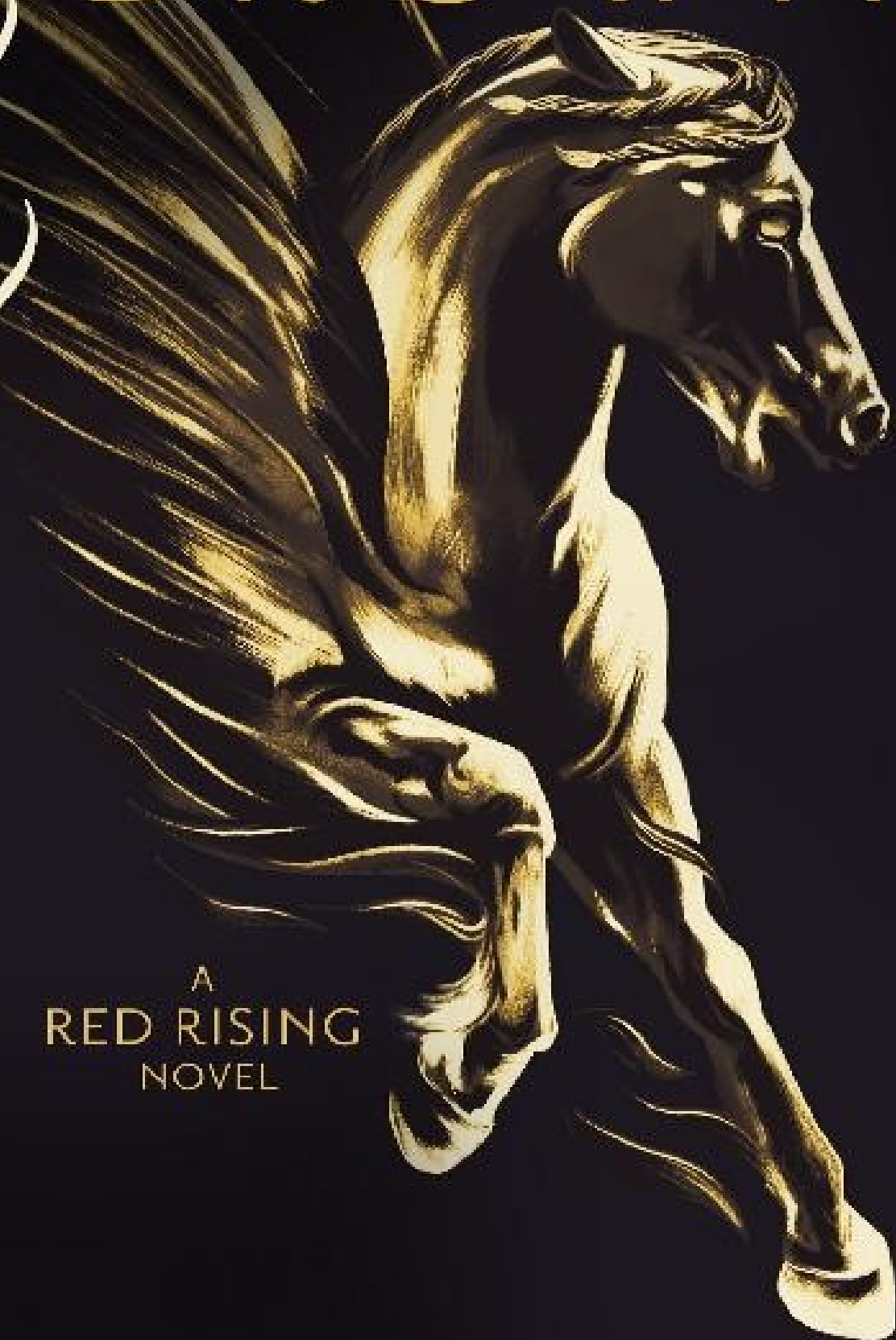


#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PIERCE
BROWN

LIGHT BRINGER

A
RED RISING
NOVEL



LIGHT BRINGER

PIERCE BROWN



NEW YORK

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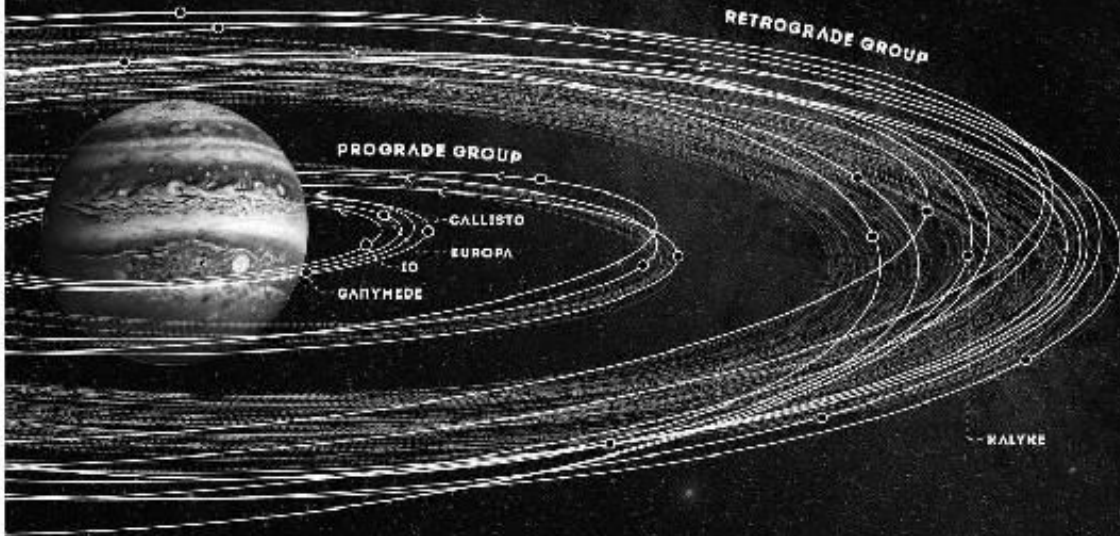
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THE JOVIAN SYSTEM
KNOWN ORBITAL OBJECTS: 121

In the 100th year of the Solar War
Commissioned by Governor Virginia
Angeris, 3517 CE

○ MOONS



THE MOON IO
ORBITAL RADIUS 422,000 KM

In the twelfth year of the Solar War
Commissioned by Sovereign Virginia
Augustine, 732 ZCC



THE MOON EUROPA
ORBITAL RADIUS 670,900 KM

In the twelfth year of the Solar War
Commissioned by Sovereign Virginia
Augustine, 700 PCC



DRAMATIS PERSONAE

THE SOLAR REPUBLIC

DARROW OF LYKOS/THE REAPER ArchImperator of the Solar Republic, husband to Virginia, a Red

VIRGINIA AUGUSTUS/MUSTANG Reigning Sovereign of the Solar Republic, wife to Darrow, Primus of House Augustus, sister to the Jackal of Mars, a Gold

PAX AUGUSTUS Son of Darrow and Virginia, a Gold

DIO OF LYKOS Sister to Eo, wife to Kieran of Lykos and mother of Rhonna, a Red

KIERAN OF LYKOS Brother to Darrow, ArchGovernor of Mars, a Red

