

MOLOCH

By

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CHAPTER 1 – THE BEAST

Now: February, 1917

Murphy was there to change everything. The gates of the Oregon State Penitentiary opened for his Pontiac, the two guards on duty craning their necks to try and get a look inside. They'd heard the rumours, of course, just like everyone else. The prison was a cluster of squat, stone buildings surrounded by a wall of concrete, twice the height of any man. The sunlight never seemed to make it past that wall. A stout young man was waiting outside the main entrance, hands clasped firmly behind a straight back, flanked by two others in identical uniforms.

'Mr. Murphy, sir.' the man said in greeting as Murphy unfurled his tall frame from the car.

'Edward Burns?'

'Ed, sir.' the man nodded.

Murphy stepped forward and held out his hand. 'A pleasure to meet you.'

'I'll be your Deputy Warden here at OSP, sir.' Burns took the hand and gave it one firm shake.

'Excellent.' Murphy clapped him on the shoulder. 'I'll be relying on you for the first week or two to make this transition as simple as possible.'

'Understood.' Burns nodded once again. Murphy noted he had a habit of looking straight through a man. Or maybe that was just for him. 'I've prepared documents pertaining to the most urgent matters. I can escort you to your office and we can make a start on them.'

'I would like that very much, Mr. Burns, lead on.' Murphy gave a nod to the guards, touching calloused fingers to the brim of his hat, before following Burns into the building. One guard turned to the other and raised an eyebrow, to which the other gave a small, wary shake of the head.

Murphy felt like Burns was watching him intently, even though his new deputy was striding ahead of him. If anyone could have eyes in the back of their head, Murphy would put a bet on a man like Burns. It was lunchtime for the prisoners and Murphy got a good luck at them from a walkway that bordered the mess hall. At a glance their swollen stomachs may have looked healthy but their sickly pallor betrayed the illusion. They were

malnourished to a one. A few looked up to see him pass, most paid him no attention. To these men, one fellow in a suit wasn't much different than any other. The air hung heavy with the acrid, too-human stink of unwashed bodies and aggression. On the opposite side of the walkway, a guard sat and watched every movement. A rifle rested in his lap.

'What are they fed, Mr. Burns?' Murphy spoke in low, almost reverential tones.

Burns didn't break his stride as he said, 'Potatoes. Beans. That sort of thing.'

Murphy took one last look down into the mess. There was the scraping of spoons on plates and the occasional muffled grunt but the room was otherwise silent. It was so quiet that Murphy could hear the nearby guard drumming his fingers on the stock of his rifle.

'This way, sir.' Burns held open the door at the end of the walkway.

'You must have one hell of a poker face, Burns.' Murphy said as they passed into another corridor.

'Sir?'

'I'm sure you've heard all sorts of things about me, you're not curious if any of it's true?'

'I'm plenty curious, sir, but I'm a patient man.'

'An admirable trait.' after a pause, he said 'Not a trait that many have these days.'

'Not from memory.'

Burns knew that well already. Before Murphy had even set foot in Oregon, he'd demanded that a dozen of the guards be fired. That dozen may or may not have been to Burns' taste but prison guards were a fraternal bunch, by nature and by necessity. Burns had heard the muttered curses passed like illicit notes from man to man, all aimed solely at this Charles Murphy.

The Warden's office was mostly bare, stripped of the previous owners possessions, just a wooden desk and a window with a view of the scrubland and flax fields to the south of the prison. The flax was blooming in shimmering purple waves.

'I've heard you called a "reformer."' Burns said as Murphy walked to the desk and took a seat. 'May I ask what that means?'

'Of course.' Murphy looked at the stack of documents on the desktop, yellow pages filled with a cramped, officious script, 'But first I have to ask you, do you believe in rehabilitation or retribution?'

Burns hesitated for a moment. 'I believe in whatever is proven to be most effective.' Murphy nodded and gestured for Burns to sit in the chair opposite him. 'Very smart. Very measured. But what if one approach hasn't yet had the chance to be proven?'

Burns settled in the chair as Murphy gave him an expectant look. Eventually, he said 'Then it should be given that chance.'

