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MORNING STAR

BOOK
III
OF THE
RED
RISING
TRILOGY

PIERCE
BROWN

Author of *Red Rising*
and *Golden Son*

MORNING STAR



Pierce Brown



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Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Map

The Story So Far...

Dramatis Personae

Prologue

Part I: Thorns

Chapter 1: Only the Dark

Chapter 2: Prisoner L17L6363

Chapter 3: Snakebite

Chapter 4: Cell 2187

Chapter 5: Plan C

Chapter 6: Victims

Chapter 7: Bumblebees

Chapter 8: Home

Chapter 9: The City of Ares

Chapter 10: The War

Chapter 11: My People

Chapter 12: The Julii

Part II: Rage

Chapter 13: Howlers

Chapter 14: The Vampire Moon

Chapter 15: The Hunt
Chapter 16: Paramour
Chapter 17: Killing Golds
Chapter 18: Abyss
Chapter 19: Pressure
Chapter 20: Dissent
Chapter 21: Quicksilver
Chapter 22: The Weight of Ares
Chapter 23: The Tide
Chapter 24: Hic Sunt Leones
Chapter 25: Exodus
Chapter 26: The Ice
Chapter 27: Bay of Laughter
Chapter 28: Feast
Chapter 29: Hunters
Chapter 30: The Quiet
Chapter 31: The Pale Queen
Chapter 32: No Man's Land
Chapter 33: Gods and Men
Chapter 34: Godkillers

Part III: Glory

Chapter 35: The Light
Chapter 36: Swill
Chapter 37: The Last Eagle
Chapter 38: The Bill
Chapter 39: The Heart
Chapter 40: Yellow Sea
Chapter 41: The Moon Lord
Chapter 42: The Poet

Chapter 43: Here Again
Chapter 44: The Lucky Ones
Chapter 45: The Battle of Ilium
Chapter 46: Helldiver
Chapter 47: Hell
Chapter 48: Imperator
Chapter 49: Colossus

Part IV: Stars

Chapter 50: Thunder and Lightning
Chapter 51: Pandora
Chapter 52: Teeth
Chapter 53: Silence
Chapter 54: The Goblin and the Gold
Chapter 55: The Ignoble House Barca
Chapter 56: In Time
Chapter 57: Luna
Chapter 58: Fading Light
Chapter 59: The Lion of Mars
Chapter 60: Dragon's Maw
Chapter 61: The Red
Chapter 62: Omnis Vir Lupus
Chapter 63: Silence
Chapter 64: Hail
Chapter 65: The Vale

