcos wept as a young man when he saw the messenger planet at sunset for the first time. Now, trash rolls through her streets, pushed by salty summer wind. Gone are the calls of the fishmongers at the wharf. Gone are the patter of pedestrian feet on the cobbles and the rumble of aircars and the laughter of the lowColor children who jump from the bridges into the waves on scorching summer days when the Trasmian sea winds are still. The city is quiet, its wealthy already gone to desert mountain retreats or

government bunkers, its soldiers on its rooftops watching the sky, its poor having left for the desert or upon cramped boats destined for the Ismere Islands.

But the city is not empty.

Huddled masses fill the public transit systems that wend beneath the waves. And in the upstairs window of a tenement complex on the ugly fringes of the city, far from the water, where the working poor are kept, a little girl with Orange eyes fogs the window with her breath. The night sky sparks. Flashing and flaring with spurts of light like the fireworks her brother sometimes buys at the corner shop. She's been told there is a battle between big fleets high up there. She has never seen a starship. Her mother lies sick in the bedroom, unable to travel. Her father, who builds parts for engines, sits at the little plastic dinner table with his sons, knowing he cannot protect them. The holoCan washes them in pale light. Government news programs tell them to seek shelter. In her pocket the girl carries a folded piece of paper that she found in the gutter. On it is a little curved sword. She's seen it before on the cube. Her teachers at the government school say it brings chaos. War. It has set the spheres on fire. But now she secretly draws the blade in the fog her breath has made on the window, and she feels brave.

Then the bombs begin to fall.

THE BOMBS

They come from high-orbit Thor-class bombers piloted by farmboys from Earth and miners from Mars of the Twelfth Sunshine Squadron. Curses and prayers and tribal dragons and curved scythes have been sprayed upon them in aerosol paint. They dip through the clouds and fall over the sea, outracing their own sound. Their guidance chips are made by freeColors on Phobos. Their steel is mined and smelted by entrepreneurs in the Belt. Their ion propulsion engines are stamped with the winged heel of a company that makes consumer electronics and toiletries and weapons. Down and down they go to race shadowless over the desert, then the sea, carrying the weight of the newest empire under the sun.

The first bomb destroys the Hall of Justice on Tyche's Vespasian Island. Then it burrows a hundred meters into the earth before detonating against the bunker buried there, killing all inside. The second lands in the sea, fifteen kilometers from a fleet of refugees, where it sinks a Society warship, hiding under the chop. The third races over a spine of mountains north of Tyche

when it is struck with a railgun round fired from a defense installation by a Gray teenager with acne scars and the charm of a sweetheart around his neck. It careens off its course and sputters across the sky before falling to the earth.

It detonates on the fringes of the city, far from the water, where it turns four blocks of tenement housing to dust.

THE REAPER

Silent, he lies encased in mankilling metal in the belly of a starship called the *Morning Star*. The fear swallows him now as it has done time and time before. The only sound is the whir of his armor's air filtration unit and the radio chatter of distant men and women. Around him lie his friends, they too cocooned in metal. Waiting. Eyes Red and Gold and Gray and Obsidian. Wolfheads mark their pauldrons. Tattoos their necks and arms. Wild empire breakers from Mars and Luna and Earth. Beyond them fly ships with names like *Spirit of Lykos*, *Hope of Tinos*, and *Echo of Ragnar*. They are painted white and led by a woman with onyx-dark skin. The Lion Sovereign said the white was for spring. For a new beginning. But the ships are stained. Smeared with char and patched wounds and mismatched panels. They broke the Sword Armada and the martyr Fabii. They conquered the heart of the Gold empire. They battled back the Ash Lord to the Core and have kept the dragons of the Rim at bay.

How could they ever stay clean?