RHONNA OF LYKOS Niece of Darrow, daughter of Kieran, Howler lancer, Pup Two, a Red, lost in the fall of Heliopolis

DEANNA OF LYKOS Mother to Darrow, a Red

SEVRO BARCA/THE GOBLIN Imperator of the Republic, husband to Victra, Howler, a Gold

VICTRA BARCA Wife to Sevro, nee Victra au Julii, a Gold

ELECTRA BARCA Daughter of Sevro and Victra, a Gold

ULYSSES BARCA Son of Sevro and Victra, killed by Harmony and the Red Hand

DANCER/SENATOR O'FARAN Senator, former Sons of Ares lieutenant, Tribune of the Red bloc, a Red, killed on the Day of Red Doves

KAVAX TELEMANUS Primus of House Telemachus, client of House Augustus, a Gold

NIOBE TELEMANUS Wife to Kavax, client of House Augustus, a Gold

DAXO TELEMANUS Heir of House Telemachus, son of Kavax and Niobe, senator, Tribune of the Gold bloc, a Gold, killed by Lilath au Faran

THRAXA TELEMANUS Praetor of the Free Legions, daughter of Kavax and Niobe, Howler, a Gold

ALEXANDAR ARCOS Eldest grandson of Lorn au Arcos, heir to House Arcos, allied to House Augustus, lancer, Pup One, a Gold, killed by Lysander au Lune

LORN AU ARCOS Former Rage Knight, head of House Arcos, mentor to Darrow of Lykos, a Gold, killed by Lilath au Faran and Adrius au Augustus

