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A COMPANY OF SHADOWS

AN ASTRA MILITARUM STORY BY
RACHEL HARRISON

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A COMPANY OF SHADOWS

Rachel Harrison

The city falls away to the thunder of turbojets. Shattered buildings recede. The smell of smoke is stolen by the cold wind as it buffets the Valkyrie gunship.

Commissar Severina Raine holds on to the frame of the side door as it rattles under her hand. Other gunships lift off and move away, grey metal rising to meet the grey sky. In the distance, a pall of dust rises into the air, indicating where the Antari tank companies are rolling towards the edge of the city. A mass retreat that stings more than the las-burn across her shoulder.

'Silver two away.'

The voice comes over the vox, but she can see the speaker in the distance. It's Andren Fel. The storm trooper captain is braced in the side door of another Valkyrie that goes out of sight behind a slumped habitation block. Raine can hear the whisper of hellgun fire behind his words.

'The fastest route,' she says, speaking up over the wind. 'Through the Maw.'

There's a noise like vox distortion. Raine knows it's Andren laughing.

'Through the Maw,' he says. *'Aye, commissar.'*

The Maw marks the edge of Gholl's primary city, Caulder's Reach, where the metal spires of the city end and the stone ones of the mountain ranges begin. The peaks punch upwards, the wind howling around and between them like the breath of a beast. The ravines go deep and dark. That's why her Antari soldiers have taken to calling it the Maw. A dangerous name, for a dangerous place.

'The Maw?'

Raine turns away from the side door at the voice. Saleen Mayir is strapped in across the troop compartment. Her bright yellow cloak stands out against the gunmetal and olive. She clings to her harness with white-knuckled hands, her fingernails filed to sharp points.

‘It is completely under enemy control,’ Mayir shouts over the roar of the engines.

Raine moves along the Valkyrie’s troop compartment and lowers herself into a seat opposite Mayir. As she locks her restraint harness in place, the Valkyrie judders. There’s a split second of weightlessness, then a loud rattle as the gunship drops a few metres. It knocks the breath out of Raine, but she keeps her hands steady, her face impassive.

‘It is,’ Raine says. ‘As is Caulder’s Reach, now, *Tacticae Principal*.’

Mayir narrows her eyes. In the dim light, Raine sees the flash of bionics. Good ones, almost invisible. Priceless.

‘The plan for the city defence was sound,’ she says. Her accent is clipped and precise. ‘If the regiments had been up to the task of holding it, then we would not be having this conversation.’

Sergeant Daven Wyck starts laughing. It’s an ugly sound. He’s not sitting, not restrained like the rest of his six-strong squad. Instead he has his arm looped through the grab-netting on the wall of the Valkyrie. He’s flexing his bloody, blackened fingers. There’s soot and filth in his fair hair.

‘Three Antari souls spent for you,’ he says, shaking his head. ‘Three of my Wyldfolk just to get you out of the city. Seems a poor trade.’

Raine doesn’t get up or move her hand towards her gun or sword. She just looks at him.

‘Enough,’ she says.

He rolls his fingers into fists, but he doesn’t challenge her. Nor do the rest of his squad. They all know better.

What they don’t know is that this time a part of Raine agrees with him.

‘Antari,’ Mayir says, looking at Wyck. ‘Splinter camouflage. Icon of the crossed rifles against a circle of thorns. The Eleventh Rifles, am I correct?’

Wyck stares at her, his fists still curled.

‘Yes, *Tacticae Principal*.’

The way he says her title falls just short of open disdain.

Saleen Mayir smiles, thin-lipped.

‘And upon meeting, how disappointing you are.’

Raine sees Wyck open his mouth to speak, but he never gets the chance to. There’s a sudden loud blare. The impact alarm. The pilot, Kain, shouts something over the internal vox. Raine picks out the word *missiles*.

‘Brace!’

Raine’s voice is drowned out by a colossal explosion that shakes the Valkyrie.

Shakes the Antari. Shakes Raine's eyes in her head. There's a second boom and the gunship starts to spin. The internal vox goes live with more shouts from the cockpit. There's another moment of weightlessness, and the Valkyrie drops again, this time much more than a few metres. Raine's stomach lurches. The engines scream. Tacticae Principal Mayir screams too. Through the open side door, Raine sees dark stone, then sky, then stone, then sky. Spinning coils of thick, dark smoke. Her vision tunnels as G-forces press against her.

Then something strikes Raine on the side of the head, and there's nothing at all.

Daven Wyck snaps awake and realises he's looking up at the sky, and that it looks strange. Blurry. He blinks hard and his eyelids gum together. His fingers are locked tight around the stock of his gun, but he can't raise it. There's a ringing in his ears. Under that, the howl of the wind. He can't think where he is. Can't think straight at all.

There was an explosion. Heat and light and noise. Screams.

A memory surfaces. A Chimera transport, torn apart by a land mine. Blood on his face. Not his own blood, but everyone else's. Staggering out of the wreck and into the jungle, forgotten by death.

But then Wyck blinks again. There's no jungle here, just jagged peaks of dark stone. The Chimera, all those deaths, they were a long time ago on Cawter. He hadn't been a sergeant then. He hadn't been anything much at all.

He manages to drag himself into a sitting position. There's debris heaped around him. Grey metal on the grey stone. It takes him a moment or two to realise he's looking at parts of a Valkyrie gunship.

Parts of *their* Valkyrie gunship.

