

CHAPTER 1

BARRABAS

YOU MAY HAVE heard of me. I guess it depends on whether or not you frequent moral or immoral social circles. I am the one they call Barrabas.

My habitually reckless, albeit inventive, feats earned me quite a bit of renown. Consequently, I can't count how many times I've been told I was the most infamous thief to grace the good Earth since Jesse James. I always preferred to think of myself as more akin to Robin of Locksley, though I never had a band of merry men. Let's put it this way: if the *Mona Lisa* had survived the wars, I could've absconded with the damn thing and been back at home asleep before the painted lady herself was even aware of the deed.

But no matter. I was raised never to boast, so I'll spare you any more of the pissing contest. Now, if I am indeed this Barrabas of legend, as they say, then there's a rather large kink in my little tale. You see, *his* story came to an end. The *real* Barrabas Madzimure died more than thirty years ago.

Currently I find myself treading an all too familiar place—the gray area that lies right between unconsciousness and vigilance. You might find yourself straddling that line after you've been drugged or beaten senseless by someone or something demanding your full cooperation. For my

most recent refusal to play ball, I was cold-cocked right into next week. I expected as much.

What I *didn't* expect to find when I opened my eyes mere minutes ago is that I'd be blindfolded and bound fast to a smooth metal chair. But to be fair, I've been put here because I deserve to be here. I'll admit that without hesitation, however, if they really knew me at all, the use of force against me might've been slightly less abrasive. In defense of my captors, though, my actions of late have been rather caustic. As a result, I killed a man today.

Admitting that to myself sends a slight wave of nausea up from the pit of my gut and into my throat. I've killed before, but I am *not* a murderer, at least not by nature. In the past, there has been more than one occasion where I found myself in a him-or-me type of situation, so that doesn't count in my book. And it's not so much that I mind dying at this point, either, but I'll be damned if I'm going to let another man take my life from me. The point is, I don't enjoy killing, and I never have.

But life is hard on any man here. I've been sitting here long enough now that I'm beginning to wonder if I might die from the boredom. Or maybe I've not been here long at all. It's hard to tell since my head, along with the room, is still spinning like a good yarn.

Regardless, this is the first time I've been outside the mine in years. I know that because the air in my nose isn't completely filled with the rancid stench of stinkspar and gypsum. Part of me can't help but feel a small bit of gratitude for that.

I smile involuntarily at my last thought, and then out of nowhere a shiver runs down my spine. I get the feeling that I'm not alone in the room. It's then that a very obnoxious and rather nasally voice calls out to me.

"State your name, murderer."

It's definitely a man, but I don't recognize the voice. I think the creep's been watching me. I purpose not to answer him.

A few seconds later, someone to my right takes in a quick breath through their mucus-filled nose just before something the size of my own head plows into my midsection.

"Your *name*, prisoner."

After a momentary fit of gasping and gagging, I chuckle a bit at the warm, tin-like taste of blood in my mouth. Then, turning my head, I look

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toward the hired muscle who must've hit me and grin just as wide as I can. I can't help thinking that I may actually lose a kidney over that last blow, though I do my damndest to hide the projections of pain throwing themselves across my abdomen.

"I'll ask it only once more," the man says. "*What* is your name?"

"Barrabas," I say with a rasp in my throat.

The man says nothing in reply, but within the cool room, his shallow, shuddering breaths reverberate around me.

"And... your surname?" the man asks.

"Madzimure."

I could swear the Torquemada in front of me stops breathing for a split second. Fingers snap, and there's a quick movement behind me, followed by a shuffle of feet. Then the greasy shroud stinking of petroleum and shielding my eyes is suddenly snatched free. The overhead lights blind me for a few seconds, and when my pupils constrict, I'm surprised to find myself in such a confined space.

The windowless room is gray, and the walls are shiny and slick—almost like the blubber of a dolphin. Well, now hold on. Is that memory even real for me? I can't be certain that I've ever seen a *real* dolphin.

"Madzimure, you say?" the man asks quizzically.

I am certain I've never laid eyes on this slender man in front of me before today. His hair is dark brown, almost black, and from the looks of it, it seems to be held in place by a sort of glossing agent. Hair product is an extreme rarity here. And by extreme, I mean it's nonexistent. He's sporting a scrawny mustache, too—the kind a teenage boy might be proud of. It's just as equally coifed and well-maintained as his hair. All that and to boot he's wearing the nicest damn coat I've seen since coming into exile.

"You are undoubtedly aware that you have less than a standard week remaining until your execution?" he asks, sighing and without so much as a glance my way.

