

LBRIS

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books

BY PIERCE BROWN

Red Rising

Golden Son

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HODDER

Once upon a time, a man came from the sky and killed my wife. Beside him now, I walk on a mountain that floats over our world. Snow falls. Battlements of white stone and shimmering glass yawn out of the rock.

Around us swirls a chaos of greed. All the great Golds of Mars descend upon the Institute to lay claim to the best and brightest of our year. Their ships swarm the morning sky, cutting over a world of snow and smoking castles for Olympus, which I stormed only hours before.

“Take a last look,” he tells me as we near his shuttle. “All that came before was but a whisper of our world. When you leave this mountain, all bonds are broken, all oaths dust. You are not prepared. No one ever is.”

Across the crowd, I see Cassius with his father and siblings as they make their way to their shuttle. Their eyes burn at us over the white, and I remember the sound of his brother’s heart as it beat its last. A rough hand with bony fingers lays claim to my shoulder, clutching possessively.

Augustus stares at his enemies.

“Bellonas do not forgive or forget. They are many. But they cannot harm you.” His cold eyes peer down at me, his fresh prize. “For you belong to me, Darrow, and I protect what is mine.”

As do I.

For seven hundred years, my people have been enslaved without voice, without hope. Now I am their sword. And I do not forgive. I do not forget. So let him lead me onto his shuttle. Let him think he owns me. Let him welcome me into his house, so I might burn it down.

But then his daughter takes my hand, and I feel all the lies fall heavy on my shoulders. They say a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand. They made no mention of the heart.

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PART I



BOW

Hic sunt leones. "*Here be lions.*"

—NERO AU AUGUSTUS

1



WARLORDS

My silence thunders. I stand on the bridge of my starship, arm broken and held in a gelcast, ion burns still raw on my neck. I'm bloodydamn tired. My razor coils around my good right arm like a cold metal snake. Before me, space opens, vast and terrible. Small fragments of light prick the darkness, and primordial shadows move to block those stars on the fringes of my vision. Asteroids. They float slowly around my man-of-war, *Quietus*, as I search the blackness for my quarry.

"Win," my master told me. "Win as my children cannot, and you will bring honor to the name Augustus. Win at the Academy and you earn yourself a fleet." He likes dramatic repetition. It suits most statesmen.

He'd have me win for him, but I'd win for the Red girl with a dream bigger than she ever could be. I'd win so that he dies, and her message burns across the ages. Small order.

I am twenty. Tall and broad in the shoulders. My uniform, all sable, now wrinkled. Hair long and eyes Golden, bloodshot. Mustang once said I have a sharp face, with cheeks and nose seemingly carved from angry marble. I avoid mirrors myself. Better to forget the mask I wear,

the mask that bears the angled scar of the Golds who rule the worlds from Mercury to Pluto. I am of the Peerless Scarred. Cruellest and brightest of all humankind. But I miss the kindest of them. The one who asked me to stay as I bid her and Mars goodbye on her balcony almost a year ago. Mustang. I gave her a horse-crested gold ring as a parting gift, and she gave me a razor. Fitting.

The taste of her tears grows stale in memory. I have not heard from her since I left Mars. Worse, I have not heard from the Sons of Ares since I won at Mars's Institute more than two years ago. Dancer said he would contact me once I graduated, but I have been cast adrift among a sea of Golden faces.

This is so far from the future I imagined for myself as a boy. So far from the future I wanted to make for my people when I let the Sons carve me. I thought I would change the worlds. What young fool doesn't? Instead, I have been swallowed by the machine of this vast empire as it rumbles inexorably on.

At the Institute, they trained us to survive and conquer. Here at the Academy they taught us war. Now they test our fluency. I lead a fleet of warships against other Golds. We fight with dummy munitions and launch raiding parties from ship to ship in the way of Gold astral combat. No reason to break a ship that costs the gross yearly output of twenty cities when you can send leechCraft packed with Obsidians, Golds, and Grays to seize her vital organs and make her your prize.

Amid lessons of astral combat, our teachers hammered in the maxims of their race. Only the strong survive. Only the brilliant rule. And then they left and let us fend for ourselves, jumping asteroid to asteroid, searching for supplies, bases, hunting our fellow students till only two fleets remain.