The memory of the crash comes back in pieces. He hadn't been secured, just holding on to the grab-netting. He'd lost his grip. Fallen clear of the gunship as it dug a furrow across the mountainside. Wyck looks down at his left arm and sees it loose and awkward, the shoulder dropped. Dislocated.

'Mists alive,' he says, his voice hoarse.

It's not because his shoulder hurts, though it does. Like a bastard. It's because for the second time in his life, he should definitely be dead and isn't. Forgotten by death, again.

Wyck lets his rifle hang by the strap and lifts his injured arm, holding it out like Lye had shown him once. He takes hold of his bad wrist with his good hand, takes three quick breaths, then pushes against it slowly. It makes him whine through his teeth. His vision bursts with spots of light, then there's a pop as the

joint reseats itself. He counts to ten until his vision clears and the nausea fades, flexing his fingers and feeling the way his nerves jolt in his injured arm.

‘Okay,’ he says, though there’s nobody around to hear it.

Wyck puts his good hand out and gets to his feet. Once he’s standing, he can see just how dead he should be.

He’s standing on an outcropping jutting from one of the Maw’s jagged teeth. The gunship’s carcass lies about one hundred metres away from him, just clear from the edge. He can’t see the nose of the Valkyrie at all, just the remains of the troop compartment, torn open like a ration tin. Around the wreckage, fires burn on slicks of fuel. Wyck can’t see any of his Wyldfolk. No grey-green camouflage. No bodies. He realises they were all strapped down, and that they probably still are. The damned commissar and Mayir, too.

Wyck starts towards the remains of the Valkyrie, the wind tugging at his fatigues. His broken ribs shift and grind together, and he slips on the scree, nearly falling.

No good. No good at all.

Wyck searches the pouches at his belt, one after the other. The first two vials are cracked and empty, but the third is good. He holds it up to the light. A stubby capsule of glass with a dark liquid inside. On the end, there’s an injector. He rolls back his fatigues and presses it against his arm.

Another dose so soon after the first is risky. Stupid, even. He flexes his numb fingers and his vision swims. Everything is distant. Muffled. Blurry.

No good, Wyck thinks, and he thumbs the injector.

There’s a gentle hiss. A bite from the needle he barely feels. Then there’s something else. Something familiar.

The crack of lasgun fire.

Wyck drops and rolls and the las-bolt skims him instead of punching clean through. The shot came from one of two Sighted hiding among the rocks higher up the slope. They have grey-and-blue armour, like the stone around them, and storm goggles for the wind. Wyck brings his gun up and fires, forcing them to duck back behind those rocks, then gets to his feet and runs towards them. The Sighted panic-fire at him. Another bolt grazes him. He barely feels it. The stimms are kicking in. Everything is growing sharp. All edges. He hears them shout in their own tongue. Wyck shoots the legs out from under one of them. The other starts to run. He catches him and knocks him to the ground. Hears bones snap. More snapping as he breaks the Sighted’s neck. The other one is still shouting. Shouting into a vox-set. Wyck takes the knife from the dead one and

uses it on the one still living until the shouting stops. Until there's blood all over his face and his hands and his fatigues. Red and rich and strong with the stink of iron. He blinks, then spits. Drops the knife. His heart is thundering, and the Sighted is so very still.

'Mists alive,' he says again.

Commissar Raine often dreams of flames. Of the sky alight. Of screams she cannot escape. Usually, upon waking, those dreams fade, but not this time.

This time, the flames follow her.

Raine tries to get up, and realises she can't. That she's strapped down, or more precisely, strapped *up*. The troop compartment of the Valkyrie is on its side, and she's hanging in her restraints, suspended halfway up the wall. Raine looks to her left. Trooper Dayn is dead in his harness, his neck broken. The two seats to her right are gone altogether, along with their occupants. Below Raine, on the opposite side of the compartment, a heavy, twisted bar of metal pins Tacticae Principal Mayir and the rest of the Antari in their seats.

'Mayir!' Raine shouts, trying to release her restraint harness.

The Tacticae Principal stirs, but she doesn't reply. Her face is a mask of blood. Raine gets an answer from Yulia Crys instead. She has her arms locked against the metal bar, trying to keep it from crushing her chest. Crys is strong, broad in the shoulders and chest, but the bar is heavy and she's weak from the smoke and the crash.

'Need a little help, commissar,' she shouts, hoarse.

Beside Crys, Yevi and Nial are unmoving. Raine can't tell if they are alive or dead.

'Hold strong,' Raine says.

Raine pulls at her harness, trying to free the locking mechanism one-handed while holding on to the grab-netting with the other. On the third try, it gives. The harness retracts, and Raine is left hanging from the netting. She half-climbs, half-slides down until she reaches Mayir and the Antari. The heat of the flames beats at her and takes her breath away. Raine is dizzy from the smoke and from whatever knocked her out. The skin pulls tight on the right side of her face when she blinks.

'It's like Drast,' Crys says. 'The way the fire roars.'

She is bleeding from several deep cuts in her face. More scars for someone already so scarred.

'We survived Drast,' Raine says. 'We will survive this.'

The metal is hot to the touch, but Raine doesn't flinch. She takes hold of the bar and starts to pull as Crys pushes from the other side. It moves, but not enough. There's a loud crack from Raine's left and the flames bloom hungrily. For an instant she is as paralysed as she is in her dreams, but then Raine pulls on the bar again with all of her weight. Crys pushes from the other side with a yell of effort and it finally moves clear. Clear enough for Raine to drag Mayir free. For Crys to slide out of the gap and pull the unconscious Nial from his seat. She tries to free Yevi, but his harness has run in the heat and fused. Yevi's skin has run too. Under the roar of the flames, there's a creaking. A hissing. A line of flame shoots across the ceiling.