Epilogue

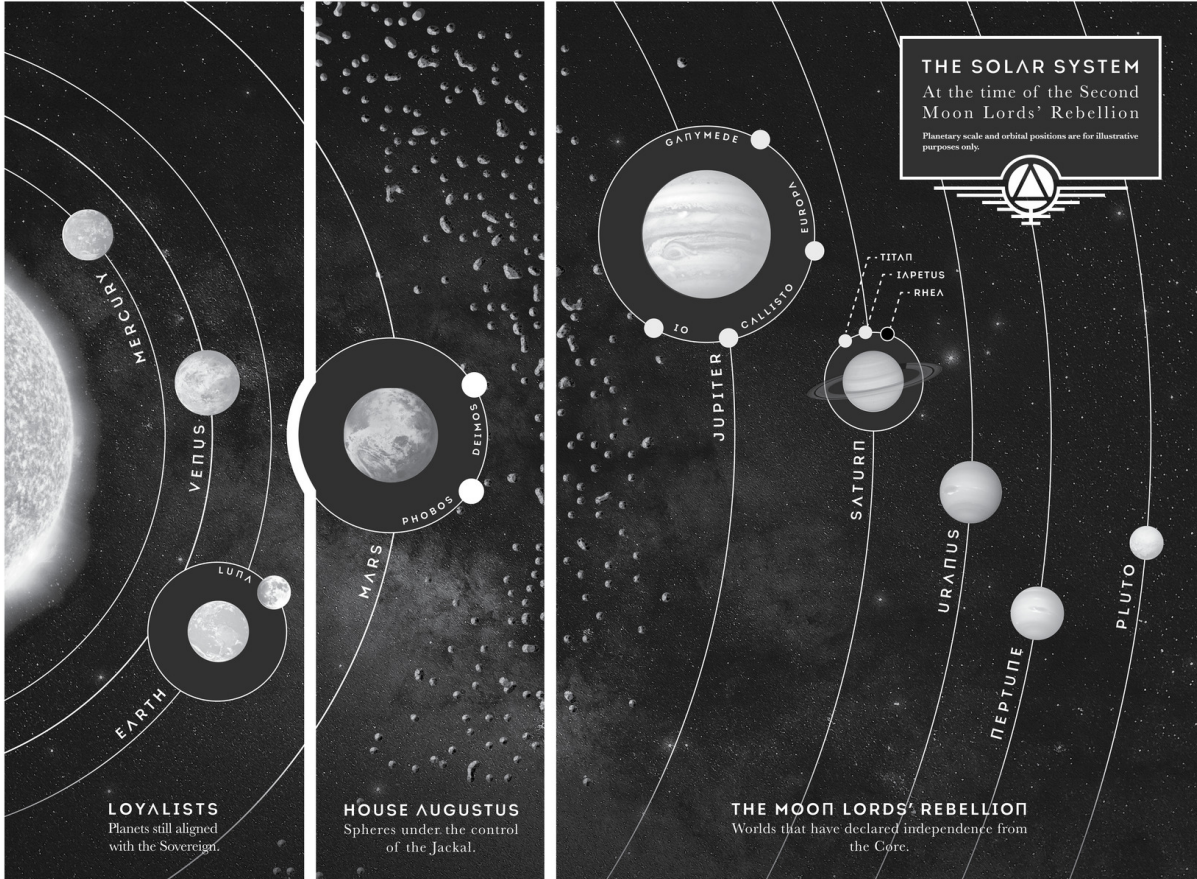
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