CADUS HARNASSUS Imperator of the Republic, second in command of the Free Legions, engineer, an Orange

ORION AQUARIUS Navarch of the Republic, Imperator of the White Fleet, a Blue, killed in Operation Tartarus

ORO SCULPTURUS Navarch of the Republic, leader of Phobos's astral defense, a Blue

COLLOWAY CHAR A pilot, reigning kill-leader of the Republic Navy, Howler, a Blue

HOLIDAY NAKAMURA Dux of Virginia's Lionguard, sister to Trigg, client of House Augustus, Centurion of the Pegasus Legion, a Gray

QUICKSILVER/REGULUS SUN Richest man in the Republic, head of Sun Industries, a Silver

MATTEO Husband to Regulus Sun, a Pink

THEODORA Leader of the Splinter operatives, client of House Augustus, a Pink Rose, executed by the Vox Populi
CLOWN Howler, client of House Barca, a Gold
PEBBLE Howler, client of House Barca, a Gold
MIN-MIN Howler, sniper and munitions expert, client of House Barca, a Red, killed by the Abomination
SCREWFACE Howler, client of House Augustus, a Gold
CASSIUS BELLONA Son of Julia au Bellona, former Olympic Knight, former mentor to Lysander au Lune, a Gold

THE SOCIETY

ATALANTIA AU GRIMMUS Dictator of the Society, daughter of the Ash Lord Magnus au Grimmus, sister to Aja and Moira, former client of House Lune, a Gold
LYSANDER AU LUNE Grandson of former Sovereign Octavia, heir to House Lune, former patron of House Grimmus, a Gold
ATLAS AU RAA/THE FEAR KNIGHT Brother to Romulus au Raa, Legate of the Zero Legion (“the Gorgons”), former ward of House Lune, client of House Grimmus, a Gold
AJAX AU GRIMMUS/THE STORM KNIGHT Son of Aja au Grimmus and Atlas au Raa, heir of House Grimmus, Legate of the Iron Leopards, a Gold
KALINDORA AU SAN/THE LOVE KNIGHT Olympic Knight, aunt to Alexandar au Arcos, client of House Grimmus, a Gold, killed by Darrow
JULIA AU BELLONA Cassius’s estranged mother and Darrow’s enemy, Primus of the House Bellona remnant, Princeps Senatus of the Two Hundred, a Gold
PALLAS AU GRECCA Captain of the Bellona chariot team, Bellona client, a Gold
SCORPIO AU VOTUM Primus of House Votum, a Gold
CICERO AU VOTUM Heir to House Votum, Legate of the Scorpion Legion, a Gold
HORATIA AU VOTUM Sister to Cicero au Votum, member of the Reformer bloc in the Two Hundred, a Gold
CIPIO AU FALTHE Primus of House Falthe (the purity-obsessed war masters of Earth), a Gold
ASMODEUS AU CARTHII Primus of House Carthii (the shipbuilders of Venus), a Gold
VALERIA AU CARTHII Daughter of Asmodeus au Carthii, and one of his many heirs, a Gold
RHONE TI FLAVINIUS Dux of House Lune, leader of Legio XIII Dracones (the Praetorian Guard), a Gray
DEMETRIUS TI INTERIMO Lunese, archCenturion of Legio XIII Dracones, a Gray
MARKUS TI LACRIMA Lunese, centurion of Legio XIII Dracones, a Gray
DRUSILLA TI PISTRIS Lunese, decurion of Legio XIII Dracones, a Gray
KYBER TI UMBRA Lunese, legionnaire of Legio XIII Dracones, whisper to Lysander au Lune, a Gray
MAGNUS AU GRIMMUS/THE ASH LORD Former ArchImperator to Octavia au Lune, the Burner of Rhea, a Gold, killed by the Howlers and Apollonius au Valii-Rath
OCTAVIA AU LUNE Former Sovereign of the Society, grandmother to Lysander, a Gold, killed by Darrow
AJA AU GRIMMUS Daughter of Ash Lord Magnus au Grimmus, a Gold, killed by Sevro, Cassius, Virginia, and Darrow
GLIRASTES THE MASTER MAKER Architect and inventor, an Orange
EXETER Valet to Glirastes, a Brown
PYTHA XE VIRGUS Captain of the *Lightbringer*, former co-pilot of the *Archimedes*, a Blue

THE RIM DOMINION

DIDO AU RAA Co-consul of the Rim Dominion, wife to former Sovereign of the Rim Dominion Romulus au Raa, née Dido au Saud, a Gold