"And just who the hell are you?" I ask, clearing my throat. "And what are the charges?"

The slender man ignores my questions, studying what looks like a digital pad or ledger of some sort lying on the brushed steel table set between the two of us. He taps on the screen briskly, his nostrils flaring.

“I’ll be damned,” I say, almost laughing. “You’re left-handed? You belong in here with us.”

The brainless muscle still standing behind me smacks me across the back of the head with an open palm.

“It says here that you abetted in the murder of one Leroy Baxter, not but nineteen hours ago,” the slender man says, biting the inside of his cheek. “Baxter was prison warden number zero five dash six.”

The display on the slender man’s ledger is nearly translucent, like a thin sheet of quartz crystal. I lean forward slightly and can plainly see an inverted thumbnail of old Leroy himself displayed on the left side of the screen. The moving text and numerical data underneath the photo, which seems to be holding my jailor’s complete and total attention, is illegible from my vantage point.

“Mmm... am I *correct* in my information, prisoner? Or do you wish to still deny the deed?” the slender man asks.

“For the record, I bore Warden Baxter no ill will. But the man had it coming,” I say.

The slender man continues to stare at the ledger, his eyes flittering left and right and never stopping once to look upon me. He frowns for half a second, as if debating whether or not there’s any truth to my previous claim.

“So, you do not deny it then?” he asks.

“I didn’t say that.”

The slender man continues to glide his index finger across the ledger with a quiet precision.

“Mr. Baxter had been transferred multiple times. He was valuable to the Church. When you took his life, you not only killed him here, but you terminated his host at home. This constitutes a double-murder charge in the eyes of the law.”

“The law?” I ask. “There’s no law here, string bean. Never was.”

My scoff prompts the slender man to scratch the side of his cheek.

“It sounds as though this is funny to you,” he says, shaking his head slightly.

“Look, if Baxter is an agent of the law, then *the law* was raping one of the women. She was too weak to stop him, so *I* did. Nothing funny

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about that. If that's earned me death, then why not toss me down one of the shafts and be done with it?"

"Because those who destroy company property always visit with one such as me before meeting their scheduled demise. It's policy. You understand, I'm sure," he says, feigning a smile at the last. "And who were you originally, prisoner? Prior to your transference?"

Now we've come to it.

I pause to reflect on the question for what feels like an eternity. Almost instantly I actually feel the pores on my forehead open, and the sweat begins to bead faster than I can think. The slender man continues to tap hastily on his ledger, all while managing to still avoid any eye contact with me. I get that old feeling—a fluttering in my chest—the same one you get when you're staring down the barrel of a gun.

"The *name*, prisoner," the slender man says impatiently. "Or your brain will be on the wall in less than five seconds," he adds while pointing toward the wall to his left. "Four."

The muscle-head behind me edges closer.

"Three."

I open my mouth to finally answer the question, and my voice cracks almost pubescently.

"Kilraven... Thaniel Kilraven."

The slender man's tongue pauses behind his lips from where it had been gliding across the top row of his teeth. Then he finally looks at me from over the top of his thick black-rimmed spectacles. The hard swallow in his throat is audible, and he half-laughs as his eyes narrow simultaneously.

"Kilraven? As in Kilraven the Cursed? That's impossible," he says, smoothing one of the lapels on his coat before looking up at the sentry behind me.

I've seen the look on his face before. He's not buying it. But I'm not blind enough yet to miss the fact that he's still curious, and the more I keep him talking, the less likely I am to get bludgeoned again.

"Thaniel Kilraven is dead," he says. "Everyone on Earth knows that," he adds, barely keeping himself from smiling.

"If you say so. And we're not on Earth, shithead," I say, mustering a sort of lazy smirk in return for the slender man's disbelief.

The sentry grunts, and I feel the air behind me move. In my peripheral, the sentry's arm rises to strike. I hold my breath, expecting it to be knocked out of me a second later, but the slender man puts his hand up with the palm forward and clears his throat. The sentry grumbles through his nose and relaxes.

"Clearly, the rod was spared with you," he says, shifting in his seat and adjusting his glasses.

I note that the slender man's fingers are long and smooth, and the tops of his hands are strangely pale. The avoidance of any sort of manual labor your whole life will do that to a man, I guess. That means wherever they sent his ass from, he's most likely a glorified pencil pusher.

"Now, there have been a handful of other prisoners in the past who made this very claim," he says, shaking his head, "and always I have been disappointed at the last. Granted, the combination of transference and the trip to this planet can addle the mind of some. Turns the temporal lobes into a concoction akin to cheese stew."