'The fuel lines!' Raine shouts. 'Leave him!'

Crys pulls on the harness one more time, but it doesn't give. She lets go with a pained sound, then grabs Nial and runs. Raine is right beside her with Mayir, so she hears her clearly, saying the same words over and over.

'No fate,' Crys is saying. 'It's no fate.'

Wyck sees Crys run clear of the Valkyrie, dragging Nial with her. Raine's there too, and Mayir. The *Tacticae Principalis* is white as fog and covered in blood. She staggers and collapses. Raine is bleeding too, from a deep head wound. Her eyes go wide when she spots him.

'Wyck!'

Her accent twists the sound of his name.

'Where are the rest?' he says.

Raine grabs his arm, halting his run.

'Where are the *rest*?' Wyck shouts it at her this time.

Raine's answer is to grab him and push him to the ground as an explosion engulfs the wreckage. Raine shields her face. Wyck doesn't. He lets the heat sting his skin and the light dazzle him. Somewhere, under the bellow of the flames, he swears he hears a scream. Then the flames retreat and the wind blows the smoke clear. What's left looks like blackened bones. Wyck gets to his feet. The way the *stimms* make everything sharp means he sees what's in among the bones, too.

'Wyck,' Raine says.

He looks at her. At her inscrutable dark eyes and the pale scars that stand out against her skin. At her greatcoat and her sash and the pistol she holds, her finger never far from the trigger. He wonders if she even notices the deaths, or if they cut out that part when they made her.

‘We need to move,’ she says.

Those words make him stop wondering.

Raine turns and walks away. She pulls Mayir to her feet and shouts for Crys to get up. Wyck is about to follow her when he notices something at his feet, glinting in the dirt. He stoops down and picks it up. It’s a coloured gemstone, red like a bead of blood. There’s a crude aquila scratched into the surface. Wyck’s seen it plenty of times, because Yevi used to roll it in his hands before a fight.

He used to say it was lucky.

Wyck lets out a slow breath, then pitches the stone hard and high over the edge of the cliff and into the Maw.

‘How many?’ Raine asks.

Mayir is groaning as Raine packs the wound in her stomach. Something punched into the *Tacticae Principal* during the crash and cut her deep. Very deep. The dressing floods red immediately, soaking through to Raine’s hands.

‘Two,’ Wyck says. ‘Scouts, by their gear. More will be coming.’

It doesn’t give them long. Certainly not long enough for real field treatment. Raine unclasps her sash and takes it off, then winds it around the *Tacticae Principal*’s waist over the top of the dressing. When she pulls it tight, Mayir cries out.

‘They will kill you,’ Mayir mumbles. ‘They will kill you, and they will take me.’

‘They will not take you,’ Raine says. ‘I will not allow it.’

Mayir shakes her head. Her artificial eyes are still crystal clear, but she can’t seem to keep them locked on Raine.

‘They have taken dozens,’ she says. ‘Those of value. They are never seen again.’

A good deal of that is true. The Sighted have taken many prisoners, all of some value to the Imperial war machine. It’s why High Command wanted Mayir out of Caulder’s Reach. For the things she knows. It’s the last part that isn’t quite true. Raine heard that General Lorin’s ruined corpse was displayed at the head of the Sighted armoured column when they came to retake Caulder’s Reach. His value, it seems, was in spreading fear. It has certainly worked on Saleen Mayir. The *Tacticae Principal* is shaking, flinching at every distant sound.

‘Get me out of here,’ Mayir says. ‘I will make sure you are rewarded for it. I have influence. Anything you want.’

There’s no trace of the *Tacticae Principal*’s haughty manner now it’s her own

blood being spilt. Now she's just desperate to stay alive. It makes Saleen Mayir weak, and if there is one quality that Raine cannot abide, it is weakness.

'Duty is its own reward,' she says.

Raine looks over at Crys. She's crouched over the vox-set Wyck took from the Sighted scouts, broadcasting a repeat emergency message in Antari battle-cant. Nial is sitting beside her with his back against a rock, conscious now. His face is a mess, his nose broken and his chin cut open to the bone. Most of his teeth got knocked out in the crash. He's got his lasgun raised, though, watching the mountain paths.

'Anything?' Raine says.

Crys shakes her head.

'Unless you count static, commissar. I think we need to go higher to get a clear signal.' There's a pause. A frown. 'Unless it's because there's nobody around to answer.'

It's Raine's turn to shake her head. The Sighted might have put them on the back foot, but defeat is unthinkable.

'Keep at it,' she says. 'We will go higher, as you say. They will hear us.'

Raine puts her hands under Mayir's arms and pulls her to her feet. The Tacticae Principal cries out in pain. She has to lean against the cliff face to stay upright. Her face is pale and Raine can hear her bionic eyes struggling to focus.

Raine knows Mayir won't be able to run, or fight.

I have influence, Mayir had said. *Anything you want*.

She won't hold strong either. She'll break for the Sighted, if she thinks it'll save her life.

Raine takes off her greatcoat and starts to pull off her gloves.

'What are you doing?' Wyck says.

Raine looks him in the eyes. His pupils are blown, swallowing up the grey. It looks like a concussion, but Raine knows better.

'We cannot outrun the Sighted with Mayir,' she says. 'And we cannot let them take her.' She takes off her peaked cap. The wind bites without it. 'But if they take me instead, then you have a chance of getting Mayir back to High Command. Of fulfilling our duty.'