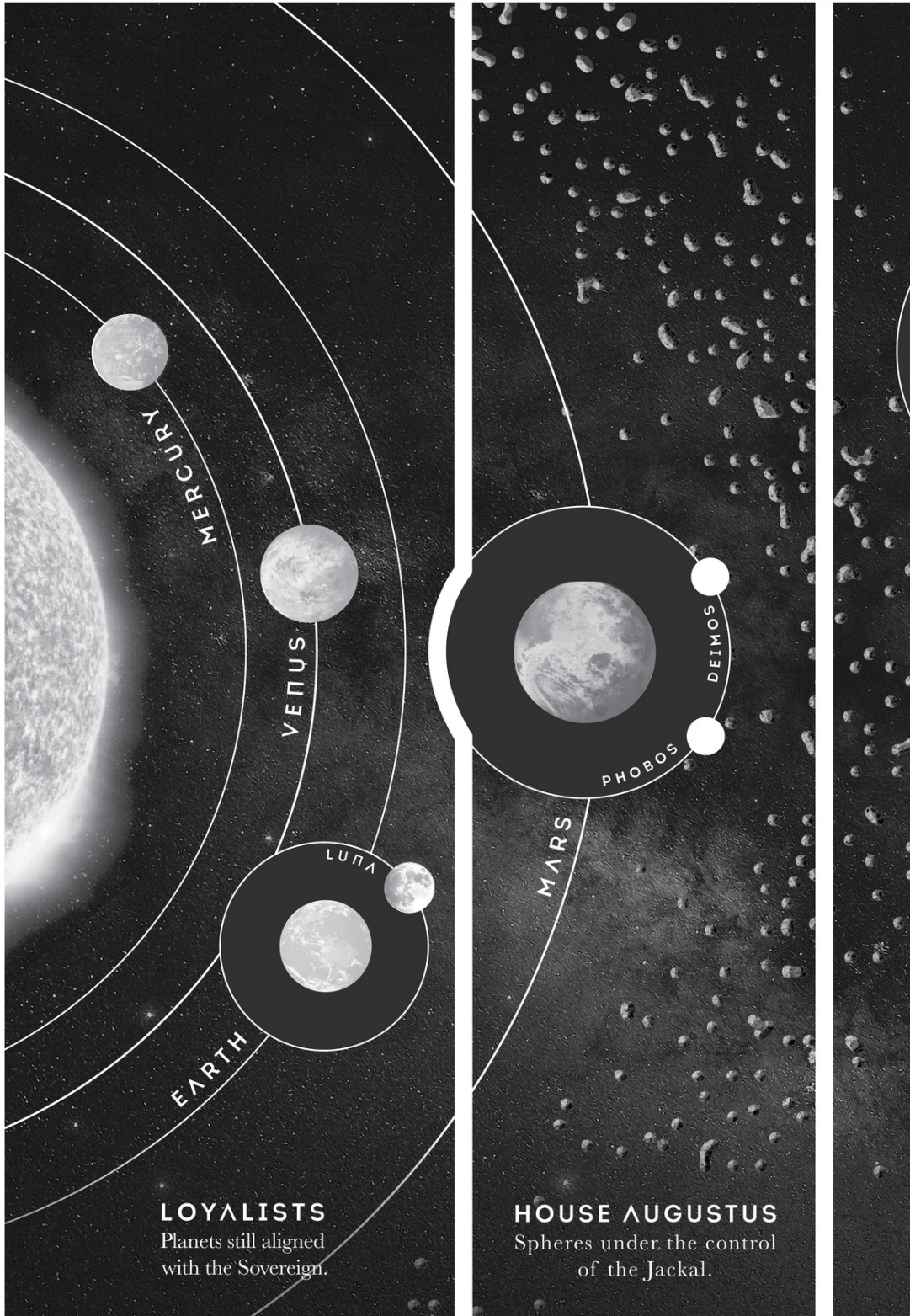
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By Pierce Brown

