

# RISING

# RED

PIERCE BROWN

# 16



## THE INSTITUTE

My test results come when I am practicing my cultural recognition and accent modulation with Matteo in our high-rise penthouse. We have a view of the city, the setting sun behind. I'm midway through a clever retort about the Yorkton Supernova faux-War sports club when my datapad beeps with a priority message sent to my datapad stream. I almost spill my coffee.

"My datapad has been slaved by another," I said. "It's the Board of Quality Control."

Matteo shoots up from his chair. "We have perhaps four minutes." He runs into the suite's library, where Harmony is reading on an ergocouch. She jumps up and is down and out of the suite in less than three breaths. I make sure that the holopictures of me with my fake family are arranged in my bedroom and throughout the penthouse. Four hired servants—Browns and a Pink—go about domestic tasks in the penthouse. They wear the Pegasus livery of my fake family.

One of the Browns goes to the kitchen. The other, a Pink woman, massages my shoulders. Matteo shines my shoes in my room. Of course there are machines to do these things, but an Aureate would

never use a machine for something a person could do. There is no power in that.

The towncraft appears like a distant dragonfly. It grows as it buzzes closer and hovers outside my penthouse window. Its boarding door slides open and a man in a Copper suit gives a bow of formality. I let my datapad open the duroglass window and the man floats in. Three Whites are with him. Each has a white Sigil upon their hands. Members of the Academians and a Copper bureaucrat.

“Do I have the pleasure of addressing one Darrow au Andromedus, son of the recently deceased Linus au Andromedus and Lexus au Andromedus?”

“You have the honor.”

The bureaucrat looks me up and down in a very deferential, but impatient manner. “I am Bondilus cu Tancrus of the Institute’s Board of Quality Control. There are some questions we must beg to ask of you.”

We sit across from one another at my oak kitchen table. There, they hook my finger to a machine and one of the Whites dons a pair of glasses that will analyze my pupils and other physiological reactions. They will be able to tell if I am lying.

“We will start with a control question to assess your normal reaction when telling truths. Are you of the Family Andromedus?”

“Yes.”

“Are you of the Aureate genus?”

“Yes.” I lie through my teeth, ruining their control questions.

“Did you cheat in your admissions test two months prior?”

“No.”

“Did you use nervenucleic to stimulate high comprehension and analytical functions during the test itself?”

“No.”

“Did you use a network widget to aggregate or synthesize outside resources in real time?”

“No.” I sigh impatiently. “There was a jammer in the room, ergo it would have been impossible. I’m glad you’ve done your research and are not wasting my time, Copper.”

His smile is bureaucratic.

“Did you have prior knowledge of the questions?”

“No.” I deem an angry response proper at this point. “And what is this about? I’m not accustomed to being called a liar by someone of your ilk.”

“It is procedure with all elite scorers, Lord Aureate. I beg your understanding,” the bureaucrat drones. “Any upward outlier far removed from the standard deviation is subject to inquiry. Did you slave your widget to that of another individual during the test?”

“No. As I said, there was a jammer. Thank you for keeping up, pennyhead.”

They take a sample of my blood and scan my brain. The results are instantaneous, but the bureaucrat will not share them. “Protocol,” he reminds me. “You will have your results in two weeks.”

We receive them in four. I pass the Quality Control examination. I did not cheat. Then comes my exam score, two months after I took the damn thing, and I realize why they thought I did cheat. I missed one question. Just one. Out of hundreds. When I share the results with Dancer, Harmony, and Matteo, they simply stare at me. Dancer falls into a chair and begins to laugh; it’s an hysterical sort.

“Bloodyhell,” he swears. “We’ve done it.”

“He did it,” Matteo corrects.

It takes Dancer a minute before he has wits enough to fetch a bottle of champagne, but I still feel his eyes watching me as though I am something different, something strange. It’s like they suddenly don’t understand what it is they have created. I touch the haemanthus blossom in my pocket and feel the wedding band around my neck. They didn’t create me. She did.

It is when a valet arrives to escort me to the Institute that I say my goodbyes to Dancer inside the penthouse. He holds tight to my hand as we shake and gives me the look my father gave me before he was hanged. It’s one of reassurance. But behind that is worry and doubt. Did he prepare me for the world? Did he do his duty? My father was twenty-five when he looked at me like that. Dancer is forty-one. It makes no difference. I chuckle. Uncle Narol never gave

me such a look, not even when he let me cut Eo down. Probably because he'd taken enough of my right hooks to know the answer. But if I think about my teachers, my fathers, Uncle Narol shaped me the most. He taught me to dance; he taught me how to be a man, perhaps because he knew this would be my future. And though he tried to stop me from being a Helldiver, it was his lessons that kept me alive. I've learned new lessons now. Let's hope they do the trick.

Dancer gives me the knifeRing he used to slice my finger months before. But he's reshaped it to look like an *L*.

