

LBRIS

We know
books

BY PIERCE BROWN

Red Rising

Golden Son

Morning Star

Iron Gold

Dark Age

Light Bringer

LIGHT BRINGER

PIERCE BROWN



HODDERSCAPE

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 Telemanus, a Red

LIAM OF LAGALOS Nephew of Lyria, client of House Telemanus, 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 Telemanus 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

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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 will-

ing 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 Aurae'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. Epically 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 helium . . . it's a long sail home and we're the bottom of the food chain. If the enemy patrols spot us . . . won't be anywhere to run. Those Rim ships are faster than us. Not that it matters. Most of the lads and lasses think Mars has already fallen anyway."

"I need you to stop encouraging them in their pessimism. You're a Howler. The men look to you to set the tone. So do I. You're the only other one here from the old pack besides me."

"Pack? Two is not a pack, goodman. Two is debris circling a drain." He looks me over. "You're in denial, boss. Afraid to face the facts. Sefi and her Volk abandoned the Free Legions to steal a kingdom on Mars. The White Fleet is gone. Orion is dead. Free Legions are dust. Senate hung us out to die. Virginia didn't send reinforcements to Mercury. Sevro dumped us for his little Gold family. Clown and Pebble pixied out. Our pack's done. Our army's rotting on the pales. I don't blame you. I don't blame me. I don't blame the troops. I blame the mobs that balked and the politicians that connived."

So much for that spark I was seeking. I leave Aurae's book in my bag. Screw doesn't need words. He needs to go home.

"All the same . . . bitch to me, not the men," I say.

"Yeah. Yeah." He sips his coffee. "My bad."

Leaving Screwface no better but also hopefully no worse than when I found him, I head to the *Archimedes's* sparring chamber via the umbilical that attaches the ship to the base. The white padding of the chamber is stained by years of sweat. Most of it belongs to Cassius and Lysander, but I've made my own marks in their absence. Since Lysander broke my blade, I've been reduced to using the room's practice razors—the very same ones Lysander would have trained with. Fetching one from the wall, I feel silly. Screw's words eat at me more than I'd like.

What's the use in training? The blade in my hand can't fix what's broken.

Much as I hate to admit it, resentment toward Sevro gnaws at me like it gnaws at Screwface. Sevro abandoned me when I needed him most. I could forgive him that. It's harder to forgive his betrayal of the army. He was the first brother of the Free Legions: when he left, doubt crept into the rank and file. Into me. Worse, Sevro's choice indicted my own choice. More than anything I wanted to return to Pax when he was kidnapped. To rescue him. To prove in the end I was there for him. I chose the duty of an Emperor over the duty of a father. Now I'm alone playing with blades.

The silence strangles me.

I almost turn back around. No one will notice if I take a day's leave. No one will dare say I didn't work hard enough. I yawn again. Maybe just a stretch today. Body could use it. Better to face tomorrow rested.

I almost cave. But I know by now that voice of reason is the enemy. Inside me there is a coward who fears discomfort. That coward will offer solace in the form of excuses. But it is the coward who grooms a man for his defeats. The coward who makes him accept them because he is accustomed to finding a good reason to quit. The coward inside can only be killed one way. I toss down my pack and don my training kit.

"Hello, teacher," I say to the sphere's computer.

"Welcome, *blademaster three*." The computer's voice is feminine and seductive, just the sort Cassius would choose. Ten years ago, I would have marveled at speaking to a computer, but the tech boom of the Republic has made the once-forbidden technology eerily commonplace. Compared with some of Quicksilver's systems, this computer is a troglodyte.

"Martian gravity profile again?"

"No."

"*Asteroid combat profile?*"

"No. Randomized intervals to a floor of point two and a ceiling of four point five G's. Let's run the system today. We'll finish on Mars." I rub my left forearm hoping it will hold over four G's.

"Affirmative. Duration?"

"Dealer's choice."

"Affirmative, *blademaster three*. Preparing session one six eight."

I fight back another yawn as the room warms up. I roll out my shoulders. They're stiff from the welding and from countless dislocations over the years. A tightness seizes my left lung as I take a deep breath, a souvenir of the razor Lysander drove into my chest in Heliopolis. I shake out my left arm, which had shattered when my slingBlade clashed with the blade Lysander took from Alexandar's corpse. *Aurae*, suspiciously versed in medicine, pinned the bones of my left arm back in place and applied a calcium catalyst, but I'll need a carver's work to regain full functionality.

My arm throbs. A good reminder of unfinished business.

A thought comes to me as the room's gravity wells warm up. When I trained with Lorn, he would speak to me as I flowed through the forms of the Willow Way. I miss the metronomic company of his voice, and I'm tired of silence.

"Computer, link to my datapad." I fish out my datapad and *Aurae's* book from my bag and scan in the first two dozen pages. I instruct the computer to narrate the text, then ease into the winter stance of the Willow Way, blade above my head held with both hands. I pause. "Computer. Voice sample from holofile one three one: Sovereign's Saturnalia Address."

A moment later, Virginia's voice fills the room.

"To those who wrote that we might read, to those who fell so we might walk, to those who came before so we might come after, gratitude."

The sphere begins its program. The gravity shifts are slow at first, alternating orientation as I move through the first branch of the winter stance and sweep the blade diagonally in descending cuts. I grunt in pain as my body warms up and the stiffness dissolves. Soon the only sounds are the whisper of the practice blade, the shuffle of my feet, my breathing, and Virginia's voice.

"The first understanding: The path to the Vale is inscrutable, eternal, and