'Exactly. A writer, one of my favourites, said "The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons" and those words have stayed with me.' Murphy paused, looked around the office. 'My predecessors, they believed in hard punishment, didn't they?'

'They did.'

'In breaking a man?'

'Yes.'

'And look where they are now.' he spread his arms, gesturing around the empty room. He let the silence sit for a moment before he said, 'I realise you're hesitant. I understand that, you're not the first.. You should hear what my wife thinks about all this.'

'It's not personal, sir.'

'Of course.' Murphy looked out the window, the vast view of nothing but nature. 'But I would like you to think about that quote. If you were a stranger to this place and you

walked through that mess hall today, what would you think of America?’

Burns followed his new boss’s gaze and then back. ‘I wouldn’t think that much of it.’

‘Exactly.’ there was the briefest flash of a smile under Murphy’s moustache. ‘So I’m asking for a chance.’

‘I’m your deputy, sir. You say the word and I make sure it gets done.’

‘Perfect.’ Murphy returned to the stack of files in front of him but raised a finger before perusing them. ‘One thing. I’ve heard a lot about one prisoner in particular, a... Jefferson Baldwin?’

Ed Burns wasn’t a man that displayed emotion often but occasionally he had no choice. At hearing the name, he could only let out a sigh.

Then: June, 1915

'Prisoner 7390, Jefferson Baldwin, step forward.'

Baldwin didn't move an inch, except for a slight curl of the lip. The sneer fit his face well. He looked like some sort of circus strongman gone feral, all bulging muscles and sharp eyes. Everything about the man said 'Walk away or regret it.'

'Baldwin. Forward.' the admissions officer repeated, tapping his fingers on the handle of a steel-tipped cane. Jefferson gave him a brick wall of a glance and then complied, to be handed his uniform and bedding. The uniform was nothing special, baggy and rough, black-and-white striped. The bedding might as well have been sackcloth. They'd already stripped him of the ragged suit he'd arrived in. Some men struggled at that point, fought for every scrap of clothing. They'd stand there shivering, covering their genitals with their hands. Some took it in their stride, tossed the clothes away like they'd already tossed their freedoms. Those were the ones that made the guards uncomfortable and a shrewd few, of which Baldwin was one, knew that and enjoyed it.

Baldwin was relatively docile as he was escorted into the main body of the prison. The cadre of guards surrounding him may well have been the reason for that. They walked in lockstep, an impromptu cage of bodies around the prisoner, each with their own cane at hand. The admissions officer slumped as the procession moved away, letting out a breath.

'What'd he do?' another guard asked, approaching the officer's desk.

'Huh?'

'The guy.' he pointed just as the doors closed behind the last of the group. 'What's he in for?'

'Robbery.' the officer said. 'Seven years.'

'All that for a yegg?'

The officer shrugged. 'Must be one hell of a yegg.'

Cell-block B smelt of mould and ammonia, that cold chemical stench that sunk deep into the lungs and stayed there. Baldwin's new home was the last cell on the left of the ground floor. A metal bed and a chamber pot. No window. Wouldn't be anything to see even if there was.. They shoved him inside, those men with the pressed uniforms and heavy sticks to hide behind. Iron bars closed on him. It wasn't the first time. It wouldn't be the last. The muttering started, the whispered threats, the scratching at the walls. He placed the threadbare bedding down on his bunk, sat, and waited.

The morning routine at the Oregon State Penitentiary wouldn't be unfamiliar to those with military experience. At 6am sharp, a bell rang throughout the complex. In all three of its cell-blocks, doors would simultaneously grind open and their inhabitants were expected to be dressed and stood at attention by 6:10. If a prisoner was yet to leave his cell, as was the case that morning in block B, then a guard would soon enter and convince the prisoner to do so with the tip of his cane. In this case, the guard never got the chance to exercise his particular brand of persuasion. As he stepped inside, a cast-iron pot swung at his head. The pot missed. Its contents didn't, showering the man in Jefferson Baldwin's piss and shit. The other guards heard a strangled yell and came running, canes ready in the air, ready to crack heads. That was how Jefferson met the boss.