"They will think it the chevron the Spartans bore on their shields," he said. "*L* for Lacadaemonia." But it is for Lykos. For Lambda.

Harmony surprises me by taking my right hand, kissing where once my Red sigil was emblazoned. She's got tears in one eye, the cold, unscarred eye. The other cannot cry.

"Evey will be coming to live with us," she tells me. She smiles before I can ask why. It looks strange on her face. "You think you're the only one who notices things? We'll give her a better life than Mickey would."

Matteo and I share a smile and a bow. We exchange proper honorifics and he extends his hand. It doesn't grasp mine. Instead, it snatches the flower from my pocket. I reach after it, but he's still the only man I've ever met who is faster than me.

"You cannot take this with you, *goodman*. The wedding band on your hand is queer enough. The flower is too much."

"Give me a petal then," I say.

"I thought you would ask for that." He pulls out a necklace. It is the sigil of Andromedus. My sigil, I remember. It is iron. He drops it in my hand. "Whisper her name." I do and the Pegasus unfurls like a haemanthus bud. He sets a petal in the center. It closes again. "This is your heart. Guard it with iron."

"Thank you, Matteo," I say, tears in my eyes. I pick him up and hug him despite his protests. "If I live more than a week, I'll have you to thank, my *goodman*." He blushes when I set him down.

“Manage your temper,” he reminds me, his small voice darkening. “Manners, manners, then burn their *bloodydamn* house to the ground.”

I clutch the Pegasus in my hand as the shuttle crosses over the Martian countryside. Fingers of green stretch over the earth I’ve lived to dig. I wonder who the Helldiver of Lambda is now. Loran is too young. Barlow is too old. Kieran? He’s too responsible. He’s got children to love, and he’s seen enough of our family die. There’s no fire in his belly. Leanna’s got enough, but women aren’t allowed to dig. It is probably Dain, Eo’s brother. Wild, but not bright. The typical Helldiver. He’ll die fast. The thought makes me nauseous.

It’s not just the thought. I’m nervous. I realize it slowly as I look around the shuttle’s interior. Six other youths sit quietly. One, a slender boy with an open gaze and pretty smile, catches my eye. He’s the sort who still laughs at butterflies.

“Julian,” he declares properly, and takes my forearm. We have no data to offer each other through our datapads; they took them when we boarded the shuttle. So instead I offer him the seat across from me. “Darrow, a very interesting name.”

“Have you ever been to Agea?” I ask Julian.

“Course,” he says, smiling. He always smiles. “What, you mean you haven’t? It’s strange. I thought I knew so many Golds, but hardly any of them managed to get past the entrance exams. It’s a brave new world of faces, I fear. Anyway, I envy you the fact you haven’t been to Agea. It’s a strange place. Beautiful, no doubt, but life there is fast, and cheap, so they say.”

“But not for us.”

He chuckles. “I suppose not. Not unless you play at politics.”

“I don’t much like playing.” I notice his reaction, so I laugh my seriousness off with a wink. “Not unless there’s a wager, man. You hear?”

“I hear! What’s your game? Bloodchess? Gravcross?”

“Oh, bloodchess is all right. But fauxWar takes the prize,” I say with a Golden grin.

“Especially if you’re a Nortown fan!” he agrees.

“Oh . . . *Nortown*. I don’t know if we’ll get along,” I say, wincing. I jab myself with a thumb. “*Yorkton*.”

“*Yorkton!* I don’t know if we’ll *ever* get along!” he laughs.

And though I smile, he doesn’t know how cold I am inside; the conversation, the jibes, the smiles, are all a pattern of sociality. Matteo’s done me well, but to Julian’s credit, he doesn’t seem a monster.

He should be a monster.

“My brother must already have arrived at the Institute. He was already in Agea at our family’s estate, causing trouble no doubt!” Julian shakes his head proudly. “Best man I know. He’ll be the Primus, just you watch. Our father’s pride and joy, and that’s saying something with how many family members I have!” Not a flicker of jealousy in his voice, just love.

“Primus?” I ask.

“Oh, Institute talk; it means leader of his House.”

The Houses. I know these. There are twelve loosely based on underlying personality traits. Each is named for one of the gods of the Roman pantheon. The SchoolHouses are networking tools and social clubs outside of school. Do well, and they’ll find you a powerful family to serve. The families are the true powers in the Society. They have their own armies and fleets and contribute to the Sovereign’s forces. Loyalty begins with them. There is little love for the denizens of one’s own planet. If anything, they are the competition.

“You sobs done beating each other off yet?” an impish kid sneers from the corner of the shuttle. He’s so drab he is khaki instead of Gold. His lips are thin and his face like a cruel hawk just as it spies a mouse. A Bronzie.

“Are we bothering you?” My sarcasm has a polite nip.

“Does two dogs humping bother me? Likely, yes. If they are noisy.”

Julian stands. “Apologize, cur.”

“Go slag yourself,” the small kid says. In half a second, Julian has drawn a white glove from nowhere. “That to wipe my ass, you golden pricklick?”