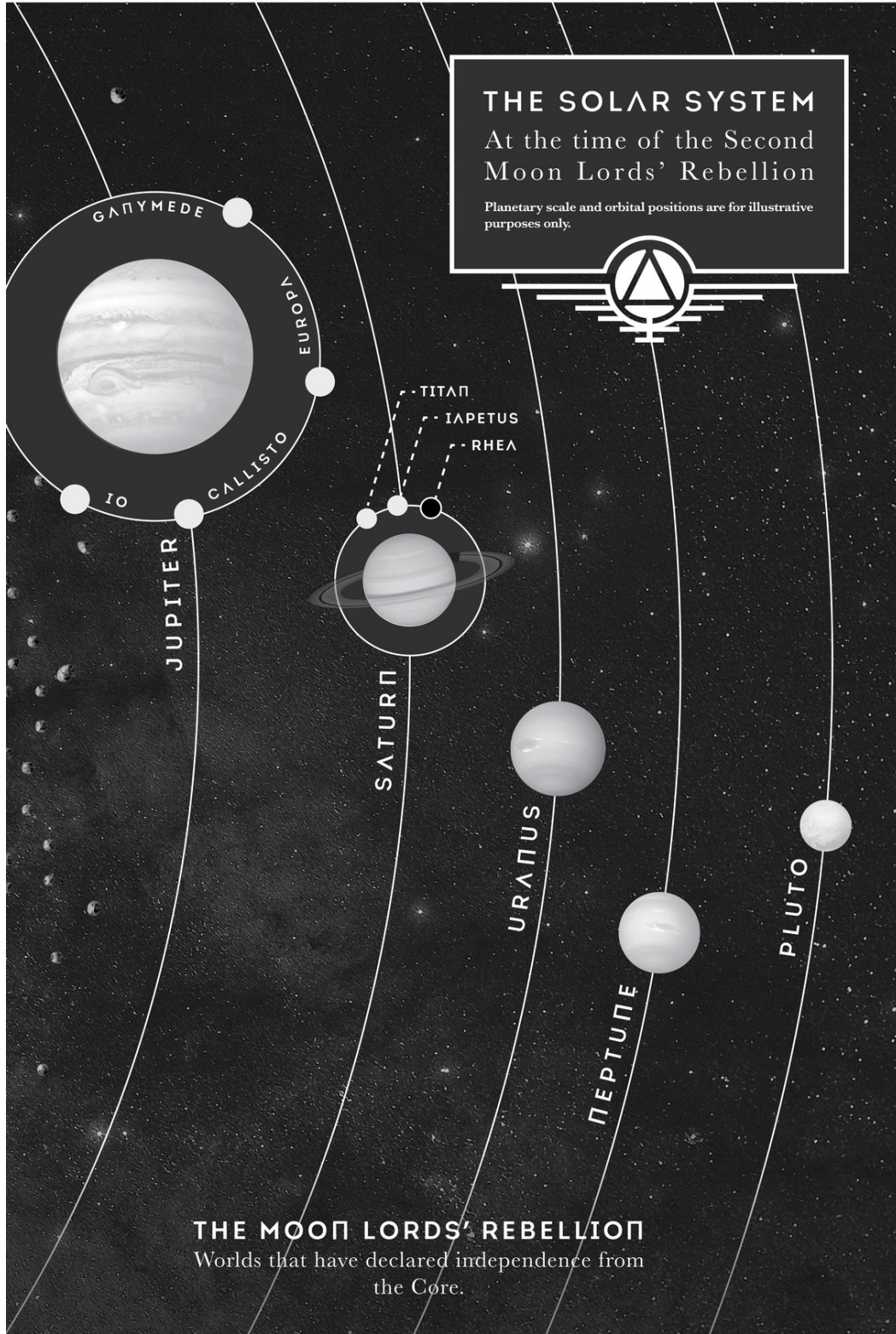
About the Author

Excerpt from Iron Gold





Detail left



Detail right

THE STORY SO FAR...

Red Rising

Darrow is a Red, a lowly miner slaving away below the surface of Mars. He toils to make the surface of his planet habitable for future generations, but he and his kind have been betrayed: the surface is livable and ruled by the unscrupulous Golds. When they hang his wife for voicing rebellious ideas, Darrow joins a revolutionary group known as the Sons of Ares. With the help of the Sons, Darrow is physically transformed into a Gold and sent to take the Society down from the inside.

He enters the Institute, a training school for the Gold elite that turns spoiled teenagers into the best warriors in Society. There Darrow learns the ways of warfare and how to navigate through the often treacherous—but sometimes genuine—friendships and complex political climate of the Golds. Only by changing the paradigm and relying on his new friends is Darrow able to best the Institute and all of its dangers.

Golden Son

From his victory at the Institute Darrow wins prestige and a position in the employ of the ArchGovernor of Mars, Nero au Augustus. However, he finds that it is difficult to live up to his own legend, as Darrow is unsuccessful at the Academy, where Golds train in ship-to-ship combat. Bested by a familial rival of his employer, Darrow's worth quickly declines in the eyes of the ArchGovernor, until that is, Darrow gives the power-hungry Gold what he wants: civil war.

Playing the Augustus clan against the Bellonas, Darrow throws Society into disarray, sowing the seeds of chaos everywhere he goes. After amassing an impressive army and some dubious allies, Darrow leads a successful assault on Mars, ousting the Bellonas from control of the planet.

But at the Triumph held to honor his military victory, betrayal once again rears its ugly head and all that he has worked for is undone. His friends and allies killed or missing, Darrow is captured and his secret identity is discovered; the fate of the rebellion balances on a razor's edge....