The bruises were starting to swell when Warden Harry Minto came to see his newest reprobate. Jefferson was strung up in one of the rooms deeper into the building, designed for this very purpose, his arms chained to the ceiling and his feet to the floor. It was a dark place. Nothing but a kerosene lamp out in the hallway and a bolted steel door

that only opened when the man in charge decided.

'Prisoner 7390.' Minto said, adjusting his shirt-cuffs 'Were you trying to set a record?'

'Who're you supposed to be?' Jefferson said through a thickened lip.

'I'm Warden Minto, the man who will be teaching you your lesson for the next seven years.'

'Minto...' Jefferson rolled the name around his mouth like he was tasting it. 'What kinda peg-house punk name is that?'

'Excuse me?' 'How do you take it, Minto? You a fruiter or a rooter?'

Harry backhanded Jefferson across the cheek. 'First thing you're gonna learn is to keep a civil tongue in your head when you're on my property.'

Jefferson spat out a string of pinkish drool that narrowly missed the Warden. 'You wanna teach me?' he licked his lower lip. 'Wouldn't be the first one who tried.'

'I assure you, I'll be the last one who needs to.' Warden Minto locked eyes with the prisoner, summoning every bit of steel a life of law enforcement had given him.

'That's what they all say.' Jefferson spat again. 'Never made a bit of difference.'

'Well, I think you'll find that the Oregon State Penitentiary is a very different animal than any other prison you may have experienced.'

Two guards entered the room to stand on either side of the prisoner, tapping their canes on the clammy stone floor. 'And I would like to show you why.'

'Go ahead then, Minto.' Jefferson let out a low, clogged laugh. 'Show me.' he lurched against the chains, making them creak under his weight. 'Try and make me do your seven years.'

'Let's start with a day and we'll go from there.'

Minto gestured to the two guards flanking Baldwin's hanging form. 'You know the routine. put him in a two-bed once you're done.' and then he walked away, as cold and as lethal as the Arctic. The guards went to work.

Another corridor. Another hand on his wrist. Another cell. Another bed rising up to meet his battered face.

'New fish?'

A grunt and the rattle of iron. The bedding was rough against his cheek but blessedly cool. He kept his eyes closed. The carbolic stink of the cellblock cut through the blood in his nostrils.

'Christ, what did you do to 'em, son?' Baldwin ignored the voice and pressed his face into the bed. 'What, they bust your ears too?'

'I can hear you.' he said.

'What's your name?' came the voice.

'Baldwin.'

'That your real name?'

'Is what it is.' Baldwin opened his right eye, the left still buried in the bedding. Distant evening light splayed across the iron bars, just enough to show the skinny, older man sat on the bed opposite.

'Mine's Curtiss.' he said 'You look like shit.'

Baldwin grunted and heaved himself into a sitting position. 'It's nothing.'

'Sure it is.' Curtiss said 'It's always nothing on the first day.'

'They do this often?'

'If you give them a reason to, which I don't.' Curtiss ran a hand over his stubbly scalp. 'Don't want to be the next one dead of syphilis.'

'Huh?'

Curtiss laughed. 'Sorry, New York joke. You ever been?' Baldwin shook his head. 'It's just as big as they say it is...' Curtiss looked at the last dregs of light fanning through the cell bars and then caught himself. 'Did a stretch there, years ago now. It's what the

screws would say when they went a little too far, "He died of syphilis." From the walkway, the clicking of boot-heels approached. 'Knew a lot of fellas who died of syphilis in New York.'

The two were silent as the patrolling guard passed by their cell. The burly figure tapped his cane against the bars as he glanced in and then was gone. Curtiss counted the guard's steps under his breath until they were out of earshot. 'Question is, Baldwin, are you gonna keep on giving them a reason?'

Baldwin was as still as stone, his bed almost entirely in the shadows now. Finally, he said 'I'm thinking so.'

Curtiss sighed and rolled his head back to rest against the clammy stone wall. 'Then may I kindly ask you to do it in someone else's cell? I don't need that trouble.'

Baldwin stood up from his bed with some effort, joints complaining as he dragged them into place and stretched to his full height. 'Nobody needs trouble.' his bulk seemed to fill the cell, soaking up whatever remained of the light. 'But it still finds 'em.'