“What? You little heathen!” Julian says in shock. “Who raised you?”

“Wolves, after your mother’s cootch spat me out.”

“You beast!”

Julian throws the glove at the small kid. I’m watching, thinking this is the height of comedy. The kid seems pulled straight from the Lykos crop, Beta maybe. He’s like an ugly, tiny, irritable Loran. Julian doesn’t know what to do, so he makes a challenge.

“A challenge, *goodman*.”

“A duel? You’re that offended?” The ugly kid snorts at the prince-ling. “Fine. I’ll stitch your family pride together after the Passage, pricklick.” He blows his nose into the glove.

“Why not now, coward?” Julian calls. His slender chest is puffed out just as his father must have taught him. No one insults his family.

“Are you stupid? Do you see razors about? Idiot. Go away. We’ll duel after the Passage.”

“Passage . . . ?” Julian finally asks what I’m thinking.

The scrawny kid grins wickedly. Even his teeth are khaki.

“It’s the last test, idiot. And the best secret this side of the rings around Octavia au Lune’s cootch.”

“Then how do you know about it?” I ask.

“Inside track,” the kid says. “And I don’t know about it. I know of it, you giant pisthead.”

His name is Sevro, and I like his angle.

But the talk of a Passage worries me. There is so little I know, I realize, as I listen in as Julian strikes up a conversation with the last member of our shuttle. They talk about their test scores. There is a severe disparity between their low scores and mine. I notice Sevro snort as they say theirs aloud. How did applicants with such low scores get in? I’ve got an ill feeling in my gut. And what did Sevro score?

We come to the Valles Marineris in darkness. It is a great scar of light across Mars’s black surface, going as far as eyes can see. At the center of it, the capital city of my planet rises in the night like a

garden of jewelswords. Nightclubs flicker on rooftops, dance floors made of condensed air. Scantly-dressed girls and foolish boys rise and fall as gravMixers play with physics. NoiseBubbles separate city blocks. We cut through them and hear worlds of different sounds.

The Institute is beyond Agea's night districts and is built into the side of the eight-kilometer-high walls of the Valles Marineris. The walls rise like tidal waves of green stone cradling civilization with flora. The Institute itself is made of white stone—a place of columns and sculpture, Roman to its core.

I have not been here before. But I have seen the columns. Seen the destination of our voyage. Bitterness wells in me like bile rising from stomach to throat as I think of his face. Think of his words. His eyes as they scanned the crowd. I watched on the HC as the ArchGovernor gave his speech time and again to the classes before my own. Soon I'll hear it from his lips myself. Soon I'll suffer the rage. Feel the fire lick over my heart as I see him in person once again.

We land on a drop pad and are shepherded into an open-air marble square looking over the vast valley. The night air is crisp. Agea sprawls behind and the gates of the Institute stretch before us. I stand with over a thousand Goldbrows, all glancing about with the cocksureness of their race. Many clump together, friends from beyond the white walls of the school. I did not think their classes so large.

A tall Golden man flanked by Obsidians and a coterie of Gold advisors rises on a pair of gravBoots before the gate. My heart goes cold as I recognize his face and hear his voice and see the glimmer in his ingot eyes.

"Welcome, children of Aureate," ArchGovernor Nero au Augustus says in a voice as smooth as Eo's skin. It is preternaturally loud. "I assume you understand the gravity of your presence here. Of the thousand cities of Mars. Of all the Great Families, you are the chosen few. You are the peak of the human pyramid. Today, you will begin your campaign to join the best caste of our race. Your fellows

stand like you in the Institutes of Venus, of the Eastern and Western Hemispheres of Earth, of Luna, of the Gas Giant Moons, of Europa, of the Astroidian Greek Cluster and the Astroidian Trojan Cluster, of Mercury, of Callisto, of the joint venture Enceledas and Ceres, and of the farpioneers of Hildas.”

It seems only a day ago that I knew I was a pioneer of Mars. Only a day ago that I suffered so that humanity, desperate to leave a dying Earth, could spread to the red planet. Oh, how well my rulers lied.

Behind Augustus, in the stars, there’s movement, but it is not the stars that move. Nor is it asteroids or comets. It is the Sixth and Fifth Fleets. The Armada of Mars. My breath catches in my chest. The Sixth Fleet is commanded by Cassius’s father, while the smaller Fifth Fleet is under the ArchGovernor’s direct control. Most of the ships are owned by families who owe allegiance to either Augustus or Bellona.

Augustus shows us why we, they, rule. My flesh tingles. I am so small. A billion tons of durosteel and nanometal move through the heavens, and I have never been beyond Mars’s atmosphere. They are like specks of silver in an ocean of ink. And I am so much less. But those specks could ravage Mars. They could destroy a moon. Those specks rule the ink. An Imperator commands each fleet; a Praetor commands squadrons within that fleet. What I could do with that power . . .