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Golds

OCTAVIA AU LUNE Reigning Sovereign of the Society

LYSANDER AU LUNE Grandson of Octavia, heir to House Lune

ADRIUS AU AUGUSTUS/JACKAL ArchGovernor of Mars, twin brother to Virginia

VIRGINIA AU AUGUSTUS/MUSTANG Twin sister to Adrius

MAGNUS AU GRIMMUS/THE ASH LORD The Sovereign's Arch Imperator, father to
Aja

AJA AU GRIMMUS The Protean Knight, chief bodyguard to the Sovereign

CASSIUS AU BELLONA The Morning Knight, the Sovereign's bodyguard

ROQUE AU FABII Imperator of the Sword Armada

ANTONIA AU SEVERUS-JULII Half sister to Victra, daughter of Agrippina

VICTRA AU JULII Half sister to Antonia, daughter of Agrippina

KAVAX AU TELEMANUS Head of House Telemanus, father to Daxo

DAXO AU TELEMANUS Heir and son of Kavax, brother to Pax

ROMULUS AU RAA Head of House Raa, ArchGovernor of Io

LILATH AU FARAN Companion of the Jackal, leader of the Boneriders

CYRIANA AU TANUS/THISTLE A former Howler, now a lieutenant of the
Boneriders

VIXUS AU SARNA Former House Mars, lieutenant of the Boneriders

Mid- and LowColors

TRIGG TI NAKAMURA Legionnaire, brother to Holiday, a Gray

HOLIDAY TI NAKAMURA Legionnaire, sister to Trigg, a Gray

REGULUS AG SUN/QUICKSILVER Richest man in the Society, a Silver

ALIA SNOWSPARROW Queen of the Valkyrie, mother to Ragnar and Sefi, an Obsidian

SEFI THE QUIET Warlord of the Valkyrie, daughter to Alia, sister to Ragnar

ORION XE AQUARIII Ship captain, a Blue

Sons of Ares

DARROW OF LYKOS/REAPER Former lancer of House Augustus, a Red

SEVRO AU BARCA/GOBLIN Howler, a Gold

RAGNAR VOLARUS New Howler, an Obsidian

DANCER Ares lieutenant, a Red

MICKEY Carver, a Violet

I rise into darkness, away from the garden they watered with the blood of my friends. The Golden man who killed my wife lies dead beside me on the cold metal deck, life snuffed out by his own son's hand.

Autumn wind whips my hair. The ship rumbles beneath. In the distance, friction flames shred the night with brilliant orange. The Telemanses descending from orbit to rescue me. Better that they do not. Better to let the darkness have me and allow the vultures to squabble over my paralyzed body.

My enemy's voices echo behind me. Towering demons with the faces of angels. The smallest of them bends. Stroking my head as he looks down at his dead father.

"This is always how the story would end," he says to me. "Not with your screams. Not with your rage. But with your silence."

Roque, my betrayer, sits in the corner. He was my friend. Heart too kind for his Color. Now he turns his head and I see his tears. But they are not for me. They are for what he has lost. For the ones I have taken from him.

"No Ares to save you. No Mustang to love you. You are alone, Darrow." The Jackal's eyes are distant and quiet. "Like me." He lifts up a black eyeless mask with a muzzle on it and straps it to my face. Darkening my sight. "This is how it ends."

To break me, he has slain those I love.

But there is hope in those still living. In Sevro. In Ragnar and Dancer. I think of all my people bound in darkness. Of all the Colors on all the worlds, shackled and chained so that Gold might rule, and I feel the rage burn across the dark hollow he has carved in my soul. I am not alone. I am not his victim.

So let him do his worst. I am the Reaper.

I know how to suffer.

I know the darkness.

This is *not* how it ends.

PART I



THORNS

Per aspera ad astra

1



ONLY THE DARK

Deep in darkness, far from warmth and sun and moons, I lie, quiet as the stone that surrounds me, imprisoning my hunched body in a dreadful womb. I cannot stand. Cannot stretch. I can only curl in a ball, a withered fossil of the man that was. Hands cuffed behind my back. Naked on cold rock.

All alone with the dark.

It seems months, years, millennia since my knees have unbent, since my spine has straightened from its crooked pose. The ache is madness. My joints fuse like rusted iron. How much time has passed since I saw my Golden friends bleeding out into the grass? Since I felt gentle Roque kiss my cheek as he broke my heart?

Time is no river.

Not here.

In this tomb, time is the stone. It is the darkness, permanent and unyielding, its only measure the twin pendulums of life—breath and the beating of my heart.

In. *Buh...bump. Buh...bump.*

Out. *Buh...bump. Buh...bump.*

In. *Buh...bump. Buh...bump.*

And forever it repeats. Until...Until when? Until I die of old age? Until I crush my skull against the stone? Until I gnaw out the tubes the Yellows threaded into my lower gut to force nutrients in and wastes out?