DIOMEDES AU RAA/THE STORM KNIGHT Son of Romulus and Dido, Taxiarchos of the Lightning Phalanx, a Gold

SERAPHINA AU RAA Daughter of Romulus and Dido, Lochagos of the Eleventh Dustwalkers, a Gold, killed in battle

HELIOS AU LUX Co-consul of the Rim Dominion, with Dido, former Truth Knight, a Gold

ROMULUS AU RAA/THE LORD OF THE DUST Former Primus of House Raa, former Sovereign of the Rim Dominion, a Gold, killed by ceremonial suicide

GAIA AU RAA Mother to Romulus au Raa and grandmother to Diomedes and Thalia, a Gold

THALIA AU RAA Younger sister of Diomedes, a Gold

VELA AU RAA Sister of Atlas and Romulus, a Legate, a Gold

GRECCA AU CODOVAN Lady of Ganymede, a Gold

THE OBSIDIAN

SEFI THE QUIET Queen of the Obsidian, leader of the Valkyrie, sister to Ragnar Volarus, an Obsidian, killed by Volsung Fá

VALDIR THE UNSHORN Warlord and royal concubine of Sefi, imprisoned for treason against the Republic, an Obsidian

RAGNAR VOLARUS Former leader of the Obsidian, Howler, an Obsidian, killed by Aja au Grimmus

VOLSUNG FÁ King of the Obsidian, father of Sefi, grandfather of Volga Fjorgan, once known as Vagnar Hefga, an Obsidian

VOLGA FJORGAN Daughter of Ragnar, former colleague of Ephraim ti Horn, an Obsidian

UR THE EATER OF JOY Named Spear of the Throne of Ultima Thule, an Obsidian

SKARDE OLSGUR Jarl of the Volk, tribe of the Blood Ram, an Obsidian

SIGURD OLSGUR Son of Skarde, brave of the Blood Ram

OTHER CHARACTERS

AURAE A Raa hetaera and companion to Cassius, a Pink

APOLLONIUS AU VALII-RATH/THE MINOTAUR Heir to House Valii-Rath, verbose, a Gold

THARSUS AU RATH Brother to Apollonius au Valii-Rath, a Gold

VORKIAN TI HADRIANA Centurion in the Rath house legions, a Gray

LYRIA OF LAGALOS Gamma from Mars, client of House Telemachus, a Red

LIAM OF LAGALOS Nephew of Lyria, client of House Telemachus, a Red

CHEON Chiliarch of the Black Owls, a Daughter of Athena, a Red

HARMONY Leader of the Red Hand, former Sons of Ares lieutenant, a Red, killed by Victra

FIGMENT Freelancer, a Brown, dead

FITCHNER AU BARCA/ARES Former leader of the Sons of Ares, Sevro's father, a Gold, killed by Cassius au Bellona

EPHRAIM TI HORN Freelancer, former member of the Sons of Ares, husband to Trigg ti Nakamura, a Gray, killed by Volsung Fá

PART I

CIRCUS

Yea, and if some god shall wreck me in the wine-dark deep, even
so I will endure...For already have I suffered full much, and
much have I toiled in perils of waves and war. Let this be added
to the tale of those.

—HOMER

DARROW

Castaway

OUR SUN FLOATS IN darkness attended by moons made of trash.

Long ago, when the planets were reshaped by mankind, the detritus of their terraforming operations was fused together into moon-sized spheres by orbital compactors and shoved out toward Sol. Grippled by the gravity of her mass, most of these trash moons have completed their centuries-long funeral march into the nuclear fires of the sun, but several hundred laggards still remain circling their eventual demise.

Tethered to the barren landscape of a forgotten trash moon once catalogued as Marcher-1632, a shipwrecked corvette named the *Archimedes* hides in the shadow cast by a waste escarpment a kilometer high. Martian slaves-turned-soldiers-turned-castaways crawl over the ship. Our welding torches flare against the hull. Our space suits are stinking bogs. We are marooned two hundred million kilometers from home, and I stew in sweat, nausea, and discontent.

That bloodydamn Bellona. That arrogant Peerless shit.

I'm going to break his knee if I ever see him again. It should be him on this hull. I'd tell him to his face, but he took the only relic in the base's hangar that could still fly and stole off with Aurae, his Pink accomplice, while I slept. He recorded a little message telling me to tend my wounds, and left his mess behind—his crippled ship—for us to repair. The bastard.