Augustus is haughty as he gives his speech. I swallow the bile in my throat. Because of the impossible distance of my enemies, my anger was once a cold, quiet sort. Now it burns in me.

“Society has three stages: Savagery, Ascendance, Decadence. The great rise because of Savagery. They rule in Ascendance. They fall because of their own Decadence.”

He tells us how the Persians were felled, how the Romans collapsed because their rulers forgot how their parents gained them an empire. He prattles about Muslim dynasties and European effemiancy and Chinese regionalism and American self-loathing and self-neutering. All the ancient names.

“Our Savagery began when our capital, Luna, rebelled against

the tyranny of Earth and freed herself from the shackles of Demokracy, from the Noble Lie—the idea that men are brothers and are created equal.”

Augustus weaves lies of his own with that golden tongue of his. He tells of the Goldens’ suffering. The Masses sat on the wagon and expected the great to pull, he reminds. They sat whipping the great until we could no longer take it.

I remember a different whipping.

“Men are not created equal; we all know this. There are averages. There are outliers. There are the ugly. There are the beautiful. This would not be if we were all equal. A Red can no more command a starship than a Green can serve as a doctor!”

There’s more laughter across the square as he tells us to look at pathetic Athens, the birthplace of the cancer they call Demokracy. Look how it fell to Sparta. The Noble Lie made Athens weak. It made their citizens turn on their best general, Alcibiades, because of jealousy.

“Even the nations of Earth grew jealous of one another. The United States of America exacted this idea of equality through force. And when the nations united, the Americans were surprised to find that they were disliked! The Masses are jealous! How wonderful a dream it would be if all men were created equal! But we are not.

“It is against the Noble Lie that we fight. But as I said before, as I say to you now, there is another evil against which we war. It is a more pernicious evil. It is a subversive, slow evil. It is not a wildfire. It is a cancer. And that cancer is Decadence. Our Society has passed from Savagery to Ascendance. But like our spiritual ancestors, the Romans, we too can fall into Decadence.”

He speaks of the Pixies.

“You are the best of humanity. But you have been coddled. You have been treated like children. Were you born to a different Color, you would have calluses. You would have scars. You would know pain.”

He smiles as if he knows pain. I hate this man.

“You think you know pain. You think the Society is an inevitable

force of history. You think Her the end of history. But many have thought that before. Many ruling classes have believed theirs to be the last, the pinnacle. They grew soft. Fat. They forgot that calluses, wounds, scars, hardship, preserve all those fine pleasure clubs you young boys love to frequent and all those fine silks and diamonds and unicorns you girls ask for on birthdays.

“Many Aureates have not sacrificed. That is why they do not wear this.” He shows a long scar on his right cheek. Octavia au Lune has the same scar. “The Scar of a Peer. We are not the masters of the Solar System because we are born. We are the masters because we, the Peerless Scarred, the iron Golds, made it that way.”

He touches the scar on his cheek. I’d give him another if I were closer. The children around me suck down this man’s garbage like oxygen.

“Right now, the Colors who mine this planet are harder than you. They are born with calluses. Born with scars and hatred. They are tough as nanosteel. Fortunately, they are also very stupid. For instance, this *Persephone* you have no doubt heard of is nothing more than a dim girl who thought singing a song was worth a hanging.”

I bite a bloody hole in my cheek. My skin shivers from rage as I find out that my wife is part of this bastard’s speech.

“The girl did not even know the video would be leaked. Yet it is her willingness to suffer hardship that gave her power. Martyrs, you see, are like bees. Their only power comes in death. How many of you would sacrifice yourself to not kill, but merely hurt your enemy? Not one of you, I wager.”

I taste blood in my mouth. I have the knifeRing Dancer gave me. But I breathe the fury down. I am no martyr. I am not vengeance. I am Eo’s dream. Still, doing nothing while her murderer gloats feels like a betrayal.

“In time you will receive your Scars from my sword,” Augustus closes. “But first you must earn them.”

# 17



## THE DRAFT

“Son of Linus and Lexus au Andromedus, both of the House Apollo. Would you prefer to mark yourself as requesting House Apollo preferentiality?” a tedious Aureate administrator asks me.

Goldbrows’ first loyalty is to Color, then family, then planet, then House. Most Houses are dominated by one or two powerful families. On Mars, the Family Augustus, the Family Bellona, and the Family Arcos influence all others.

“No,” I reply.

He shuffles over his datapad. “Very well. How do you believe you performed on the slangSmarts test? That is the extrapolational test,” he clarifies.

“I think my results speak for themselves.”

“You were not paying attention, Darrow. I shall mark that against you. I’m asking for *you* to speak for your results.”

“I think I took a gory piss on your test, *sir*.”

“Ah.” He smiles. “Well, you did. You did. House Minerva for brains might be right for you. Perhaps Pluto, for the deviousness. Apollo for the pride. Yes. Hmm. Well, I have a test for you. Please

complete it to the best of your ability. Interviews will commence when you have finished."