Alone in his armor, waiting to fall from the sky, he remembers the girl who began it all. He remembers how her Red hair fell over her eyes. How her mouth danced with laughter. How she breathed as she lay atop him, so warm and fragile in a world far too cold. She has been dead longer than she was ever alive. And now that her dream has spread, he wonders if she would recognize it. And he wonders too if he were to die today, would he recognize the echo of his own life? What sort of man would his son become in this world he has made? He thinks of his son's face and how soon he will become a man. And he thinks of his Golden wife. How she stood on the landing pad, looking up at him, wondering if he'd ever return home again.

More than anything, he wants this to end.

Then the machine takes hold.

He feels the tug on his body. The pounding of his heart. The mad cackling of the Goblin and the howls of his friends as they try to forget their children, their loves, and be brave. Nausea in his gut rises as the magnetic rails charge

behind him. With a shudder of metal, they fire him forward through the launch tube out into silent space at six times the speed of sound.

Men call him father, liberator, warlord, Slave King, Reaper. But he feels a boy as he falls toward the war-torn planet, his armor red, his army vast, his heart heavy.

It is the tenth year of war and the thirty-third of his life.

PART I

WIND

*There is a poor, blind Samson in this land,
Shorn of his strength and bound in bonds of steel,
Who may, in some grim revel, raise his hand,
And shake the pillars of this Commonweal,
Till the vast Temple of our liberties
A shapeless mass of wreck and rubbish lies.*

—HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

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DARROW

Hero of the Republic

WEARY, I WALK UPON FLOWERS at the head of an army. Petals carpet the last of the stone road before me. Thrown by children from windows, they twirl lazily down from the steel towers that grow to either side of the Luna boulevard. In the sky, the sun dies its slow, weeklong death, staining the tattered clouds and gathered crowd in bloody hues. Waves of humanity lap against security barricades, pressing inward on our parade as Hyperion City Watchmen in gray uniforms and cyan berets guard the route, shoving drunken revelers back into the crowd. Behind them, antiterrorism units prowl up and down the pavement, their fly-eyed goggles scanning irises, hands resting on energy weapons.

My own eyes rove the crowd.

After ten years of war, I no longer believe in moments of peace.

It's a sea of Colors that line the twelve-kilometer Via Triumphia. Built by my people, the Red slaves of the Golds, hundreds of years ago, the Triumphia is the avenue by which the Conquerors who tamed Earth held their own processions as they claimed continent after continent. Iron-spined murderers with eyes of gold and haughty menace once consecrated these same stones. Now, nearly a millennium later, we sully the Triumphia's sacred white marble by honoring Liberators with eyes of jet and ash and rust and soil.

Once, this would have filled me with pride. Jubilant crowds celebrating the Free Legions returned from vanquishing yet another threat to our fledgling Republic. But today I see holosigns of my head with a bloody crown atop it,

hear the jeers from the Vox Populi as they wave banners emblazoned with their upside-down pyramid, and feel nothing but the weight of an endless war and a desperate longing to be once again in the embrace of my family. It has been a year since I've seen my wife and son. After the long voyage back from Mercury, all I want is to be with them, to fall into a bed, and to sleep for a dreamless month.

The last of my journey home lies before me. As the Triumphia widens and abuts the stairs that lead up to the New Forum, I face one final summit.

Faces drunk on jubilation and new commercial spirits gape up at me as I reach the stairs. Hands sticky with sweets wave in the air. And tongues, loose from those same commercial spirits and delights, cry out, shouting my name, or cursing it. Not the name my mother gave me, but the name my deeds have built. The name the fallen Peerless Scarred now whisper as a curse.

"Reaper, Reaper, Reaper," they cry, not in unison, but in frenzy. The clamor suffocates, squeezing with a billion-fingered hand: all the hopes, all the dreams, all the pain constricting around me. But so close to the end, I can put one foot after the other. I begin to climb the stairs.

Clunk.

My metal boots grind on stone with the weight of loss: Eo, Ragnar, Fitchner, and all the others who've fought and fallen at my side while somehow I have remained alive.

I am tall and broad. Thicker at my age of thirty-three than I was in my youth. Stronger and more brutal in my build and movement. Born Red, made Gold, I have kept what Mickey the Carver gave me. These Gold eyes and hair feel more my own than those of that boy who lived in the mines of Lykos. That boy grew, loved, and dug the earth, but he lost so much it often feels like it happened to another soul.