Wyck stares at her.

'They will kill you,' he says flatly.

The idea doesn't particularly seem to trouble him.

'They might,' Raine says. 'But first they will take me where they have taken the other prisoners.'

He blinks. ‘The Sighted stronghold.’

She nods. ‘And then you will know where it is, and so will High Command.’

‘How?’ Wyck says. ‘Nobody has managed to track them back to that place. They disappear into the mountains like water into the earth.’

Raine puts her hand in the pocket of her greatcoat and takes out her timepiece. It is still intact, even after the crash. The only damage is the crack that’s been there since the day she got it. Since the day it was left in an unmarked box at the scholam on Gloam where she was trained.

‘Take this,’ she says. ‘Find Zane, and give it only to her. She will know how to find me.’

Wyck frowns, but he takes the timepiece. Raine watches it go into one of the pouches at his belt. She feels hollow, like she’s missing a part. Not one of the Antari has ever held that timepiece. Not even Andren Fel, though she trusts the storm trooper captain with her life.

And Raine knows with absolute certainty that she cannot say the same about Daven Wyck.

Above the Valkyrie crash site, the path flattens out. Tall, hardy trees grow clumped together, creaking in the high, cold wind. The ground underfoot is a mess of curled roots and loose scree. Wyck keeps his gun raised and places his feet carefully. Every noise is deafening. The cracks in the bark look like shadowed smiles. He thinks about Antar. The forests of his home world are thick, dark tangles of thorns and rich green leaves where fog curls underfoot. The sort of place where you lose your way. Where things with teeth wait in the darkness. A place of stories and superstition. His squad is named for one of those stories, for the wicked spirits of the forest who cut trespassers deep. He should feel at ease among the trees, but he doesn’t, because this time he is the trespasser.

It’s the timepiece, too, making him wary. It weighs heavily on him, sitting in the next pouch along from where he keeps his last vial of stimms. A part of Wyck swears he can hear it ticking, like a heartbeat carried with him.

Wyck stops, spotting something between the trees. A barely glimpsed movement. It’s the Sighted. He can’t say how long they’ve been watching, but he hopes it’s not long enough for them to know that Raine isn’t Mayir. That the *Tacticae Principalis* is actually hiding with Crys and Nial, up in the cliffs.

Wyck raises his hand and Raine moves up beside him. He barely hears her tread. She has Mayir’s bloodied yellow cloak thrown around her shoulders. He

thought that would make her look less like a commissar, but it doesn't. It's not the uniform that makes Severina Raine what she is.

Raine sees what he sees. She slowly raises her pistol.

And the forest lights with gunfire.

A las-bolt hits the trunk of the tree to Raine's left. Splinters hit her, followed by the smell of scorched wood. The Sighted are everywhere. All around them. Bellowed words in their guttural tongue carry to her. It takes her a moment to understand them.

We have the one! the voice is calling. *We have the one!*

The rest of the Sighted take up the cry until the forest rings with it.

Raine looks at Wyck. 'Get Mayir out of here,' she says. 'As I said.'

It seems a long moment before he nods. A moment filled with the snap of las-fire and the splintering of wood.

'As you said,' he says.

Raine sets off running towards the Sighted. The chant is interrupted by a rolling wave of cheers and shouts. She brings up her pistol, firing twice. Two of them are knocked onto their backs. Blood mists the air and stains the pale bark of the trees. A las-bolt grazes her leg. Another her shoulder. It should burn, but all she feels is cold. The feeling spreads along her limbs until she cannot run anymore. Around her, frost is spreading up the trunks of the trees. Weight presses down on Raine from nowhere, and she is forced to her knees. Her vision dazzles.

A figure steps into view. Raine sees bloody, bare feet and a long feathered cloak that snags on tree roots. She looks up. A man stands over her, his lips tweaked up in a smile. Her face is reflected a dozen times in the cut gemstones where his eyes should be.

'The one,' he says, in Gothic this time.

Then he closes his fist, and darkness takes her.

Wyck sits by the body of the Sighted scout with his back against one of the pale trees, wiping the blade of his knife on his fatigues. They aren't green and grey anymore. They are every shade of red, from scarlet to rust. Blood on blood. The Sighted is a mess that Wyck can't quite remember making. He just remembers the feeling. Bright and vital. It's one of the only things that make him feel like that.

That, and the stimms.

In his other hand, he holds Raine's timepiece. It keeps drawing his eye. Brass and bone, marked with a seal he doesn't know. Beautifully made. There's a word

scratched into the back of the case clumsily, as if by hand. A name, he thinks.
Lucia.

Wyck gets to his feet. His arms and legs ache from running and fighting and his lip is split from where the Sighted scout punched him. He walks over to where the trees spill off the cliff. The Maw stretches away below, deep and dark. Wyck holds Raine's timepiece out over the edge by the chain. The wind snags at it, spinning it. The name engraved on the back flashes in the light.

He could drop it. Tell Crys and Nial that Raine is dead. They could call in a Valkyrie and fly out of the Maw. The Sighted would kill her for real, and he would be done with Commissar Severina Raine and the way she hangs over him like a spectre of death. Like the black hound of shadow from the old stories, come to kill those that fate forgot to take.

He looks at the timepiece hanging there and wills his shaking hand to open, but his fingers don't move.

He doesn't care about Raine's blood on his hands. She's not Antari. She's not one of them. She's an outsider, and he knows for a fact that she wouldn't hesitate to put a bullet in him. He's seen her do it to better men.

But he still can't drop it.