The test is quick and it is in the form of an immersion game. There is a goblet on a hill that I need to acquire. Many obstacles stand in my way. I pass them as rationally as possible, trying to hide my anger when a little elf steals a key I acquire. But every step of the way, there's some damn setback, some inconvenience. And it is always unforeseen. It is always something beyond the bounds of extrapolation. In the end, I reach the goblet, but only after killing an annoying wizard and cruelly enslaving the race of elves by means of said wizard's magic wand. I could have left the elves be. But they annoyed me.

Soon, the interviewers come in intervals. I learn they are called Proctors. Each one of them is a Peerless Scarred. They are chosen by the ArchGovernor to teach and represent the students of the House within the Institute.

All said, the Proctors are impressive. There's a huge Scarred man with hair like a lion and a lightning bolt on his collar for Jupiter, a matronly woman with gentle golden eyes, and a quick-witted man with winged feet on his collar. He can't sit still and his baby face seems immensely fascinated by my hands. He makes me play a game with him in which he puts out both hands flat and facing up and I put mine atop facing down. He tries slapping my hands, but never quite manages. He leaves after clapping his hands together in joy.

Another strange encounter comes when a beautiful man with coiled hair interviews me. A bow marks his collar. Apollo. He asks me how attractive I believe myself to be and is displeased when I undershoot his estimate. Still, I think he likes me, because he asks me what I would like to be one day.

"An Imperator of a fleet," I say.

"You could do great things with a fleet. But a lofty notion," he sighs, accenting every word with a feline purr. "Perhaps too lofty for your family. Maybe if you had a benefactor of better familial origin. Yes, maybe then." He looks at his datapad. "But unlikely due to your birth. Hm. Best of luck."

I sit alone for an hour or more till a sullen man comes to join me. His unfortunate face is pinched like a hatchet, but he has the Scar and a razor hilt hangs on his hip. His name is Fitchner. A wad of gum fills his mouth. The uniform he wears is black with gold, and it nearly conceals the slight belly paunch that sticks outward despite the faint smell of metabolizers. Like many of the others, he wears badges about his personage. A golden wolf with two heads decorates his collar. And a strange hand marks his cuff.

“They give me the mad dogs,” he says. “They give me the killers of our race, the ones full of piss and napalm and vinegar.” He sniffs the air. “You smell full of shit.”

I say nothing. He leans against the door and frowns at it as though it offended him in some way. Then back to me, sniffing improperly.

“Problem is, we of House Mars always burn out. Kids rule the Institute at first. Then they find out that napalm lasts about . . .” He snaps his fingers. I have no reply. He sighs and plops down in a chair. After a while of watching me, he stands and punches me in the face. “If you punch me back, you will be sent home, Pixie.”

I kick him in the shin.

He limps away, laughing like a drunk Uncle Narol.

I’m not sent home. Instead, I find myself escorted with one hundred others into a large room with floatChairs and a large wall dominated by ivory gridwork. The gridwork forms a checkerboard square on the wall, ten rows high, ten rows across. I’m taken on a lift to the middle row, some fifty feet off the ground. Ninety-nine other students are ushered in till each box is filled. This is the prime crop, the best of the students. I look out from my box, peering up above me. A girl’s feet dangle out of the box above my head. Numbers and letters appear in front of my box. My statistics. Supposedly I am very rash and have upper-outlier characteristics in intuition and loyalty and, most noticeably, rage.

There are twelve groups in the audience. Each group sits close together in floatChairs around vertical golden standards. I see an archer, a lightning bolt, an owl, a wolf with two heads, an upside-down crown, and a trident, amongst others. One of the Proctors

accompanies each group. They alone do not have their faces covered. The others wear ceremonial masks, featureless and golden and slightly like the animals of their Houses. If only I had known this was going to happen, I might have brought a nuke. These are the Drafters, the men and women of highest prestige. Praetors and Imperators and Tribunes and Adjudicators and Governors sit there watching me, trying to choose the new students for their House, trying to find young men and women they can test and offer apprenticeships. With one bomb, I could have destroyed the best and the brightest of their Golden rule. Maybe that's the rashness speaking.

The Draft begins when a titan of a genAlt boy is chosen first to the House of the lightning bolt. House Jupiter. Then go more girls and boys of unnatural beauty and physical prowess. I can only guess they are geniuses as well. The fifth pick comes. The baby-faced interviewer with the winged feet floats up to me on golden boots. Several of the Drafters of House Mercury float along with him. They speak quietly amongst themselves before asking me questions.

“Who are your parents? What are their family’s accomplishments?”

I tell them about my modest false family. One of them seems to think highly of a relative of mine who has long since passed away. But despite the Proctor’s objections, they pass me over for another student from a family with the ownership of ninety mines and a stake on one of Mars’s southern continents.

The Mercury Proctor curses and shoots me a quick smile.

“Hope you’re available next round,” he says.