More than a decade separated from Olympia's airy sepulchres has done little to dim Cassius's spectacular talent for condescension. Worst of all, in typical Cassius fashion, he's taking his damn time. Six weeks he's been gone on a mission to Starhold—an ecliptic trade post between the orbits of Mercury and Venus—to secure us the helium we need for the *Archimedes*. While here I am: either languishing in the old Sons of Ares base that's hidden in the belly of the trash moon or latched onto the side of his ship like an industrious barnacle welding the days away, knowing time is running out.

Hades, it may already have run out.

Cut off from communication with the outside world, I have no way of knowing the course of the war I began. No way of knowing if Virginia and Victra have managed to weather the united power of the Golds of the Rim and the Core. No way of knowing if Sefi has come back to the Republic or if Lysander has used my defeat on Mercury as a ladder to the Morning Chair.

No way of knowing if the enemy has already burned Mars, my family, my home.

I think of Mars and her highland moors and whispering woods...

No. Virginia told me to endure.

I've been imprisoned before. I know I must force away the thoughts of home before they make debris of me. Not for the first time, I try to seek refuge in anger. I want a fight. I need a fight. It's how I'm made—to struggle in eternal vain. But instead of a fight, instead of the forward motion that soothes my restless nature, all I get is the monotone hum of generators and the days congealing together, a litany of endless routine.

I started this war. Others are finishing it. I must escape. Atalantia must die. Atlas must die. Lysander must die. I picture them each groveling before me, my ears deaf, my hand choking the life from them as blood swells in their eyes.

The violent fantasies do nothing to ease my desolation. The anger that once made planets tremble is now toothless. Shorn of my myth by my failure, shorn of my army by my mistakes, shorn of my friends and family by the demands I made on them, I know hate will not return what I have lost or repair what I have broken.

The sun has raged for 4.6 billion years. I have raged for sixteen. No surprise, the sun has more fuel to spare. Even my anger at Cassius feels performative. I can't sustain it anymore, can't feed this endless anger at myself and everyone. Not after what I have done.

I escaped Mercury with my life, but it cost me my Free Legions and what remained of my self-respect. I led children of Mars to a planet far from home promising we could finish the war, only to abandon them to the enemy to save my own hide. My heart is buried with my army in those sands. But my body trudges on, as it does, no matter the ruin it leaves in its wake.

It's been a backward slide since I fled Mercury with my small band of survivors. Cassius rescued barely two hundred of us from Heliopolis, but it was not a clean escape. Harried by Grimmus torchShips, we missed our rendezvous with the Telemachus fleet. Missed our chance home. We barely managed to limp into the base on the Marcher before Cassius took off.

The silence is broken by the chatter of the other welders. One tells a joke. It's funny enough for me to stop flagellating myself. I listen to the other voices. They remind me of the drillboys chattering in the tunnel above my clawDrill back in Lykos. Their bad jokes soothe me, and my mind wanders to the tattered book *Aurae* left in the helmet of my space suit before she slipped off with Cassius.

The note *Aurae* left with it said that the book was her path through the darkness of her servitude in the Rim. I was angry after *Aurae* and Cassius left and nearly used the book as toilet paper. But I've always felt Pinks to be the most oppressed of the Colors, their plight imbuing some of them with preternatural internal strength. Evey and Theodora taught me that. So, more out of respect for them than *Aurae*, I read the first page. I grew annoyed by the opacity of the writing. It read like a divination book, repeating conventional wisdom in esoteric metaphors. Still, I recall a few lines that seem apt.

The path is made of many stones that look all the same. When you trod upon evil, do not rest or look down because goodness is only a step away. The next may bring ruin, the next joy, but these stones are not your destination, they are but your journey to the path's end.

I mull that over as I weld a new panel onto the hull. Maybe this is just a stepping stone. Maybe this place isn't perdition. Maybe it is a gift.

Truth is I should have died on Mercury. Truth is everything after that hell is a gift, even this place. It may be tedious repairing the antique fifty-meter corvette with only hand tools, but labor gives a man purpose, I suppose. Each panel welded a step forward. Each step forward takes me closer to my family. So long as Cassius returns with the helium we need for the reactor, and so long as Harnassus actually fixes the reactor, we will go home.

Maybe I'll read another page tonight.

But I'm a stubborn bastard, so maybe not.