Clunk. Another step.

Sometimes I fear that this war is killing that boy inside. I ache to remember him, his raw, pure heart. To forget this city moon, this Solar War, and return to the bosom of the planet that gave birth to me before the boy inside is dead forever. Before my son loses the chance to ever know him. But the worlds, it seems, have plans of their own.

Clunk.

I feel the weight of the chaos I've unleashed: famines and genocide on Mars, Obsidian piracy in the Belt, terrorism, radiation sickness and disease spreading through the lower reaches of Luna, and the two hundred million lives lost in my war.

I force a smile. Today is our fourth Liberation Day. After two years of siege, Mercury has joined the free worlds of Luna, Earth, and Mars. Bars stand open. War-weary citizens rove the streets, looking for reason to celebrate. Fireworks crackle and blaze across the sky, shot from the roofs of skyscraper and tenement complex alike.

With our victory on the first planet from the sun, the Ash Lord has been pushed back to his last bastion, the fortress planet Venus, where his battered fleet guards precious docks and the remaining loyalists. I have come home to convince the Senate to requisition ships and men of the war-impoverished Republic for one final campaign. One last push on Venus to put this bloodydamn war to rest. So I can set down the sword and go home to my family for good.

Clunk.

I take a moment to glance behind me. Waiting at the foot of the stairs is my Seventh Legion, or the remnants of it. Twenty-eight thousand men and women where once there were fifty. They stand in casual order around a fourteen-pointed ivory star with a pegasus galloping at its center—held aloft by the famous Thraxa au Telemachus. The Hammer. After losing her left arm to Atalantia au Grimmus's razor, she had it replaced by a metal prototype appendage from Sun Industries. Wild gold hair flutters behind her head, garlanded with white feathers given to her by Obsidian admirers.

In her mid-thirties, a stout woman with thighs thick as water drums and a freckled, bluff face. She grins past the shoulders of the Obsidians and Golds around her. Blue and Red and Orange pilots wave to the crowd. Red, Gray, and Brown infantry smile and laugh as pretty young Pinks and Reds duck under barriers and rush to drape necklaces of flowers around their necks, push bottles of liquor into their hands and kisses onto their mouths. They are the only full legion in today's parade. The rest remain on Mercury with Orion and Harnassus, battling with the Ash Lord's legions stranded there when his fleet retreated.

Clunk.

"Remember, you are but mortal," Sevro's bored voice drawls in my ear as white-haired Wulfgar and the Republic Wardens descend to greet us midway up the Forum stairs. Sevro sniffs my neck and makes a noise of distaste. "By Jove. You wretch. Did you dip yourself in piss before the occasion?"

"It's cologne," I say. "Mustang bought it for me last Solstice."

He's quiet for a moment. "Is it made out of piss?"

I scowl back at him, wrinkling my nose at the heaviness of liquor on his

breath, and eye the ragged wolfcloak he wears over his ceremonial armor. He claims he hasn't washed it since the Institute. "You're really lecturing me about stench? Just shut up and behave like an Emperor," I say with a grin.

Snorting, Sevro drops back to where the legendary Obsidian, Sefi Volarus, stands in her customary silence. He feigns an air of domesticity, but next to the giant woman, he looks a little like some sort of gutter dog an alcoholic father might ill-advisedly bring home to play with the children—washed and rid of fleas, but still possessing that weird mania behind the eyes. Pinched, thin lipped, with a nose crooked as an old knifefighter's fingers. He eyes the crowd with resigned distaste.

Behind him lope the pack of mangy Howlers he brought with us to Mercury. My bodyguards, now drunk as gallants at a Lykos Laureltide. Stalwart Holiday walks at their center, the snub-nosed woman doing her best to keep them in line.

There used to be more of them. So many more.