Next goes a delicate girl with a mocking smile. I can barely pay attention, and, at times, it is difficult to see who else is being selected. We’re arrayed in an odd way. With the tenth pick, the Proctor who struck me in the interviews floats my way. There is disagreement amongst the Drafters. I have two ardent advocates: one is as tall as Augustus, but her hair flows down to her spine in three golden braids. And the second is broader, not very tall. He’s old. Can tell by the scars and wrinkles on his thick hands. Hands that bear the signet ring of an Olympic Knight. I know him immediately

even without seeing his face. Lorn au Arcos. The Rage Knight, the third-greatest man on Mars, who chose to serve the Society by safeguarding the Society's Compact, instead of reaching for crowns in politics. When he points to me, Fitchner grins.

I am chosen tenth. Tenth out of one thousand.

# 18



## CLASSMATES

I feel a sinking in my stomach as I walk with the chattering mass into the dining hall. It is overgrand—white marble floors, columns, a holosky displaying birds in flight at sunset. The Institute is not what I expected. According to Augustus, the classes are to be hard on these little godlings. I snort down a laugh. Let the lot of them spend a year in a mine.

There are twelve tables, each with one hundred place settings. Our names float above the chairs in golden letters. Mine floats to the right of a table's head. It is a place of distinction. The firstDraft. A single bar floats to the right of my name. A -1 is to the left. The first to get five bars becomes Primus of his House. Each bar is bounty for an act of merit. Apparently my high score on the test was the first bit of merit.

“Wonderful, a cutter in the lead for Primus,” a familiar voice says. The girl from the exam. I read her name. Antonia au Severus. She has cruel good looks—high cheekbones, a smirking smile, scorn in her eyes. Her hair is long, full, and golden as Midas’s touch. She was born to be hated and to hate. A -5 floats beside her name. It is the second-closest score to mine at the table. Cassius, the boy I met

at testing, sits diagonally across from me. A -6 shimmers by his broad smile. He runs a hand back through his curls.

Another boy sits directly across from me; -1 and a golden bar float by his name. While Cassius lounges, this other boy, Priam, sits as straight as a blade. His face is celestial. His eyes alert. His hair coiffed. He's tall as me, but broad in the shoulders. I don't think I've ever seen a more perfect human being. A bloodydamn statue. He wasn't in the Draft, I discover. He is what they call a Premier; they cannot be drafted. His parents choose his House. Then I discover why. His scandalous mother, a bannerwoman of the House Bellona, owns our planet's two moons.

"Fate brings us together again," Cassius chuckles to me. "And Antonia. My love! It seems our fathers conspired to place us side by side."

Antonia replies with a sneer, "Remind me to beam him a thank-you."

"Toni! No need for nastiness." He wags a finger. "Now toss me a smile like a good doll."

She flips him the crux with her fingers. "Rather toss you out a window, Cassi."

"Rawr." Cassius blows her a kiss. She ignores it. "So, Priam, I suppose you and I will have to play gently with these fools, eh?"

"Oh, they look like swell sorts to me," Priam replies primly. "I fancy we'll do very well as a group."

They talk in highLingo.

"If the dregs of the Draft don't weigh us down, my good man!" He gestures to the end of the table and starts naming them: "Screw-face, for obvious reasons. Clown because of that ridiculous puffy hair. Weed because, well, he's thin. Oy! You, you're Thistle because your nose looks hooked as one. And . . . that itty-bitty one right there next to the Bronzie-looking fellow, that's little Pebble."

"I think they will rather surprise you," Priam says in defense of the far end of the table. "They may not be as tall or as athletic or even as intelligent as you or me, if intelligence really can be measured by *that* test, but I do not think it charity to say that they will be the spine of our group. Salt of the earth, if you will. Good sorts."

I see the small kid from the shuttle, Sevro, at the very foot of the table. The salt of the earth is not making friends. And neither am I. Cassius glances at my -1. I see him concede that Priam might have scored better than he, but Cassius makes a point in saying he's never heard of my parents.

"So, dear Darrow, how did you cheat?" he asks. Antonia glances over from her conversation with Arria, a small girl made of curling hair and dimples.

"Oh, come now, man." I laugh. "They sent Quality Control after me. How could I have cheated? Impossible. Did you cheat? Your score is high."

I speak the midLingo. It's more comfortable than that highLingo fartdust Priam jabbers on in.

"Me? Cheat! No. Just didn't try enough, apparently," Cassius replies. "If I had my wits, I'd have spent less time with the girls and more on studying, like you."

He's trying to tell me if he tried he could have done just as well. But he's too busy to put in as much effort. If I wanted him as a friend, I'd let him get away with it.

"You studied?" I ask. I feel a sudden urge to embarrass him. "I didn't study at all."

A chill goes through the air.

I shouldn't have said it. My stomach plummets. *Manners*.