The slender man pauses and looks at me sidelong, then leans across the table, his face now a mere meter from my own.

"But *you*... hmm. Well, you might actually believe what you're saying," he says with a whisper.

For the briefest moment, the muscles in my lower extremities spasm, and I nearly piss myself.

Meanwhile, my mind does a one-eighty, teasing me to the brink of humiliation, and the part of me that's eternally a child pretends I'm in a motion picture. The constrictor knot binding my hands, which I could never possibly undo, mysteriously falls free to the ground. Getting up from my chair, I strike the slender man square in the larynx. His eyes bulge as he falls back, and his fingers desperately clutch at the base of his throat while he's raucously vying for breath. Naturally, the guard behind me pauses for much too long, and it's all I need to strangle him with the restraints he undoubtedly fashioned for me.

Then the fantasy vanishes quicker than a wisp of smoke.

"Prisoner?!" the slender man shouts as he raps me almost comically across the mouth with his cold and clammy palm. "Answer me!" he squeals. "Do you believe you are Kilraven?!"

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I say nothing and he simply squints, his forehead now a mass of wrinkles. As he studies my face, I see a small flame of delight spark up like a newly struck match in the center of his eyes, but it fades just as fast as it ignited.

The slender man sighs and relaxes in the seat, and his face is once again masked by an unreadable countenance. He glances up at the sentry behind me and nods curtly before excusing himself.

“Do try not to go anywhere, prisoner.”

It’s astounding how quickly and almost imperceptibly the slender man leaves the room, leaving behind only a scented trail. It’s a strange odor. Like camphor oil or... something slightly floral. I turn my head to the right as far as I can in an attempt to get a look at the sentry behind me.

“Just you and me now, cannon fodder.”

The meathead decides that it’s time to reassert his clout by seizing the back of my neck with an icy, gloved hand.

“Shit, you’re a mollydooker, *too*? I didn’t realize the Church was employing so many *lefties* these days. Are you even human?”

“Don’t you say another friggin’ word to me, criminal!” he says gruffly.

“So, he speaks with words, after all,” I add.

The guard squeezes the back of my neck so hard I momentarily become his personal stress-relieving device. But I knew he might do something like that, so I close my eyes and focus on his grip. I count six fingers.

He must have been made fun of in school for that. Probably a low-level service goon back on Earth, and this was his meal ticket. I don’t blame him, really. His voice, though... It isn’t one that I recognize, either, so he’s likely not one of the wardens. And with those six digits he would’ve had a nickname floating around this place that I’d have heard by now.

After a few torturous minutes of silence, the slender man returns, and the weighty hand still gripping the nape of my neck loosens. Taking up his seat once more, the slender man gazes at me curiously with one eyebrow raised, and the two of us set about waging a silent war. His gray eyes are the first to look away.

“As a representative of the Church, I have been charged with the task of, shall we say, speaking to you *ad nauseam*,” he says.

“I don’t know a thing,” I reply, wagging my head from side to side and

trying to roll my shoulders as best a man can when he's constricted from head to toe. "And I've got nothing else to say to you, Doc."

I call him that because he reminds me of a man I saw in a film once in my youth.

Out of nowhere, the force of a freighter lands square at the base of my skull. As I'm blinded by the red flecks of light dancing through my eyes, I hear the slender man clearing his throat before sighing heavily.

"*Tsk tsk tsk*. You most definitely know something, or you would not be here at all, prisoner."

The red lights fade, and then I thank the sentry for reminding me of who and what I am. Then the six-fingered ham fist hits me again. Harder this time, too.

When the screeching in my ears subsides and I regain my sight, I get a sense that a few minutes have passed because the air in the room has changed considerably. Through a haze of red dots I see the slender man still across from me, but now he's looking quite a bit more relaxed than before. He's sitting cross-legged and smiling in that sort of way someone might should they take pleasure in another person's struggle. Like watching an animal in a trap.

"I've dismissed my guard," the slender man says. "You'll be talking only to me from here on in. That is, unless you continue to be verbally unpleasant."

The slender man reaches across the table in my direction, placing a device about the size of a sim-chip in the center of the table. I quickly recognize the familiar rainbow-colored, fruit-shaped logo, which oddly no longer has a chunk missing from it.

"This is merely a customary precaution. For quality-assurance purposes, of course," he says.

"Haven't seen one of those in a long time. Helluva lot smaller than they used to be."

The slender man licks his thumb, then affixes it to the corner of the ledger. There's a quick popping sound, and the slender man winces. His hand recoils, and he studies the tip of his thumb along with the dot of crimson forming at the end of it. The ledger pings several times with an approving tone.