My com crackles. "*Welder twenty-three, do you register?*" I holster my torch and ease back on my security line. "*Welder twenty-three. Ignore your existential dread for a moment and do reply...*"

"Welder twenty-three registers. What's what, Thraxa. That rash acting up again?"

Unable to find any suits wide enough for her prodigious thighs, Thraxa's stuck inside the base. Daily, the bellicose woman grumbles that she would have preferred the honorable suicide she intended to commit in Heliopolis to the daily monotony of shift management.

"*Sun's on its way in thirty. Be a dear and rein your squad in before you boil in your suits.*"

I glance over my shoulder to the eastern curve of the trash moon. "A little early, no?"

"*Archimedes's mass is speeding up the moon's rotation. We all know you skipped physics, but trust me on this one or by tomorrow your prick will look like a hydra. You're rad heavy as is.*"

"We can finish the hull this shift," I say.

"*Next shift can finish. Aren't going anywhere without helium and the reactor fixed anyway. Call it.*"

With a grumble, I agree and call my crew to end shift. The welders scurry along their safety lines back to the base as I count heads. When the last is in, I pull myself down the hull, push toward the base, and ease down to the airlock.

At the rim of the airlock, I pause and do something I haven't done in all my welding shifts. I take the time to look out over the craggy horizon. A thin scythe of sunlight carves around the trash moon. It warps the mottled surface outward with heat, inverting expansion calderas until dust and toxic gas spew. The dust and gas coalesce around a scarp of green-black plastic before stretching out behind the moon to form a tail of shimmering particles.

I have seen things a Red miner was never meant to see—unspeakable horrors, impossible beauty. Things that would make the tail of particles seem commonplace. But today I feel a little different. A little more willing to see there's beauty here on this stepping stone. Maybe it's the book. Maybe it's the radiation. Whatever it is, I feel like today I have enough strength to look the other way, past the shadowy shoulder of the *Archimedes* to an expanse of stars in the distance where my eyes settle on a dim, ruddy light.

Home.

Space is empty and silent but my memory is full and rich with the sounds of home. I close my eyes and hear the whisper of the godTrees, the murmur of the Thermic Sea, the beating of griffin wings, Victra shouting at Sophocles, Sevro cackling at his girls, the clink and whir of Pax fiddling around in the garage, the voice of my wife.

For a perfect moment I see the promised dawn, my return to Mars, my home. Then it is gone. The moon has turned toward the sun. The light blazes through my eyelids until it is too

much even for my golden eyes to bear. It is time to go down.

DARROW

The Book

IF MERCURY WAS A perpetual frontal assault on the nerves, Marcher-1632 is a slow siege on the mind.

The old Sons of Ares base is a claustrophobic, spartan affair. Built inside the Marcher to give early Sons raiders a hidden harbor from which to harass Venusian slavers, the base was abandoned eleven years ago when its garrison joined my fleet in our desperate attack on Luna. Eight months ago, we limped in to find the halls cold and in vacuum. By restarting the base's solar-powered generator we reestablished habitability. We found water stores, calories when we most needed them. But temperatures and gravity remain low, and the hostile radiation beyond the lead-lined walls makes us feel besieged. We look it. We are skinny, pale despite the sun-scars of Mercury on our faces. Nearly all of us are bald and those who can wear beards in remembrance of Ragnar.

Removed from the war, blind to the movements of friends and enemies, cut off from all communication from home, worry is our incessant refrain and routine our only salvation.

I worry over my son as I de-radiate with my crew in the flush, clutching the gravBike key Pax gave me before I left Luna as I used to clutch Eo's wedding band in the Lykos flush. I worry for Virginia as I slump through the narrow, drill-carved halls to the mess. I worry over Sevro—lost when Luna fell to the Vox—as I slurp down the freeze-dried amino mush. The others, as bald as I am, worry to either side. About their own loves. Homes. Lost time. Lost worlds. Together, we make a sea of worry under the dim chemical lights. We try to hide that worry from each other like it's something dark and secret and shameful. Like all lost soldiers, my survivors are tired and quiet except when they are grotesque, flippant, or profane. Sincerity is found only in the awkward silences or the quiet moments when Aerae's lyre fills the mess with songs of the Rim that somehow remind us of our own homes.

Not for the first time, I miss her songs. It's not been the same since she and Cassius slipped away.

