HADES

Also by Mark Knowles

Blades of Bronze series
Argo
Jason

Other novels
The Consul's Daughter

HADES

MARK KNOWLES



An Aries Book

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For Rachael, my *νόστος*

By command of the wanax *of Pylos, Great King Nestor, and his* lawagetas *Peisistratus, consider the orders of my followers as if delivered by the hand of the king:*

- *All coastal defences must be mobilised in both lower and upper fiefdoms against the enemy from the sea – 800 coastal watchmen and 600 oarsmen. Drafted by force, if necessary.*
- *All spare bronze will be requisitioned for the making of tips for spears, javelins and arrows. Scrap bronze to include votive gifts and grave goods, if necessary. By force, if necessary.*
- *A quantity of gold has been set aside for the payment of local chiefs and officials in enacting the above.*

In addition:

- *One golden cup and two women (to be drafted) as offerings for Potnia Hera.*
- *One golden cup and one man (to be drafted) as offerings for Hermes.*
- *One golden cup and one boy (drafted) as offerings for Zeus.*

Adapted from Pylos Linear B tablet archive

It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

From 'Ulysses' (1842) by Alfred,
Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)

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Dramatis Personae

Lemnos

Alektruon warrior and member of the council
Auge Hypsipyle's handmaid
Euneus *wanax* (king) and son of Jason, leader of the Argonauts
Ekhinos son of Plouteos
Hektor warrior and member of the council
Hilarion member of the council
Hypsipyle mother of Euneus and former queen of Lemnos
Khalkeus warrior son of Idas of Arene (an Argonaut)
Moxos warrior son of Meleager, prince of Calydon (an Argonaut)
Plouteos *nomarch* (leader) of Moudros
Teodora proud young woman from Moudros
Xandros son of Euneus

Surviving Argonauts

Acastus *wanax* of Iolkos
Ancaeus helmsman and carpenter, formerly of Samos
Butes warrior of Athens
Castor and Pollux exiled twins of Sparta
Jason former *wanax* of Iolkos
Idas spearman of Arene
Meleager prince of Calydon
Orpheus the bard
Peleus leader of the Myrmidons of Phthia; father of Achilles
Telamon brother of Peleus

Crew of the *Salamander*

Elissos an archer
Glaux a young lookout

Additional Characters

Acamas *wanax* of Athens
Atukhos Ancaeus' young apprentice
Caeneus mercenary from Argos, son of Argonaut Polyphemus
Creoboros a fierce and loyal dog
Demophon brother of Acamas
Eriopis daughter of Medea
Huliat a warrior of the Peleset tribe
Medea princess of Colchis, formerly wife of Jason
Orestes *wanax* of Mycenae


HADES
N
Samothrace
Troy
Lemnos
Iolkos
Dimini
Sporades Islands
Perachora
Athens
Corinth
Mycenae
Nemea
Argos
Spetses
Pylos
Gytheon
THE ARCHIPELAGOS
Megalonisi
Route of the Salamander
0 100 200 300 miles
0 100 200 300 400 500 km

Prologue

I, Orpheus

Stranger, answer me this.

Imagine you are dying of thirst in a sun-baked wasteland, and you see a spring suddenly burble through the dust ten feet in front of you. Could you will yourself to make it to the spring? The answer, I would say, is yes.

But what if the spring emerged from the ground one hundred feet away. Could you will yourself to live then? What about one thousand feet? What about ten thousand?

At some point, your will to live would be broken by the reality of the task set before you, so that it would be easier for you just to lie down and die. At the point of our birth, the thread of our fate has already been spun. At the point of our birth, the limit of our will to reach that spring has already been ordained. I have toiled alongside men and women whose strength of will appeared inexhaustible so that it seemed inconceivable that they should ever fall, yet fall they did.

Then came an age of darkness.

The world had changed. Drought and hunger stripped whole towns and villages of all but the strongest. Western vassal states engaged in frequent rebellions against the Hittite heartland, which started a tidal wave of migration, war and piracy that swept through Anatolia. Confederations of marauding pirates laid waste to those Achaian states that did not tear themselves apart first.

Imagine, if you will, witnessing your loved ones slain or enslaved and your homes razed to the ground. Imagine, at the tip of a sword, shunning death or destitution and groping instead for that spring, that sweet trickle of life-giving water.

We speak so much of memory these days because there is so little of it left. What little remains bards must gather, like precious shells on the shore when the tide of living memory has receded.

I am Orpheus the Thracian bard, custodian of memory and keeper of traditions. Much has already been told about me: only some of it is true. It has been my fate to live a long and eventful life. I have loved; I have lost. I once teetered above the fetid precipice of Hades, minded to jump, but I held my nerve. I rowed with the men of *Argo* to the ends of the earth and back. I lived through the Eastern War and have turned men into heroes and even gods. There are some who say I was born of a muse and a god. Some men are fools.