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“Indeed. *Much* has changed,” he says, licking his lips. “I would bet you wouldn’t recognize your home, let alone anyone or anything else you once knew. That of course is based on the ridiculous premise that you could or would somehow manage to find your way back to Earth.”

“Stranger things have happened. Maybe, uh... maybe I’ll take that wager, Doc.”

The slender man pauses for a moment and shakes his head in dismay.

“Well, you know your history, clearly. If I’m your *Doc*, then that means you must be *my* John Ringo. And you know what happened to Mr. Ringo in the end, don’t you?” he asks cruelly, glaring at me with an icy rancor.

“You tell me, Doc.”

“The man had a bullet put through his head. And there was not *one* soul there to mourn him. Now, if you want to continue this game of name-calling, I have no hesitation in inviting the watchman back inside so that he can have words with you,” he says, smiling to himself. “I can already tell Haden doesn’t like you.”

“What do you want me to call you then, Doc?”

“Say it again, prisoner,” he says, no longer smiling, “and I’ll have the sentry remove your tongue in such a manner that the two so-called physicians at this facility won’t even bother trying to repair or replace it!”

“Well, man-with-no-name, then you’d have a damn hard time getting me to talk, wouldn’t you?”

The slender man laughs in a lilting and feminine sort of way and slaps one hand on the table.

“Very good!” he says, clasping his hands together. “Yes, well then... if you feel inclined to address me directly, and cannot resist the urge to do so, then call me Corvus.”

The slender man stares squarely at me, removes his glasses, and places them quietly on the table.

“You’ve got some expensive-looking implanted gray eyes there, Corvus,” I say slyly. “You must be from one of the free city-states in the East.”

Corvus places his forearms on the table and leans toward me slowly. His previous demeanor, which was ambiguous at best, is now transformed as though he were a dog foaming at the mouth.

“Enough!” he snaps. “I know that life here turns more than half of you into half-wits, so pay close attention, please. I am *not* here to be civil with you. I am not your friend. I have spoken at length with the chief operator. They’re ready to tear you apart for what you did to Warden Baxter. I’m the only thing standing between you and them. The chief and the remaining wardens have unanimously agreed that I can end your life at any time if your desire is simply to waste mine!”

Interesting. At least now I know how to push one of the bastard’s buttons.

Corvus leans back in his chair and stares into the ledger, the light from it reflecting in his beady little eyes. And what he says next I am altogether unprepared for.

“After you’re dead and the goeey clumps of your reprehensible face have been scooped up off of the floor, the Church will ship the Kilraven family here. They will no doubt suffer the same fate as you.”

My heart quickens. My stomach and entrails gnash. I feel the warm sting of tears longing to be loosed, and it takes all the strength I have left to keep them at bay. Lucky for me the bastard misses the welling flood. All these long years I’ve received no news of my family, and until this moment, I believed them long since dead.

“Even now, the family of Kilraven the Cursed still lives,” Corvus says while looking at his fingernails. “If you could call it *living*, really. The poor souls have been transferred so many times it’s... well... one might even call it an atrocity. But you didn’t hear that from me.”

Corvus is looking down toward the floor now, relishing his authority with the kind of gratification that must come only to those who have a complete lack of pity. He’d fit right in with Verdauga’s men on the east side of the mine—some of the most tried and true bastards are among that lot. So, what do I do?

I have no choice; I have to play the game. But I’m gonna play it *my* way. Caution will be my ally now.

And with that thought, I turn my face toward the door behind me.

“You’re offering nothing for sale that I’m interested in, pal,” I say.

“The Council has kept their original bodies still intact,” Corvus says, licking his lips and ignoring my last comment. “And if memory serves, they were all being well-tended to in the Halls of Waiting, under the

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Church's supervision. If you are who you *claim* to be, you could hold the means to their potential freedom. They are, of course, innocents in all of these matters."

Corvus glances up at me slowly, searching for something—some sign of sympathy in my face, perhaps. Rather than attempting to further mask my emotions, I mentally damn myself instead, least of all for the fact that the apple-like lump sitting stubbornly at the back of my throat takes more than a moment to settle. Corvus reaches out for his eyeglasses, puts them back on smoothly, and looks at the ledger.

"We are well aware of your cohorts in the mines as well. Point of fact, I have a rather informative dossier on each of them right here," he says, adjusting his frames down to the brim of his nose.

"We're all cohorts here."

"The old man, Iyov... a homosexual degenerate. Here's one... Mel Sinosian, also known as *Magpie*... a fornicator *and* adulterer. Mmm, let's see now... another called Tarsil. Queer theorist and musician. Yes, we know him *quite* well," he says, glaring at me over the top of his glasses, grinning like a bushel basket full of possum heads. "Shall I go on?"