I eat quickly, clean my tray, say good night to my troops, and resist the urge to condescend with a joke to get a smile. They know I left their friends to die for my mistakes. And they know I will work them half to death again next cycle. That's my job. If you don't use a machine, it breaks down. Like the Sons of Ares when we phased them in to the Republic military, like this base. But if something is used too much, it breaks apart, like

Orion on Mercury. Like Sevro after Venus. Leadership is a tightrope, especially when you're losing.

Checking in at the base's machine shop to get a progress report from Harnassus, I find the Orange Imperator hunched over parts from the *Archimedes's* reactor with a gaggle of mechanics. He is a simian-shaped man with big knuckles and a drinker's nose. His beard is more prolific than my own and shot through with gray. Spanners and auto-drivers rattle in the background as he comes to speak with me.

"Cadus."

"Darrow. Hear the hull's ready to go," he says.

"Nearabout. Third shift gets the honors of finishing. Won't take them half an hour. You're sure the plating will still be sensor resistant? It'll be stealth that gets us home."

"In theory it will be. So long as we didn't dilute the plating too much thinning it out," he says. "We're on track to finish right behind you."

I brighten. "Really? That test run didn't seem too prime—"

"That's because you're not an engineer. Assuming we get the helium we need, the *Archimedes* will be ready to fly when Bellona returns. If Bellona's not being tortured in a Grimmus sorrow sphere, that is."

"You might be the only one who thinks he intends to come back," I say with a glance for his men.

He shrugs. "We wouldn't be around to doubt him now if he didn't save us on Mercury. But I am worried he is bedblind. We should be warier about that Pink of his."

"Not that it's any of our business, but I don't think they're sleeping together," I say.

He's shocked. "Really? The man's utterly besotted."

"I don't think he has much say in the matter," I reply.

Cassius told me the tale of his escape from the Rim after we landed on the Marcher. He'd been a prisoner of the Rim with Lysander and forced into a series of unfair duels on Io. Impressed by Cassius, Diomedes au Raa falsified his death to protect him after he'd survived the duels. Diomedes hid Cassius in his estate on nearby Europa after accepting his parole—a promise not to flee until the war was done. Aurae, a hetaera of House Raa, helped Cassius escape Diomedes's estate on the *Archimedes*. She claimed to be a sympathizer of the Republic. Together they rushed back to the Core to warn the Republic of the Rim's plan to enter the war. They were too late. She's served as Cassius's crewmember ever since.

"Well even if they're not shagging, just because she looks like a dryad, sings like a Siren, talks like an oracle, and has a bloodydamn alibi doesn't mean she ain't Krypteia."

"If she were Rim intelligence, we'd already be dead," I say. Calling the Krypteia "Rim intelligence" is a compliment. Intelligence work is part of their charge, certainly. But the Krypteia's most insidious duty is maintaining the hierarchy in the Dominion at all costs.

"Unless she's leading the Krypteia to us right now. You have to admit: even for a Raa hetaera, she does have a diverse collection of skills. Medical. Engineering. Not exactly the domains of a courtesan."

My eyes narrow. "You've been talking to Screwface, haven't you?"

He grimaces. "Man does like to talk these days. Sows doubt like it's his job. Might do for you to check in on him?"

I don't know if I have anything left to say that will pull Screw from his depression. A thought comes to me. Maybe he'll be more receptive to Aurae's book than I am. He's a reader, Screw. I clap Harnassus on the shoulder and head for the door. I call back, "Cadus, if you thought Aurae was Krypteia, why'd you make her a lyre?"

Before she left with Cassius, Aurae would play her lyre and sing the songs of her spheres to the troops after dinner. Harnassus never missed a performance.

"It was for the troops," he lies with a blush.

—

I tell myself I'm checking on Screwface to keep him straight, but it's my own loneliness that inspires the visit. Of all my survivors, he is the only one who shares memories of the Institute. I just want a spark of our days of glory from an old member of my pack.

Taking two thermoses of the diluted caf from the processor, I grab my training pack and Aurae's book from my room and make my way through the base's upper labyrinth toward the coms chamber. I find Screw bathed in computer screens under thermal blankets next to his space heater. He looks more like an animated stack of laundry than the legend he is. It breaks my heart.

Screwface is a man uncelebrated by the public, because his sacrifices have always been in the shadows. Much to his chagrin. A lover of the high life, he envies the fame of Colloway Char or Sevro. When I met him at the Institute, he was ugly, lazy, and a freeloader. He is still a freeloader and would rather amputate his own testicles than pay for a drink. But with three years behind enemy lines and after being carved by Mickey and given a new identity by Theodora to infiltrate the Ash Legions, no one could describe him as lazy.