I'm still playing games. This is just the deadliest yet.

"It's a trap," Roque says from my elbow. His hair is long, like mine, and his face soft as a woman's and placid as a philosopher's. Killing in space is different from killing on land. Roque is a prodigy at it. There's poetry to it, he says. Poetry to the motion of the spheres and the ships that sail between. His face fits with the Blues who crew these vessels—airy men and women who drift like wayward spirits through the metal halls, all logic and strict order.

"But it's not so elegant a trap as Karnus might think," he continues. "He knows we're eager to end the game, so he will wait on the other side. Force us into a choke point and release his missiles. Tried and true since the dawn of time."

Roque carefully points to the space between two huge asteroids, a narrow corridor we must travel if we wish to continue following Karnus's wounded ship.

"Everything's a damn trap." Tactus au Rath, rangy and careless, yawns. He leans his dangerous frame against the viewport and shoots a stim up his nose from the ring on his finger. He tosses the spent cartridge to the floor. "Karnus knows he's lost. He's just torturing us. Leading us on a little merry chase so we can't sleep. The selfish prick."

"You're such a little Pixie, always yapping and whining," Victra au Julii sneers from her place against the viewport. Her jagged hair hangs just past ears pierced with jade. Impetuous and cruel, but neither to a fault, she disdains makeup in favor of the scars she's earned through her twenty-seven years. There are many.

Her eyes are heavy, deeply set. Her sensual mouth wide, with lips shaped to purr insults. She looks more like her famous mother than her younger half sister, Antonia; but in her capacity for general mayhem she far outstrips both.

"Traps mean nothing," she declares. "His fleet has been dashed. He has but one ship. We've seven. How about we just bust his mouth?"

"Darrow has seven," Roque reminds her.

"Your pardon?" she asks, annoyed at the correction.

"Seven of Darrow's ships remain. You called them ours. They are not *ours*. He is Primus."

"Pedantic poet strikes again. The point is the same, my goodman."

"That we should be rash instead of prudent?" Roque asks.

"That it is seven against one. It would be embarrassing to let this drag out any longer. So, let's squish the Bellona thug like a cockroach with our sizable boot, fly back to base, take our just rewards from old Augustus, and go *play*." She twists her heel for emphasis.

"Here, here," Tactus agrees. "My kingdom for a gram of demon-Dust."

"That your fifth stimshot today, Tactus?" Roque asks.

“Yes! Thank you for noticing, Mommy dearest! But I grow weary of this military crank. I believe I desire Pearl clubs and copious amounts of respectable drugs.”

“You’re going to burn out.”

Tactus slaps his thigh. “Live fast. Die young. While you’re a boring old raisin, I’ll be a glorious memory of finer times and decadent days.”

Roque shakes his head. “One day, my wayward friend, you’re going to find someone you love who makes you laugh at the silly person you once were. You’ll have children. You’ll have an estate. And somehow you’ll learn there are more important things than drugs and Pinks.”

“By Jove.” Tactus stares at him in utter horror. “That sounds resolutely miserable.”

I peer at the tactical display, ignoring their banter.

The quarry we chase is Karnus au Bellona, the older brother of my former friend, Cassius au Bellona, and the boy I killed in the Passage, Julian au Bellona. Of that curly-haired family, Cassius is the favorite son. Julian was the kindest. And Karnus? My broken arm stands testament—he’s the monster they let out of their basement to kill things.

Since the Institute, my celebrity has grown. So when news reached the Violet gossip circuit that the ArchGovernor was finally sending me to further my studies, Karnus au Bellona and a few handpicked cousins were dispatched by Cassius’s mother to “study” as well. The family wants my heart on a plate. Quite literally. Only Augustus’s badge holds them back. To attack me is to attack him.

In the end, I could give a bloody piss about their vendetta or my master’s bloodfeud with their house. I want the fleet so I can use it for the Sons of Ares. What a mess I could cause. I’ve made a study of supply lines, sensor stations, battlegroups, data hubs—all the pressure points that might cause the Society to stagger.

“Darrow . . .” Roque comes closer. “*Guard your hubris. Remember Pax. Pride kills.*”

“I want it to be a trap,” I tell Roquè. “Let Karnus turn and face us.” He tilts his head. “You’ve set your own trap for him.”