"That's a nice sack of tricks you've got there, company man. But you're a little misguided if you think anyone in this place means shit to me."

"Is that so?" he asks, raising one eyebrow.

"That's right, *Santy* Claus."

Corvus folds his arms in his lap, one of his eyebrows still cocked toward the ceiling. He *knows* that was a lie.

"You are a dead man. Do you understand? Regardless of what transpires here, you are dead already. You get to live a few more days, gifted with the foreknowledge that you yet have time to make peace with your maker, if you trust in one. And, for your cooperation, we'll leave your friends *and* the Kilraven brood out of this. That is all I can offer you," he says, shrugging nonchalantly.

Within the sterile room, the weight of his words pounds on the walls and then back against my eardrums. For the first time in decades I feel something rising in the pit of my stomach, something that I thought had almost departed from me: fear.

In my mind's eye, I'm instantly transported back to the moment I last

held my wife. I looked in her eyes and they were full of terror, and it was such a fright that I had never seen before, nor have I seen it since. And I did nothing. I could do nothing. If this buffoon across from me *is* telling me the truth, and she is still alive, then I must know. For her sake I cannot sit idly, and not least of all for my friends.

“If you want some kind of assurance, *thief*, I can promise you that everything you say and do in this room after today will be fed back to the Church,” he says while tapping on the sim-chip in the middle of the table. “I’m sure you have learned by now that they honor their agreements, and I will not make you this offer again,” he adds with a reveling smile.

The bastard’s *right*.

“We have access to more than you could fathom,” he says. “Now, with that having been said, there are some vital components still *missing* from the Kilraven file. And if you *are* him, then there are things only *he* could possibly know, which we may come to in due course.”

“So, how do you suggest we play this out?” I ask.

“Well then!” he nearly shouts, laughing to himself. “In mere minutes you’ve proven that cooperation, unlike chivalry, is not yet dead! Even if it *has* been coerced. You must be a romantic at heart.”

I watch as the son of a bitch actually takes pride in his gloating. He licks the front of his perfect teeth as he laughs through his nose. I stare back at him blankly, refusing in what pride I have left to give him even the smallest satisfaction.

When Corvus finally gets the better of himself and his mirth, he adjusts his glasses carefully. Then, taking his eyes off me, he puts the frames back on the table right next to the ledger again.

Hmm. He’s very *precise* in his movements.

“Oh, goodness me!” Corvus says. “Well my *suggestion* is that when we resume first thing tomorrow morning, you start from the beginning. You will leave nothing out. I want your entire life, as you recall it. Yes?”

“I’ll tell you what, why don’t we just get this over with now?” I ask.

“You do not set the pace, prisoner. Besides, I have half a dozen more prisoners to see today, and some of them have *far* less time left than you do,” he says. “And frankly, you smell so bad it’s making my eyes hurt. Didn’t your mother teach you how to bathe properly?”

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Every instinct I have tells me not to oblige the scrawny worm. I should just open my mouth and say the words *Go fuck yourself, Doc*.

And I nearly do. But right before that baser urge reaches my lips, Corvus interrupts me.

“You cannot save yourself, whoever you are—or *think* you are. But you do have this one chance to implement some final merit with your no doubt *pathetic* existence. Every single thing you’ve done, right or wrong, has led to this. I suggest you think of them and not yourself. Or has time in the mines been so cruel that you’ve completely forgotten how to be a good little lad?” he asks, sneering at me.

I can’t tell if his ploy is a trick or not. First the asshole wouldn’t even look me in the eyes, and now he’s damn near pleading with me.

You’re not a fool, Kilraven. Don’t be fooled. These company types are always looking out for one thing: their bank accounts.

And so I do exactly what Corvus tells me to do. I think of *them*, and the choice I must and will make becomes pretty obvious. In fact, I realize I made the choice minutes ago. It’s the same thing anyone else with half a heart would do in my situation.

“Dying sooner rather than later is very low on my priority list,” I reply in the dullest tone I can muster.

“Excellent. We will proceed first thing tomorrow morning. Good day to you,” he says, appearing plainly pleased.

Corvus taps on the ledger softly, and within moments my favorite sentry comes back in and pulls the shroud down over my eyes once more. As I’m dragged out of the room, the smooth but squeaky movement of the chair tells me it has wheels on it. But just before I’m shuttled through the doorway, I hear Corvus’s raised voice attempting to pour salt into an already open wound.

“You have six days left to live, prisoner.”