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BY PIERCE BROWN

*Red Rising*

*Golden Son*

*Morning Star*

PIERCE BROWN

# Morning Star

  
HODDER

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 Sefi, sister to Rag-  
nar

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

# Morning Star

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 Telemachus 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.

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**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. *Bub* . . . *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.

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## PRISONER L17L6363

The ceiling parts. Light burns my eyes. I clamp them shut as the floor of my cell rises upward till, with a click, it stops and I rest, exposed, on a flat stone surface. I push out my legs and gasp, nearly fainting from the pain. Joints crack. Knotted tendons unspool. I fight to reopen my eyes against the raging light. Tears fill them. It is so bright I can only catch bleached flashes of the world around.

Fragments of alien voices surround me. "Adrius, what is this?"

". . . has he been in there this whole time?"

"The stench . . ."

I lie upon stone. It stretches around me to either side. Black, rippling with blue and purple, like the shell of a Creonian beetle. A floor? No. I see cups. Saucers. A cart of coffee. It's a table. That was my prison. Not some hideous abyss. Just a meter-wide, twelve-meter-long slab of marble with a hollow center. They've eaten inches above me every night. Their voices the distant whispers I heard in the darkness. The clatter of their silverware and plates my only company.

"Barbaric . . ."

I remember now. This is the table the Jackal sat at when I visited him after recovering from the wounds incurred during the Iron Rain.

Did he plan my imprisonment even then? I wore a hood when they put me in here. I thought I was in the bowels of his fortress. But no. Thirty centimeters of stone separated their suppers from my hell.

I look up from the coffee tray by my head. Someone stares at me. Several someones. Can't see them through the tears and blood in my eyes. I twist away, coiling inward like a blind mole unearthed for the very first time. Too overwhelmed and terrified to remember pride or hate. But I know he stares at me. The Jackal. A childish face in a slender body, with sandy hair parted on the side. He clears his throat.

"My honored guests. May I present prisoner L17L6363."

His face is both heaven and hell.

To see another man . . .

To know I am not alone . . .

But then to remember what he's done to me . . . it rips my soul out.

Other voices slither and boom, deafening in their loudness. And, even curled as I am, I feel something beyond their noise. Something natural and gentle and kind. Something the darkness convinced me I would never feel again. It drifts softly through an open window, kissing my skin.

A late autumn breeze cuts through the meaty, humid stink of my filth and makes me think that somewhere a child is sprinting through snow and trees, running his hands along bark and pine needles and getting sap in his hair. It's a memory I know I've never had, but feel like I should. That's the life I would have wanted. The child I could have had.

I weep. Less for me than for that boy who thinks he lives in a kind world, where Mother and Father are as large and strong as mountains. If only I could be so innocent again. If only I knew this moment was not a trick. But it is. The Jackal does not give except to take away. Soon the light will be a memory and darkness will return. I keep my eyes clenched tight, listening to the blood from my face drip on the stone, and wait for the twist.

"Goryhell, Augustus. Was this really necessary?" a feline killer purrs. Husky accent smothered in that indolent Luna lilt learned in the courts of the Palatine Hill, where all are less impressed by everything than anyone else. "He smells like death."