“Now, what makes you say that?”

“You might have told us. I could have—”

“Karnus falls today, brother. That is the simple fact of the matter.”

“Of course. I only want to help. You know that.”

“I know.” I stifle a yawn and let my eyes sweep the bridgepits behind and below me. Blues of many shades toil there, working the systems that run my ship. They speak more slowly than any other Color save Obsidian, favoring digital communication. They are older than I, graduates of the Midnight School, all. Beyond them, near the back of the bridge, Gray marines and several Obsidians stand sentinel. I clap Roque on the shoulder. “It’s time.”

“Sailors,” I call to the Blues in the pit. “Sharpen your wits. This is the final nail in the Bellona coffin. We put this bastard into the ether and I promise the greatest gift in my power to give—a week of solid sleep. Prime?”

A few of the Grays near the back of the bridge laugh. The Blues just rap their knuckles on their instruments. I’d give half my substantial bank account, compliments of the ArchGovernor, to see one of those pale airbrains crack a smile.

“Enough delay,” I announce. “Gunnery to positions. Roque, cluster the destroyers. Victra, attend targeting. Tactus, defense deployment. We’re ending this now.” I look over at my wispy helmBlue. He stands central in the pit beneath my command platform amid fifty others. The snaking digiTats that mark the Blues’ bald heads and spidery hands glow subtle shades of cerulean and silver as they sync with the ship’s computers. Their eyes go distant as optic nerves revert to the digital world. They speak only out of courtesy to us. “Helmsman, engines to sixty percent.”

“Aye, *dominus.*” He glances at the tactical display, a globular holo floating above his head, voice like a machine. “Mind, the concentration of metal in the asteroids presents difficulty in assessing spectro readings. We’re a mite blind. A fleet could hide on the other side of the asteroids.”

“He doesn’t have a fleet. Into the breach,” I say. The ship’s engines rumble. I nod to Roque and say, “*Hic sunt leones.*” The words of our master, Nero au Augustus, ArchGovernor of Mars, thirteenth of his name. My warlords echo the phrase.

Here be lions.



THE BREACH

On the tactical readout, the six nimble destroyers move around my remaining man-of-war. Eerie silence from the Blue crew as the functions of war take over. On the plane through which their minds now drift, words are slower than icebergs. My lieutenants monitor my fleet. At any other time, they'd be on their personal destroyers or leading men in leechCraft, but at the moment of victory, I want my fellows near. Yet even when my lieutenants stand here at my side, I feel that separation, that deep gulf between their world and mine.

"Missile signatures," says the comBlue. The bridge does not burst into action. No warning lights panic the crew. No shouts break the stillness. Blues are icy specimens, raised from birth in communal Sects that teach them to embrace logic and enact their function with cold efficiency. It's often said they're more computers than men.

The dark space beyond my viewport blooms fresh with a thick veil of microexplosions. Our flak bursts in a great screen of dull white clouds. Incoming missiles explode as the flak bursts detonate the missiles' payloads prematurely. One gets through and a destroyer on our far wing ripples from the simulated nuclear blast. Men would pour

from her. Gases would seep out. Explosions might puncture holes in the metal hull and bring burning oxygen rupturing forth like blood from a whale, only to be swallowed in a blink by the black. But this is a wargame, and they do not give us real nukes. The deadliest weapons here are the students.

Another ship falls victim as railgun salvos rip through the flak.

"Darrow . . ." Victra worries.

I stand absently thumbing the place Eo's ring once graced.

Victra turns to me. "Darrow . . . he's chewing us to pieces, if you haven't noticed."

"Lady has a point, Reap," Tactus echoes, face glowing blue from the tactical display. "Whatever you have in store, don't be shy about it."

"Coms, tell Ripper and Talon squadrons to engage the enemy."

I watch the tactical display as the squadrons I dispatched a half hour prior swoop around either side of the asteroids and descend on Karnus's flank. From this distance, they are impossible to see with the naked eye, but they pulse gold on the display.

"Congratulations, my friend," Roque whispers before it is even done. There's a strange reverence in his voice, any earlier frustration now gone. "With this, everything will change." He touches my shoulder. "Everything."