If she dies here, she'll be replaced by another. The spectre will follow him in a different form. At least with Raine, like with the forests of home, death would wear a familiar face. She'd owe him too, whether she liked it or not. Maybe she'd even stop looking at him so closely.

Then there is the name scratched into the brass of the watch.

Lucia.

It proves that there's still a part of her that cares about something. Wyck feels the barest pull of a smile.

Because something that the commissar cares about is something that he can use.

The Valkyrie gunship sets down on the flat plateau at the heart of the Maw amid a squall of dust. The turbojets cycle down and fall silent, then there's a thud as the ramp drops. Six Antari soldiers disembark. The rest of Wyck's Wyldfolk. The ones that were lucky enough to be on the other Valkyrie out of Caulder's Reach. They are followed by five more in black and grey with snarling faces painted on their masks. Andren Fel and his Duskhounds. High Command sent Lye, too. Wyck points the medic straight to where Mayir is sitting. Lye will patch Mayir up as best she can and then accompany her back to High Command.

Wyck's eyes go back to the gunship as the last figure sets foot on the ramp. Lydia Zane. The psyker's pale face turns to Wyck immediately and he tightens his grip on his gun.

'This is all?' Crys says. 'We go after the Sighted with this?'

Wyck nods. The response from High Command when they finally connected via the vox-set had been clear. With the Sighted taking back the primary city, there are no more guns to spare. The Antari are to follow Raine's trail alone. If they find her and the Sighted stronghold – and the Lord-General had put a lot of emphasis on that *if* – then they will have four hours to retrieve her and any of the other high-value prisoners and do as much damage to the Sighted as possible.

After that, the site will be bombarded from orbit, whether the Antari are still in there or not.

'About time,' Wyck says, as his squad gather to him in loose ranks.

Crys and Nial join the others, exchanging handshakes and softly spoken words.

'You look a mess, Dav,' Awd says.

Wyck chose Gereth Awd as a second when he had to split the unit because he was one of the longest-serving Wyldfolk still standing. One that he can trust, mostly because Awd owes him several times over.

'You mean I look like I've been doing something, instead of sitting on my arse.'

Awd grins, but then he's always grinning. The burn scars don't allow for anything else. He's as much of a mess as Wyck, his camouflage peeled back to grey and his knuckles split open to the bone. He's covered in ash and filth from using the flamer slung across his chest.

Awd's eyes soften. It's the way to tell he's being serious.

'So we're it,' he says. 'What's left of the Wyldfolk.'

Wyck nods. He thinks back to throwing Yevi's luckstone into the Maw. 'We will cut them twice as badly as they've done us,' he says. 'For every death.'

The two of them clasp wrists.

'For every death,' Awd says.

'Wyck.'

Lydia Zane's voice tugs at him like snagging claws against his mind.

'Take the others and keep watch,' Wyck says to Awd.

Awd does as he's told and Wyck turns to face Lydia Zane. He still hasn't grown used to the loss of her grey Antari eyes and the silver bionics that replace them. He always hated looking the psyker in the eyes before, but now it's even worse. It feels like she can see more of him, somehow. Andren Fel stands beside Zane. The Duskhound's armour is black and grey but for the plating on his forearms.

Red, to mark him as captain.

‘Raine gave you something I can use to find her,’ Zane says. ‘To track the shape of her soul.’

Wyck takes the timepiece out of the pouch at his belt and holds it out so that Zane can see it. There’s a shift in Andren Fel, the barest movement of his fingers on the stock of his hellgun.

‘The commissar gave that to you,’ he says.

The Duskhound sounds like he doesn’t believe it for a moment. Wyck expects it from him. Fel follows Raine around like a shadow. He might as well not be Antari at all.

‘Freely,’ Wyck says. ‘Said to let nobody else touch it but Zane.’

Fel’s face is hidden behind that Duskhound mask, but Wyck can tell he’s angry and can’t help feeling a little pleased about it. It doesn’t last. A creeping unease pushes up in its place. More snagging at his mind.

‘He is speaking the truth,’ Zane says. Then she smiles. ‘This time.’

Wyck spits on the ground at her feet. His mind burns where hers brushed against it. He tries not to think about what she might have lifted from it.

‘Do that again and I will cut you for it. That’s the truth.’

Lydia Zane laughs. ‘I would love for you to try.’

Wyck curls his fists. He wants to hit her, or better, shoot her. He won’t do either, though, and she knows it.

He’s too afraid of her for that.

‘Do your damned spell,’ he says, and throws the timepiece at her.

Zane catches it easily in her gloved fingers. ‘It is not a spell,’ she says. ‘It is a sensing.’

Wyck doesn’t see the distinction, and he doesn’t much care, either.

‘How does it work?’ Fel asks.

Zane removes one of her gloves.

‘Our souls echo inside the things that we carry, especially those that we carry close.’

She holds the timepiece by the chain.

‘Once I have that echo, the shape of a soul, I can find it again.’

‘Like a hound with a scent,’ Fel says.

Zane nods. ‘Just so.’

She lowers the timepiece into her hand. Wyck keeps his finger on the trigger of his rifle. He can see Fel doing the same. The moment that the brass casing touches Zane’s skin, the temperature around them drops like a stone.

‘Oh,’ Zane says.

‘What?’ Wyck and Fel say in the same instant.

Zane doesn’t look up, focused entirely on the timepiece. Wyck can hear her silver eyes focusing with a soft hiss.

‘The soul-echo is strong,’ she says, her breath misting in the air.

‘You can use it to find her?’ Fel asks.