At first, he was delighted by his deep cover mission. Chronically insecure, when he emerged from Mickey's recovery suite, broad shouldered, ruggedly Roman in the face, with a chin almost as fine and just a little larger than Cassius's, I'd never seen a man finally so at home in his own skin.

"Fit, mate. I look bloodydamn fit to slag an entire ballet troupe. Bellona, what? Ash Legions here I come," he'd said, striking an Olympian pose. He was nude. Epicly proportioned. Theodora even applauded.

But now? Now Screwface is ugly again, and he hates it. When Heliopolis fell, he was scalped and lost a leg. He covers the livid scar that starts just above his eyebrows with a wool cap, but the base's stores lack prosthetics, so he's made do with a peg of plastic padded with packing foam against the stump.

My command has ruined the man. *Twice*. Bitterness seeps through his every word, but he was there for me in Heliopolis, before it fell. He helped pull me back from despair. So, I can stomach his bitterness. "Word from Bellona?" I ask, handing him the caf.

He doesn't thank me. "Oh, we're calling the Decapitator of Ares by his real name today?" He pouts. "Alas, no the Chin and the Siren are still wayward."

"Do you always have to bring that up?" I ask.

"Aw, come now. Yesterday's talk was so fun. You had many adjectives for the Feckless Quim. The Avian Turncloak. Even a few adverbs."

"I was—"

“Bitter and drunk?” he asks. “You’re all wrath when you’re bitter and drunk. Honestly, I think this war would be won if you were that way the whole time, but then I fear it’d just be you and me lording over an autarchy.” He chuckles at his rhyme, his lingo inverse to his birth, which was low. “Let’s be candid though, everyone’s been bitter about Bellona their entire life. Handed all the cards, wasn’t the Putrid Adonis?”

“And misplayed them all,” I offer.

“Except that dimpled chin. Oh, the dew-dappled valleys it’s explored. My kingdom to be a hair on that mentum...”

I resist glancing down at Screwface’s very dimpled chin. Unlike the rest of us, he still maintains a clean shave.

“Anything on the sensors?” I ask.

“Nil, oh bald and bearded liege.” He cups both his hands around the thermos for warmth. The nails of both fingers are bitten to nubs. “Radar and lidar are still slagged. Tried building some filters to strain the soup—you know all this.” He chews on a caf stick, swigs his coffee, and cocks his head back. “Routine may be your sanity, but you’re driving me mad.”

“You haven’t left this room in three days,” I say and nod to his slop bucket. “Your decor is starting to look very Sevro.”

He looks around. “No jade. No golden walls. No silk. I’ve got about zero in common with that deserter’s den.”

“Screw, you know he did what he thought was right.”

Screw spits on the ground. “I spent three years amongst Atalantia’s sociopaths on behalf of the Republic while he was sucking on the tit of Gold royalty. Look at my reward.” He removes his cap to show his mutilated scalp. “While we died, Sevro ran home. And I’m here waiting for that Pink to lead the Dustwalkers right to us.”

“She’s something all right, but she’s not Krypteia,” I say.

He frowns. “Then what is she?”

I think of Aurae’s skills, the book, the way she watches me like a judge sometimes. “A friend, I hope.”

“Let’s pray you’re right. Because they’re out there, hunting us. They’ll want to cut your head off for destroying the Dockyards of Ganymede. You and Victra. And Dustwalkers never stop till they find their mark.”

I share Screw’s respect for the Rim’s stalker squads, just not his agitated tenor. It’d be almost ironic if they found us and dragged me back to the Rim to pay for my sins. But it isn’t because of them or Aurae that Screw shits in a bucket for fear of abandoning the sensor station. Neither is it because of Ajax au Grimmus, who came closest to discovering us when his destroyer, *Panthera*, prowled within fifty thousand clicks of us five months back. Rightfully, Screw is only afraid of Fear himself.

I sympathize, because I am too.

“Atlas isn’t hunting us,” I say. He looks up at me like Pax would when I’d wake him from a bad dream. “Our trail’s cold. In relation to the System, we’re smaller than a zooplankton on a krill’s back in all the seas of all the worlds put together. Even if Atlas doesn’t think we’re dead, he won’t waste time looking.”

“Not when he knows where we want to go, you mean,” Screw murmurs. Maybe that was the wrong conclusion to lead him toward. “Shit, boss. Even if Bellona does come back with