I smile as Wulfgar descends the stairs to meet me. A favorite son of the Rising, the Obsidian is a tree root of a man, gnarled and narrow, armored all in pale blue. He's in his early forties. His face angular as a raptor's, his beard braided like that of his hero, Ragnar.

One of the Obsidians to fight alongside Ragnar at the walls of Agea, Wulfgar was with the Sons of Ares that freed me from the Jackal in Attica. Now ArchWarden of the Republic, he smiles down at me from the step above, his black eyes crinkling at the corners.

"Hail libertas," I say with a smile.

"Hail libertas," he echoes.

"Wulfgar. Fancy meeting you here. You missed the Rain," I say.

"You did not wait for me to return, did you?" Wulfgar clucks his tongue. "My children will ask where I was when the Rain fell upon Mercury, and you know what I will have to tell them?" He leans forward with a conspiratorial smile. "I was making night soil, wiping my ass when I heard Barca had taken Mount Caloris." He rumbles out a laugh.

"I told you not to leave," Sevro says. "You'd miss out on all the fun, I said. You should have seen the Ashies route. Trails of piss all the way to Venus. You'd have loved it." Sevro grins at the Obsidian. It was Sevro who put a razor in his hand in the river mud of Agea. Wulfgar has his own razor now. Its hilt made from the fang of an ice dragon from Earth's South Pole.

"My blade would have sung that day were I not summoned by the Senate," he says.

Sevro sneers. “That’s right. You ran home like a good little dog.”

“A dog? I am a servant of the People, my friend. As are we all.” His eyes find me with mild accusation and I understand the true meaning to his words. Wulfgar is a believer, like all Wardens. Not in me, but in the Republic, in the principles for which it stands, and the orders that the Senate gives. Two days before the Iron Rain over Mercury, the Senate, led by my old friend Dancer, voted against my proposal. They told me to maintain the siege. To not waste men, resources, on an assault.

I disobeyed and let the Rain fall.

Now a million of my men lie in the sands of Mercury and we have our Liberation Day.

Were Wulfgar with me on Mercury, he would not have joined our Rain against the Senate’s permission. In fact, he might have tried to stop me. He’s one of the few men alive who might manage. For a spell at least.

He spares a nod for Sefi. “*Njar ga hae, svester.*” A rough translation is “Respect to you, sister” in *nagal*.

“*Njar ga hir, bruder,*” she replies. No love lost between them. They have different priorities.

“Your weapons.” Wulfgar gestures to my razor.

Sefi and I hand his Wardens our weapons. Muttering under his breath, Sevro hands over his as well. “Did you forget your toothpick?” Wulfgar asks, looking at Sevro’s left boot.

“Treasonous yeti,” Sevro mutters, and pulls a wicked blade long as a baby’s body from his boot. The Warden who takes it looks terrified.

“Odin’s fortune with the togas, Darrow,” Wulfgar says to me as he motions for us to continue upward. “You will need it.”

Arrayed at the top of the steps of the New Forum are the 140 Senators of the Republic. Ten per Color, all draped in white togas that flutter in the breeze. They peer down at me like a row of haughty pigeons on a wire. Red and Gold, mortal enemies in the Senate, bookend the row to either side. Dancer is missing. But I have eyes only for the lonely bird of prey that stands at the center of all the silly, vain, power-hungry little pigeons.

Her golden hair is bound tight behind her head. Her tunic is pure white, without the ribbons of their Color the others wear. And in her hand, she carries the Dawn Scepter—now a multi-hued gold baton half a meter long, with the pyramid of the Society recast into the fourteen-pointed star of the Republic at its tip. Her face is elegant and distant. A small nose, piercing eyes behind thick eyelashes, and a mischievous cat’s smile growing on her face.

The Sovereign of our Republic. Here at the summit of the stairs, her eyes shed the weight from my shoulders, the fear from my heart that I would never see her again. Through war and space and this damnable parade, I have traveled to find her again, my life, my love, my home.

I bend to my knee and look up into the eyes of the mother of my child.

“ ’Lo, wife,” I say with a smile.

“ ’Lo, husband. Welcome home.”