Zane nods. Wyck watches as a single, impossible tear slides down her cheek. It freezes against her skin. He wonders exactly what Zane saw when she touched the watch. What in the name of the Throne could make a woman like Lydia Zane cry?

‘What is it?’ Fel says, his finger still on the trigger of his gun.

Zane brushes the ice from her cheek. ‘Nothing of concern,’ she says. ‘Follow me.’

Raine sits on a hard wooden stool, her elbows resting on the table in front of her. Outside, the wind howls. The air feels damp, even through the canvas of her command tent. On the table sits her bolt pistol. It’s properly and carefully disassembled in the way she was taught to do it at the schola progenium. A place for each part. Each part in its place. Her masters had said that she would find that maxim true of all things in her duties as a commissar. Raine sometimes wonders if her masters ever considered what happens when a part goes missing.

When it cannot be replaced.

‘So, a story then?’

Raine glances up at Andren Fel. He is sitting opposite her, also resting his elbows on the table. His arms are a dark patchwork of tattoos. Shadowy hounds and water wraiths and loops of pointed thorns. As the hanging lantern overhead swings, they seem to move.

‘It’s my turn?’ Raine says.

He nods.

‘What story do you want to hear?’ she asks.

‘What about that timepiece you carry? Tell me about that.’

Raine pushes a slender brush into the barrel of the pistol to scrub away the foulings. ‘We don’t know each other well enough for that.’

‘Don’t we?’

Raine thinks about the ways they have come to know each other. About their scars and stories. It’s not enough. Not for that.

‘No,’ she says, and begins to thread the barrel back onto the pistol’s receiver.

‘It was made on Darpex,’ Andren says. ‘And that’s where you come from too, isn’t it?’

‘I thought you wanted me to tell this story,’ she says. ‘But it seems you already know it.’

‘Just what I’ve heard.’

‘Darpex doesn’t matter,’ she says, though it does. ‘I was made on Gloam when I was taken into the scholam. When I was shaped into what I am now. Where I was born, who I was before that, those things scarcely matter and you know it.’

Andren smiles at her. It’s a smile that doesn’t sit easily on his face, as if it’s not his. ‘I’m not sure I’d say so,’ he says. ‘Not if I was born to parents like yours.’

A chill runs through Raine that she has trouble concealing. ‘You are overstepping, captain.’

The wind picks up outside the tent. Rain thrashes the canvas.

‘Lord-General Militant Thema Raine,’ he says. ‘Your mother’s is a name to live up to.’

He tilts his head.

‘But your father, not so much. It must gall you to bear his blood.’

He smiles again, too wide.

‘A coward’s blood,’ he says.

The words aren’t his. He’d never speak to her like that. His voice is all wrong too, distorted like a bad recording. Or a voice you might hear in a dream. Raine catches sight of the surface of the table. The tin cup at her elbow. They are both textureless and indistinct.

Coated with frost.

‘This is not real,’ she says.

Andren laughs, and that settles it. She knows that laugh well enough to know when it is wrong.

‘What are you talking about?’ he says.

Raine shakes her head and her vision smears, edge to edge. She fumbles with the final parts of the pistol, her fingers cold and slow.

‘This is not real,’ she says again. ‘And neither are you.’

She raises her rebuilt pistol and points it at his face. Right between his grey Antari eyes. Her hands are shaking and her heart is beating out of time.

‘This is a lie,’ she says.

He holds up his hands, scarred and tattooed. His eyes go wide. ‘Severina,’ he says. ‘Don’t.’

Her pistol booms and Andren falls backwards. His blood hits her face. The

wind goes from a howl to a scream that rips the tent to shreds. Turns the table to splinters. Raine squeezes her eyes closed and keeps her hands tight on her pistol as the world falls apart.

When she opens them again, it's to a completely different place.

The floor is stone, shot through with glimmering silver veins. Fat drops of blood sit there on the surface of it. Another drop falls from her nose to join it as she watches. The air is cold and carries a strange smell, like old flowers. Raine is on her knees, her hands chained in front of her through a loop driven into the floor of the cave. When she tries to move, she realises that the same chain binds her feet. Raine raises her head with effort and finds herself looking once again into the gory gemstone eyes of the man from the forest.

He smiles.

'So strong,' he says. His accent is strange. He is not of Gholl. 'Your mind is a cage, Severina Raine.'

He knows her name. Of course he does. He's been inside her mind. Raine's stomach turns. She can still feel the cold metal grip of her pistol in her hands. The way Andren's blood spattered her face. She cannot help but let slip a wordless noise of rage.

The man stands up and turns his back on her, making the feathers of his cloak stir. They are in a cave that stretches up and away, the ceiling lost to darkness. Crystal stalagmites stand sentry around a central dais. There's a pattern carved into it that stings Raine's eyes when she looks at it. The man treads across it, his feet leaving bloody prints that disappear almost immediately, swallowed up by the stone.

'Won't you ask my name?' he says. 'I know yours.'

She spits on the ground, trying to rid herself of the taste of roses. 'Traitors have no names. They are just that. Traitors.'

The man sighs.

'Come, now,' he says. 'There is a great power in names. You know that is true, Severina Raine of Darpex, then of Gloam. You who chose to keep your mother's name, and not your father's.'

Raine's limbs shake with the need to get to her feet and kill him. The need to take back her secrets and her self from the traitor with the gemstone eyes.

'I am Arcadius Verastus,' the man says. 'Ninth of nine.'

His robes are plain and dark. No insignia, save for the silver chain around his neck on which hangs a charm in the shape of a feather. Nothing to tell her what he is, beyond the name and the title he has given himself.