I watch my trap close, feeling the imminent victory drain the tension from my shoulders. The Grays of my bridge take a step forward. Even the Obsidians lean to watch the displays as Karnus's ship registers my squadrons' signatures. He tries to flee, blasting his engines to escape what's coming. But the angles conspire against him. My squadrons loose missiles before Karnus can deploy a flak screen or bring his own missiles to bear. Thirty simulated nuclear explosions wrack his last ship. There is no point to capturing his ship at this point in the game, and so the Blue fighter pilots relish a little overkill.

And like that, I have won.

My bridge erupts with shouts from Grays and the Orange technicians. The Blues wrap their knuckles vigorously. The Obsidians, at odds with this hi-tech world, make no sound. My personal valet, Theodora, smiles to her younger charges at the bridge's valet station. A

former Rose courtesan well past prime age, she's heard her fair share of secrets and serves as my social advisor.

Across the ship, from engines to kitchens, the victory transmits through holo screens. This is not just my victory. Each man and woman shares it in their own way. That is the scheme of the Society. To prosper, your superior must prosper. As I found a patron in Augustus, so must the lowColors find their own in me. It breeds a loyalty of necessity to Golds that the Color system itself cannot create by mere dictation.

Now my star will rise, and all aboard will rise with it.

Power and promise are celebrity in this culture. Not long ago, when the ArchGovernor announced he would sponsor my studies at the Academy, the HC channels blazed with speculation. Could someone so young, someone from such a piteous family, win? Look what I did at the Institute. I broke the game. I conquered the Proctors, killed one and bound the others like children. But was that a mere flash in the night? Now those prattling bastards have their answer.

"Helmsman, set course for the Academy. We've laurels to claim," I announce to cheers. *Laurel*. The word itself echoes through my past, making bitter my mouth. Despite my smile, I feel no great joy at this victory. Just grim satisfaction.

One more step, Eo. One more step forward.

"*Praetor* Darrow au Andromedus." Tactus plays with the title. "The Bellona will shit themselves. I wonder if I can leverage this into a command, or do you think I must join your fleet? Can never tell. Gorydamn bureaucracy is so tedious. Coppers to grease. Golds to lobby. My brothers will want to throw us a party, naturally." He nudges me. "At a Brothers Rath party, even you might finally get bedded."

"As if he'd touch your friends." Victra squeezes my hand, fingers lingering as though she wore a gown instead of armor. "Loath as I am to say it, Antonia was right about you."

I feel Roque flinch, and remember the sound of Antonia cutting Lea's throat as she tried to lure me from hiding at the Institute. I had stayed in the shadows, listening to my small friend fall wetly to the mossy ground. Roque had loved Lea in his own fast way.

"I've told you before not to mention your sister's name in our presence," I say to Victra, her face souring at the curt dismissal.

I turn back to Roque.

"As *Praetor*, I do believe I have authority to stock my fleet with personnel of my choosing. Perhaps we should bring back some old faces. Sevro from Pluto, the Howlers from wherever the hell they got shipped off to, and maybe . . . Quinn from Ganymede?"

Roque flushes in the cheeks at the mention of Quinn's name.

Personally, I wish for Sevro the most. Neither of us is particularly diligent at keeping in touch over the holoNet, especially me, because I haven't had access to it since the Academy began. Anyway, all he's partial to sending is holograms of uniquely perverted unicorns and video clips of him reading puns. Pluto, if anything, has made him stranger. And perhaps more lonely.

"*Dominus*." The helmBlue's voice draws me to the display.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

His eyes are glazed. Distant, jacked into the ship's sensors, seeing the raw data of the display I stare at. "Not clear, *dominus*. Sensor distortion. Ghosting."

On the large central display, the asteroids are there in blue. We're gold. Enemies red. There should be none left. Yet a red dot throbs there now. Roque and Victra walk toward it. Roque motions his hand and the data transfer to his datapad. A smaller holo globe floats in front of him. He enlarges the image and cycles through analytic filters.

"Radiation?" Victra hazards. "Debris?"

"The asteroid's ore could cause a mirror refraction from our signal," Roque says. "Couldn't be software. . . . It's gone."