Cassius's face sours and Antonia smirks. I've insulted him. Priam frowns. If I want a career in the fleet, then I will likely need Cassius au Bellona's father's patronage. Son of an Imperator. Matteo drilled this into me. How easy it is to forget. The fleet is where the power is. Fleet or government or army. And I don't like government, not to mention that, this sort of insult is how duels begin. Fear trickles down my spine as I realize how thin a line there is to tread. Cassius knows how to duel. I, for all my new skills, do not. He would rip me to pieces, and he looks like he wants to do just that.

"I joke." I tilt my head to Cassius. "Come on, man. How could I score so high and not have studied till my eyes were bleeding? Wish I'd spent more time fooling off like you—we're in the same spot now, after all. Fat lot that studying did for me."

Priam nods his approval at the peace offering.

“I bet it was a slog!” Cassius crows, tipping his head to acknowledge my peculiar breed of apology. I expected the play to go over his head. Thought his pride would blind him to my sudden apology; the Gold may be proud, but he isn’t stupid. None of them are. Have to remember that.

After that, I do Matteo proud. I flirt with a girl named Quinn, befriend and joke with Cassius and Priam—who has probably never sworn in his life—throw my hand out to a tall brute named Titus whose neck is as thick as my thigh. He squeezes too hard on purpose. He’s surprised when I nearly break his hand, but damn is his grip strong. The boy is even taller than Cassius and I, and he’s got a voice like a titan, but he grins when he realizes that my grip, if nothing else, is stronger than his. Something strange about his voice, though. Something decidedly disdainful. There’s also a feather of a boy named Roque who looks and speaks like a poet. His smiles are slow, few, but genuine. Rare.

“Cassius!” Julian calls. Cassius stands and throws an arm around his thinner, prettier twin. I didn’t piece it together before, but they are brothers. Twins. Not identical. Julian did say his brother was already in Agea.

“Darrow here is not what he seems,” Julian tells the table with a very grave face. He has a knack for theatrics.

“You don’t mean . . .” Cassius puts a hand to his mouth.

My finger grazes my steak knife.

“Yes.” Julian nods solemnly.

“No.” Cassius shakes his head. “He’s not a *Yorkton* supporter? Julian, tell me it isn’t so! Darrow! Darrow, how could you be? They never win a game! Priam, are you hearing this?”

I throw my hands up in apology. “A curse of birth, I suppose. I am a product of my upbringing. I cheer for the underdog.” I manage not to sneer the words.

“He confessed it to me on the shuttle.”

Julian is proud to know me. Proud his brother knows he knows me. He looks for Cassius’s approval. Cassius isn’t oblivious to this either; he gently doles out a compliment and Julian leaves the high-

Drafts and returns to his midDraft seat halfway down the table with a content smile and squared shoulders. I didn't think Cassius would be the kind sort.

Of those I meet, only Antonia openly dislikes me. She doesn't watch me like the others at the table. From her, I feel only a distant breed of contempt. One moment she is laughing, flirting with Roque, and then she feels my gaze and becomes ice. The feeling is mutual.

My dormitory is from a dream. Gold trim lines a window that looks out into the valley. A bed is laden with silks and quilts and satins. I lie in it when a Pink masseur comes in and stays for an hour kneading my muscles. Later, three lithe Pinks file through to tend to my needs. I send them to Cassius's room instead. To calm the temptation, I take a cold shower and immerse myself in a holoexperience of a digger in the mining colony Corinth. The Helldiver in the holoexperience is less talented than I was, but the rattling, the simulated heat, the darkness and the vipers, they comfort me so much that I wrap my old scarlet rag around my head.

More food comes. Augustus was all talk. Gob full of exaggerations. This is their version of hardship. I feel guilty as I fall asleep with a full stomach, clutching the locket with Eo's flower inside. My family will go to bed hungry tonight. I whisper her name. I take the wedding band from my pocket and kiss it. Feel the ache. They stole her. But she let them. She left me. She left me tears and pain and longing. She left me to give me anger, and I cannot help but hate her for a moment even though beyond that moment there is only love.

"Eo," I whisper, and the locket closes.

# 19



## THE PASSAGE

I vomit as I wake. A second fist strikes my full stomach. Then a third. I'm empty and gasping for air. Drowning in my sick. Coughing. Hacking. I try to scramble away. A man's hand grabs me by the hair and throws me into the wall. God, he's bloody strong. And he's got extra fingers. I reach for my knifeRing, but they've already dragged me into the hall. I've never been so manhandled; even my new body can't recover from their strikes. There's four of them in black—Crows, the killers. They've discovered me. They know what I am. It's over. All over. Their faces are expressionless skulls. Masks. I pull the knife I took from dinner from my waist and am about to stab one of them in the groin. Then I see the flash of gold on their wrists and they hit me till I drop the knife. It's a test. Their strikes against a higher Color are sanctioned by the issuer of the bracelets. They haven't found me out at all. A test. That is what this is. It is a test.