Ninth of nine.

The number prickles at Raine's skin.

'Whatever it is that you want, you will not get it from me,' she says. 'I will tell you nothing.'

Verastus smiles patiently.

'Oh, I know,' he says. 'But then I do not need you to. I already know all about you. I know that you allowed yourself to be captured in place of Saleen Mayir and that you pinned your hopes of rescue on a man who hates you.'

Raine's throat tightens.

'You thought we wanted Mayir,' Verastus says. 'But she is a mundane creature. Plenty of blood on those hands, but no real value. Only small boons are granted in exchange for those like her.'

He takes a couple of steps towards her. The stone drinks his footprints.

'You think value and you think of rank. Of medals and pins and petty little things.' He crouches down in front of her. 'True value is in potential. In the way the fates tremble at a soul's touch. As they do with yours.'

The smell of old flowers is coming from him. Sweet and rotting, all at once.

'It was always you,' he says. 'In my waking dreams you fell from the sky on wings of fire. By the light of your soul, the flames seemed plain and dim.'

He lifts his hand as if he might touch her face, stopping just short. Pressure begins to build behind Raine's eyes.

'The things you have done. The things you would do, given the chance. You are a fatemaker, Severina Raine, and my lord will give great things in trade for your soul.'

Raine keeps her head up, though her vision is running at the edges. 'So much faith in false promises,' she says. 'You will die, and so will your lord.'

Verastus rocks back on his heels and he laughs. It's a dry rasp, like claws on stone.

'My lord will die? Oh, please.'

His too-wide grin grows wider.

'You cannot kill a god.'

Before the Valkyrie takes off, Wyck takes Nuria Lye aside, away from the others, where the roar of the gunship's engines keeps their words between the two of them.

'No,' she says, before he even asks anything.

'Nuria. You owe me.'

It's true. For lots of things, just like with Awd, and if there's one thing Wyck knows, it's the value of a debt.

'You're chasing death,' she says. 'By rights the amount you take should have killed you already.'

'You make it sound like you care.'

Lye looks furious. For a second he thinks she might hit him. He almost wants her to.

'About you?' she says. 'I don't. Not a damn bit. I care about what you'll do to the regiment. To our reputation.'

Wyck can't see the truth like Lydia Zane can, but he knows Lye still cares. It's why she always gives in, in the end.

'You say I'm chasing death,' he says. 'But I'm not. It's chasing me, and it has been since Cawter. You know that.'

She runs her hand through her shock of red hair. 'I should report you,' she says.

'Then they'll put a bullet in you as surely as me,' he says. 'And nobody wins but death.'

Nuria Lye lets out a long, slow breath. She reaches into the pouch at her belt, takes out three vials and presses them into his hand.

'Enough to get it done,' she says. 'And then no more.'

He closes his hand around the vials. It's what she says every time, and it's never true.

'As you say,' he says. 'Just enough, then no more.'

'A *god*,' Raine says in disbelief. 'You are not just a traitor – you are a madman. A heretic. There is only one god, Him on Earth.'

'That is what they tell you, isn't it? From the day you are born it is driven into you over and over again. I suppose you heard it many times at the schola progenium.' Verastus pauses, and there's a flicker in his face. 'I know I did.'

Raine's limbs flood cold, as if she's been dropped into ice water. She wonders what he was before he took those lies into his heart. Before he gave up his eyes for gemstones.

'Do not bother to voice the question,' Verastus says, answering her thoughts. 'It's like you said – what we were before scarcely matters, does it?'

Raine pulls at her restraints at the sound of her own words coming from his liar's mouth, but she can't reach him. Can't silence him.

'You are so *blind*,' he says. 'Shattered and closed.'

He turns his outstretched hand and the pain in her head dials up.

‘Let’s see if we can change that, shall we?’

The world frays, tearing away like cloth, until Raine stands with Verastus in a wide-open space. Pockmarked grey stone stretches away on all sides, bordered by fortified walls that reach up to the sky. It looks like a parade ground. Snow falls silently. Where it hits Raine’s skin, it burns.

She tries to hurl herself at Verastus, to hurt him, even if it’s only in this world of dreams, but her limbs refuse her. She stays locked in place, breathing hard through her teeth.

‘Always fighting,’ he says. ‘But then, that is what they made you for.’

The huge stone doors on the far side of the parade ground open with a rumble. Figures file in through them in formation. A company of shadows.

‘I said that you were a fatemaker,’ Verastus says. ‘And these are the fates you have made.’

Raine sees Yevi, his skin running like wax. She sees Tevar Lun, his honest face shattered from her bolt pistol round. She sees Varn, holes punched through him wide enough to see through. Dayn and Ludi and Selk and dozens and dozens more Antari. Then there are the others that came before, from every war on every front. A muddle of fatigues and battledress and robes. Then last of all, slight figures in soft-soled shoes and scholam clothes.

‘This is your revelation,’ Raine says. ‘You show me the dead as if you expect me to flinch from them. To feel guilt or shame. I am a commissar. Death is my companion, and delivering it is my duty.’

Verastus looks at her sidelong.

‘Pretty words,’ he says. ‘But this is not everything that I have to show you.’

Wyck exhales a slow breath as he watches the Sighted scouts come into the clearing through the crosshairs of his rifle. His fingers twitch by the trigger. Heat rushes in his head. Whatever Lye gave him, it worked. But then, he did take two doses.

Enough to get it done, just like she said.