In my twilight years, it was my misfortune to witness the slide of man into the abyss but heed me when I say that there is light even in its deepest blackness: light cast by the memory of what once was and by the hope of what is to come.

Memory is life, stranger. I have always worshipped the goddess who protects it, for she has been kind. Be kind once more, divine Mnemosyne, and I will ask no more of you before I set down this lyre at your altar, as I once laid down my bow. Grant me the voice; grant me the nimble fingers to take these strands and weave them whilst the thread of Fate – and my waning power – still allows.

It starts with Jason, as many stories do.

BOOK ONE

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Part One

A Gathering

I

The Isthmus of Corinth, 1212 BC

The crack was sharp, rattling the heavens, the shutters and the careworn man who now groaned beneath them.

Curse thunder and the god who wields it. Curse them all, the dogs.

It had heralded his birth and, doubtless, it would herald his end.

But that would not be today. Perhaps, if he prayed for life – and made the fiction convincing – they might deliver the opposite. That was how they worked, these Olympians. At least, it was how they had worked for him.

Jason buried his head in the sweat-sour pillow and sighed. Sleep had been close to claiming him but the storm had dragged him back from the void, and now he was awake.

He pushed himself upright and listened to the steady hiss of rain on the thatch above. All of the oil lamps had fizzled out save one. He watched the plucky little flame cast a disc of light around the scoop of clay as if protecting the precious oil within. It felt like a seed of hope, which he had no mind to entertain, and he flopped back upon the bed.

Had it been worth it?

He looked about him in distaste. A converted byre in a lonely farmstead off the Corinth road. This was where life had led him. From a frescoed palace and a blazing hearth; the patter of soft feet across the hall; the giggling; the warmth of two children's smiles and their ready embraces. The innocent cast of one's own face beaming back, as yet unstained by fault or sin…

I bore you love's – life's! – greatest gift, twice over. You kicked my sweet agonies aside like… like dirt from your shoe!

He clutched his face, nails digging into his eyelids. *No! No! No! NO!*

He felt the grief crush his chest and he struggled to breathe as panic flooded the breach, as it did most nights, when wine or a woman had not patched it up.

You are Midas, but his gold is your pestilence!

His head thrashed about on the pillow. *Enough! Get out of my head! Out! OUT!*

Kicking aside the dirty coverlets, he threw himself from the bed, landing on the cold, compacted earth. The shock of the dull pain silenced the voices. In the darkness, his throat felt raw but he couldn't be sure the screams had ever left his head. He staggered to his feet and fumbled for the ewer of water.

No pain, no grief on earth could have prepared him for the passage of the past three years. His heart and mind had waded through Hades, scorched and tormented, and only his softening, ageing body had reminded him of his continued existence above the ground. No matter where he had roamed, no matter how he had punished his body through exhaustion or drink, his memories trailed behind him with his shadow and, whenever he closed his eyes, they pounced. He was cursed. Medea had done her work and she had done it well.

He felt a sudden rush of bile in his stomach as her voice returned.

Did her moans make you feel more of a man? Just as I made you, you filthy coward, so will I break you!

He made it to the door, falling against it with a clatter as the meagre contents of his stomach spattered onto the cool earth outside.

Dawn took her time in arriving. Once, when they were close, Medea had told Jason about the rumours of Helios being her grandfather, and how useful it was for common folk to believe this. He had to accept, given the pain of waking each morning, that there was some truth to it.

After bathing in a nearby stream, he gathered up his belongings and joined the road, full of misgivings. He walked for a mile, during

which time the sun had begun to melt the hazy clouds and sweeten the earth after the previous night's storm. To all of nature's beauty, Jason was oblivious. At some point before midday, when his pace had slowed and his feet ached, he stopped and looked around him. Swifts swooped and chirped above a grove shelving towards the sea to the left while, to the right, the white hills of the central isthmus shone bright. The world was alive and people were waiting yet he had never felt so detached from it all.

He crested a rise and looked out westwards towards the remote, rocky peninsula of Perachora, spearing into the Corinthian Gulf. It would take him another evening and a morning before he would see its rocky waves diminishing towards the tip of that desolate triangle. Its very remoteness from an otherwise central region of Hellas, which had long since shaped its appeal for him, was now polluted. Yet it was here that the dwindling band of men would be gathering.

But his heart wasn't in it; not this year, just as it hadn't been for the last, nor the one before that. He took out a gourd of water and drank deep whilst he made a decision. Sated, he set off once more, resigned to follow whichever path his feet instinctively took him down.