The red dot flickers away, but the tension has spread through the bridge. All stare at the display. Nothing. There's no one else out here except my ships and Karnus's defeated flagship. Unless . . .

Roque turns to me, face drawn, terrified.

"Flee," he manages just as the red signal burns back to life.

"Full power to engines," I roar. "Thirty degrees plus our midline."

"Launch remaining missiles at the surface of the asteroid," Tactus commands.

Too late.

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Victra gasps, and I see with my naked eyes what our instruments struggled to detect. One shadowed destroyer emerges from a hollow in the asteroid. A ship I thought we defeated three days ago. Its engines were off as it lay in wait. Its front half is torn and black from damage. Now its engines blast at full power. And its trajectory takes it directly toward my ship.

It's going to ram us.

"Evac suits and pods!" I shout. Someone's screaming for us to brace for impact. I rush to the side of the bridge where my command escape pod is built into the wall. It opens at my word. Tactus, Roque, and Victra sprint into its confines. I hold back, shouting at the Blues to hurry and unsync. For all their logic, they'll die for their ships.

I range about the bridge, screaming at them to activate their escape hatch. The helmBlue does, pressing a button that causes a hole to dilate in the floor of the pit. One by one, they unsync and are sucked down the gravity tube into their escape pods.

"Theodora!" I shout, seeing her prying at a young Blue who still clutches his operations display with white-knuckled fear. "Get in the gorydamn pod!" She doesn't listen. Nor does the Blue let go. I start toward them just as the proximity sensor lets loose one final warning blast.

All slows.

Bridge lights throb red.

I jump for Theodora, wrapping my arms around her.

And the destroyer hits my man-of-war at her midline.

Clutching Theodora to my chest, I'm thrown thirty meters across my bridge, slamming into a metal wall. White pain rips across my left arm along the seams of the mending break. I'm slapped with darkness. Lights dance there, first like stars, then as weaving lines of sand disturbed by wind.

Red light seeps through my eyelids. A gentle hand pulls at my clothing.

I open my eyes. I'm wrapped around a dented electrical column as the ship shudders, groaning like an ancient, dying beast sinking in the deep. The column trembles violently against my stomach as the de-

stroyer finishes shearing through our middle. Gutting us with slow cruelty.

Someone's shouting my name. Sound fades back into being.

Lights bathe the bridge, alternating shades of murderous red. Warning sirens. The ship's swan song. Theodora's delicate old hands pull at me, like a bird pulling at a fallen statue. I'm bleeding from my forehead. My nose is broken. I wipe the stinging blood from my eyes and roll onto my back. A broken display sparks beside me. It has my blood on it. Did it fall on me? A bar lies beside it, and my eyes drift to Theodora. She pried it off. But she's so small. Her hands cup my face.

"Get up. *Dominus*, if you want to live, you have to get up." The old woman's hands tremble from fear. "Please, get up."

Groaning, I pull myself to my feet. My command escape pod is gone. In the collision, it must have launched. Either that or they left me behind. So too has the Blue escape pod jettisoned away. The frightened Blue has become a stain on a bulkhead. Theodora can't tear her eyes away from the sight.

"There's another pod in my quarters," I mutter. Then I see why Theodora winces. Not from fear, but pain. Her leg is shattered, splayed off to the side like a length of wet, cracked chalk. They don't make Pinks to last through this. "I won't make it, *dominus*. Go, now."

I bend to a knee and throw her over the shoulder of my good arm. She whimpers horribly as her leg shifts under her. I feel her teeth rattle. And I run. I run through the broken bridge toward the wound that is killing my ship, through the bridge level's hallways into a scene of chaos. People swarm the main halls, abandoning their posts and functions as they race to escape pods and the troop carriers in the forward hangar. People who fought for me—electricians, janitors, soldiers, cooks, valets. They'll never make it to safety. Many change course when they see me. They tumble forward, leaning against me, panicked and crazed in their mania to find safety. They pull at me, screaming, pleading. I push them off, losing a small part of my heart as each falls behind. I can't save them. I can't. An Orange grabs Theodora's good leg and a Gray sergeant hits him in the forehead till he drops like a stone to the ground.

"Clear a path," the thick Gray bellows. She whips her scorcher out