They could have used stunners. There's a purpose to the beating. It's something most Golds have never experienced. So I wait. I curl up and let them beat me. When I don't resist, they think they've done their job. They sort of do; I'm raggedshit by the time they're satisfied.

I'm dragged through the hallway by men nearly three meters tall. A bag is shoved over my head. They're staying away from technology to scare me. I wonder how many of these kids have felt physical force like this? How many have been so dehumanized? The bag smells like death and piss as they drag me along. I start laughing. It's like my bloodydamn frysuit. Then a fist hits my chest and I crumple, gasping.

The hood also has a sound device installed. I'm not breathing hard, but my breaths come back louder than they should. There are over a thousand students. Dozens at a time must suffer this same fate, yet I hear nothing. They don't want me to hear the others. I'm supposed to think I'm alone, that my Color means nothing. Surprisingly, I find myself offended that they dare strike me. Don't they know I'm a bloodydamn Gold? Then I snort back a laugh. Effective tricks.

I'm lifted up and thrown hard onto a floor. I feel a vibration, the smell of exhaust. Soon we're in the air. Something in the bag covering my head disorients me. I can't tell which direction we're flying, how high we've risen. The sound of my own raspy breath has become terrible. I think the bag also filters out the oxygen, because I'm hyperventilating. Still, it's not worse than a frysuit.

Later. An hour? Two? We land. They drag me by my heels. Head bumps on stone, jarring me. It's not till much later that they take the bag off of my head in a barren stone room lit by a single light. Another person is already here. The Crows strip away my clothing, rip away the precious Pegasus pendant. They leave.

"Cold in here, Julian?" I chuckle as I stand, unclenching my left hand from the dirty red Helldiver sweat band. My voice echoes. We're both naked. I fake a limp with my right leg. I know what this is.

"Darrow, is that you?" Julian asks. "Are you well?"

"I'm prime. They busted up my right leg, though," I lie.

He stands too, pushing himself up with his left hand. That's his dominant one. He looks tall and feeble in the light. Like bent hay. I caught more kicks and punches than him, though, loads more. My ribs might be cracked.

“What do you think this is?” he asks.

“The Passage, obviously.”

“But they lied. They said it would be tomorrow.”

The thick wooden door squeals on rusted hinges and Proctor Fitchner saunters in popping a gumbubble.

“Proctor! Sir, you lied to us,” Julian protests. He brushes his pretty hair back out of his eyes.

Fitchner’s movement is sluggish but his eyes are like a cat’s. “Lying takes too much effort,” he grunts idly.

“Well . . . how dare you treat us like this!” Julian snaps. “You must know who my father is. And my mother is a Legate! I can have you up on charges for assault in a moment’s notice. And you hurt Darrow’s leg!”

“It’s one A.M., dipstick. It’s tomorrow.” Fitchner pops another gumbubble. “There are also two of you. Alas, only one spot is available in your class.” He tosses a golden ring emblazoned with the wolf of Mars and a star shield of the Institute onto the dirty stone ground. “I could make it ambiguous, but you look like rustyheaded lads. Only one comes out alive.”

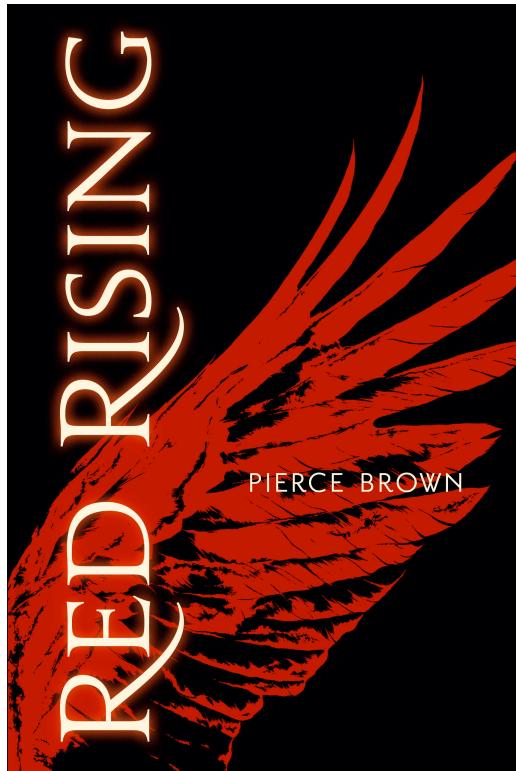
He leaves the way he came. The door squeals and then slams shut. Julian flinches at the sound. I do not. We both stare at the ring and I have a sick feeling in my gut that I’m the only one in the room who knows what just happened.

“What do they think they are doing?” Julian asks me. “Do they expect us to . . .”

“Kill each other?” I finish. “Yes. That’s what they expect.” Despite the knot in my throat. I ball my fists, Eo’s wedding band tight on my finger. “I intend to wear that ring, Julian. Will you let me have it?”

I am bigger than he. Not quite as tall. But that doesn’t matter. He doesn’t stand a chance.

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