Or until you go mad?

“No.” I grind my teeth.

Yessssss.

“It’s only the dark.” I breathe in. Calm myself. Touch the walls in my soothing pattern. Back, fingers, tailbone, heels, toes, knees, head. Repeat. A dozen times. A hundred. Why not be sure? Make it a thousand.

Yes. I’m alone.

I would have thought there to be worse fates than this, but now I know there are none. Man is no island. We need those who love us. We need those who hate us. We need others to tether us to life, to give us a reason to live, to feel. All I have is the darkness. Sometimes I scream. Sometimes I laugh during the night, during the day. Who knows now? I laugh to pass the time, to exhaust the calories the Jackal gives me and make my body shiver into sleep.

I weep too. I hum. I whistle.

I listen to voices above. Coming to me from the endless sea of darkness. And attending them is the maddening clatter of chains and bones, vibrating through my prison walls. All so close, yet a thousand kilometers away, as if a whole world existed just beyond the darkness and I cannot see it, cannot touch it, taste it, feel it, or pierce that veil to belong to the world once again. I am imprisoned in solitude.

I hear the voices now. The chains and bones trickling through my prison.

Are the voices mine?

I laugh at the idea.

I curse.

I plot. *Kill.*

Slaughter. Gouge. Rip. Burn.

I beg. I hallucinate. I bargain.

I whimper prayers to Eo, happy she was spared a fate like this.

She’s not listening.

I sing childhood ballads and recite *Dying Earth*, *The Lamplighter*, the *Ramayana*, *The Odyssey* in Greek and Latin, then in the lost languages of Arabic, English, Chinese, and German, pulling from memories of dataDrops Matteo gave me when I was barely more than a boy. Seeking strength from the wayward Argive who only wished to find his way home.

You forget what he did.

Odysseus was a hero. He broke the walls of Troy with his wooden horse. Like I broke the Bellona armies in the Iron Rain over Mars.

And then...

“No,” I snap. “Quiet.”

...men entered Troy. Found mothers. Found children. Guess what they did?

“Shut up!”

You know what they did. Bone. Sweat. Flesh. Ash. Weeping. Blood.

The darkness cackles with glee.

Reaper, Reaper, Reaper...All deeds that last are painted in blood.

Am I asleep? Am I awake? I’ve lost my way. Everything bleeding together, drowning me in visions and whispers and sounds. Again and again I jerk Eo’s fragile little ankles. Break Julian’s face. Hear Pax and Quinn and Tactus and Lorn and Victra sigh their last. So much pain. And for what? To fail my wife. To fail my people.

And fail Ares. Fail your friends.

How many are even left?

Sevro? Ragnar?

Mustang?

Mustang. What if she knows you’re here...What if she doesn’t care...And why would she? You who betrayed. You who lied. You who used her mind. Her body. Her blood. You showed her your true face and she ran. What if it was her? What if she betrayed you? Could you love her then?

“Shut up!” I scream at myself, at the darkness.

Don’t think of her. Don’t think of her.

Why ever not? You miss her.

A vision of her is spawned in the darkness like so many before it—a girl riding away from me across a field of green, twisting in her saddle and laughing for me to follow. Hair rippling as would summer hay fluttering from a farmer’s wagon.

You crave her. You love her. The Golden girl. Forget that Red bitch.

“No.” I slam my head against the wall. “It’s only the dark,” I whisper. Only the dark playing tricks on my mind. But still I try to forget Mustang, Eo. There is no world beyond this place. I cannot miss what does not exist.

Warm blood trickles down my forehead from old scabs, now freshly broken. It drips off my nose. I extend my tongue, probing the cold stone till I find the drops. Savor the salt, the Martian iron. Slowly. Slowly. Let the novelty of sensation last. Let the flavor linger and remind me I am a man. A Red of Lykos. A Helldiver.

No. You are not. You are nothing. Your wife abandoned you and stole your child. Your whore turned from you. You were not good enough. You were too proud. Too stupid. Too wicked. Now, you are forgotten.

Am I?

When last I saw the Golden girl, I was on my knees beside Ragnar in the tunnels of Lykos, asking Mustang to betray her own people and live for more. I knew that if she chose to join us, Eo’s dream would blossom. A better world was at our fingertips. Instead, she left. Could she forget me? Has her love for me left her?

She only loved your mask.

“It’s only the dark. Only the dark. Only the dark,” I mumble faster and faster.

I should not be here.

I should be dead. After the death of Lorn, I was to be given to Octavia so her Carvers could dissect me to discover the secrets of how I became Gold. To see if there could be others like me. But the Jackal made a bargain. Kept me for his own. He tortured me in his Attica estate, asking about the Sons of Ares, about Lykos and my family. Never telling me how he discovered my secret. I begged him to end my life.

In the end, he gave me stone.

“When all is lost, honor demands death,” Roque once told me. “It is a noble end.” But what would a rich poet know of death? The poor know death. Slaves know death. But even as I yearn for it, I fear it. Because the more I see of this cruel world, the less I believe it ends in some pleasant fiction.

The Vale is not real.

It’s a lie told by mothers and fathers to give their starving children a reason for the horror. There is no reason. Eo is gone. She never watched me fight for her dream. She did not care what fate I made at the Institute or if I loved Mustang, because the day she died, she became nothing. There is nothing but this world. It is our beginning and our end. Our one chance at joy before the dark.

Yes. But you don’t have to end. You can escape this place, the darkness whispers to me. Say the words. Say them. You know the way.

It is right. I do.

“All you must say is ‘I am broken,’ and this will all end,” the Jackal said long ago, before he lowered me into this hell. “I will put you in a lovely estate for the rest of your days and send you warm, beautiful Pinks and food enough to make you fatter than the Ash Lord. But the words carry a price.”

Worth it. Save yourself. No one else will.

“That price, dear Reaper, is your family.”

The family he seized from Lykos with his lurchers and now keeps in his prison in the bowels of his Attica fortress. Never letting me see them. Never letting me tell them I love them, and that I’m sorry I was not strong enough to protect them.

“I will feed them to the prisoners of this fortress,” he said. “These men and women you think should rule instead of Gold. Once you see the animal in man, you will know that I am right and you are wrong. Gold must rule.”

Let them go, the darkness says. The sacrifice is practical. It is wise.

“No...I won’t...”

Your mother would want you to live.

Not at that price.

What man could grasp a mother’s love? Live. For her. For Eo.

Could she want that? Is the darkness right? After all, I'm important. Eo said so. Ares said so; he chose me. Me of all the Reds. I can break the chains. I can live for more. It's not selfish for me to escape this prison. In the grand scheme of things, it is selfless.

Yes. Selfless, really...

Mother would beg me to make this sacrifice. Kieran would understand. So would my sister. I can save our people. Eo's dream must be made real, no matter the cost. It's my responsibility to persevere. It is my right.

Say the words.

I slam my head into the stone and scream at the darkness to go away. It cannot trick me. It cannot break me.

Didn't you know? All men break.

Its high cackle mocks me, stretching forever.

And I know it is right. All men break. I did already under his torture. I told him that I was from Lykos. Where he could find my family. But there is a way out, to honor what I am. What Eo loved. To silence the voices.

"Roque, you were right," I whisper. "You were right." I just want to be home. To be gone from here. But I can't have that. All that's left, the only honorable path for me, is death. Before I betray even more of who I am.

Death is the way out.

Don't be a fool. Stop. Stop.

I lurch my head forward into the wall harder than before. Not to punish, but to kill. To end myself. If there is no pleasant end to this world, then nothingness will suffice. But if there is a Vale beyond this plane, I will find it. I'm coming, Eo. At last, I am on my way. "I love you."

No. No. No. No. No.

I crash my skull again into stone. Heat pours down my face. Sparks of pain dance in the black. The darkness wails at me, but I do not stop.

If this is the end, I will rage toward it.

But as I pull back my head to deliver one last great blow, existence groans. Rumbling like an earthquake. Not the darkness. Something beyond. Something in the stone itself, growing louder and deeper above me, till the darkness cracks and a blazing sword of light slashes down.