It’s an effort not to drop from the tree he’s hiding in and chase them down. Throne, he wants to move and fight and hurt them. But he can’t, because they need to do it quietly. He has to wait for them to come close. Just like with the other patrols they’ve silenced on their path deep into the Maw.

The Sighted are talking in their own tongue. Wyck knows a few words. The sort of words you pick up during a war.

Guard, or protect. Seek, or watch.

Then that last word.

Keep. Not keep as you would a possession. Keep like a castle.

The stronghold.

They are on the right path. Zane's witch-sense is working.

There's a snap of twigs from between the trees. The Sighted fall silent, and their rifles come up. The one with the sword at his hip gestures and the group splits. Six keep coming towards Wyck and the Wyldfolk, including the one with the vox-set on her back. Five go back in a ragged spread towards where the Duskhounds wait in shadow.

Wyck's ears ring with their footsteps. His mouth is dry. His heart loud.

They have to get closer. Into the circle.

The circle is Crys and Awd and the rest of his Wyldfolk, waiting among the trees and the scrub and the standing stones. Waiting for the circle to close, for when they can coil around the Sighted like briars and not let go until they've bled them.

They have to get closer.

The Sighted with the vox-set turns, her face settling in Wyck's sights.

He holds his breath.

And they step into the circle.

Wyck fires his rifle, and the Sighted with the vox-set drops with a yelp and a spiral of smoke. There's a shout from the one with the sword at his hip. He draws it, lurching forward into the trip line that Crys has set. There is a series of low *pops* and fire bursts in a circle around the Sighted. More shouting. Another word Wyck knows.

Kill.

Wyck drops from the tree, right on top of the scout leader with the sword, knocking him to the ground. That pretty sword is useless when your attacker has got a knife between your ribs. Blood makes his hand slick. The Sighted claws at his face and throat. Wyck twists the knife. More blood. The clawing stops.

The ambush has become a melee, with the Sighted fighting back like cornered wolves. There's shouting and cursing. Thrashing, desperate movement. Flashes of las-fire and motes of flame. To Wyck, it all seems to be happening so very slowly. He sees Crys put one of the Sighted down with a punch to the throat. Another of them goes to stick one of their black-bladed knives in her back. Wyck gets between them because he's faster. Faster than he's ever been. He breaks the Sighted's knife arm, then hits him with the butt of his rifle, shattering the glass of the Sighted's goggles and most of the face underneath. Teeth and

blood and bone. He turns to face another of the Sighted, hits him too, then puts a las-bolt in him. Sweat and oil and smoke. Wyck's heart is loud. So loud. A shadow moves in his peripheral vision. He snaps around, with his ears ringing and his heart beating like a rolling drum.

And realises with an instant to spare that he's pointing his rifle at Andren Fel. His fingers twitch. It's a conscious and deliberate effort to lower his gun.

'It's done,' Fel says slowly.

Or maybe it's not slowly. Wyck can't really tell. He looks around at the Sighted, slumped and still. Silent. His Wyldfolk are watching him. So are the Duskhounds. He tries to ignore the burning in his limbs and the prickling against his mind. The thunder of his heart.

'We cut them,' Wyck says absently.

Fel tilts his head. 'They cut you, that's for sure.'

Wyck feels it then, a distant stinging. The cut goes right across his throat, just shallow enough not to open it all the way.

'We should keep moving,' he says, his voice hoarse.

'There is not much further to go.'

Zane stands at the edge of the clearing, just beyond where the circle of fire is burning low. Her pale face is like a moonstone in the dim light. She has never looked so much like a bad spirit.

'Follow me,' she says. 'To the mouth of the Maw.'

Verastus waves his hand and the scene kaleidoscopes before Raine's eyes.

'I said that your value is in your potential,' he says. 'In the fates you might make. The tremors you send singing through the futures.'

There's a flicker like the changing of a vid-reel, and Verastus places his hand on Raine's shoulder.

Raine sees Gloam aflame, the hives toppling to be swallowed by the sea. The sky splits with lightning and the sound of screams.

She sees rows and rows of Antari dead, draped in cloaks of forest-drab. Each one bears the single wound of execution.

She sees Lord-General Militant Serek lying dead from a single bolt pistol round, his blood spreading across a floor of white marble to touch Raine's boots.

She sees Daven Wyck, coming at her wild-eyed, blood up from the stimms. He puts a knife in her chest, too fast to stop.

She sees Lydia Zane, alight with psychic fire that burns until even her bones are gone.

Last of all, she sees Andren Fel, standing with his back against cold grey stone, facing down a firing squad for crimes committed in her name.

‘Tricks and lies,’ Raine manages to say.

Verastus ignores her. His grip on her shoulder tightens.

‘And then there are the fates that made you,’ he says.

The scene changes again. Raine sees her mother, decorated in bright regimental dress. Her father, decorated with blood from the executioner’s bullet that killed him.

There’s one more figure. One that steals the air from Raine’s lungs.

Her sister.

‘Lucia.’

Raine can’t help saying the name. It claws free of her throat on its own. Her heart missteps, going out of time. She coughs up blood.

Verastus sighs. His smile is beatific.

‘I thought you should see it,’ he says. ‘Your value.’

Raine looks at the heretic leader through blinking, bleary eyes. ‘No,’ she says, the words coming as agonised whispers. ‘This is not my value.’

And with a scream of effort, she locks her hands around his throat.

Verastus struggles, but Raine hangs on, her vision dazzling and her mind alight. The world around them shatters and all of the fates blow away like smoke. Reality reasserts itself, all traces of the waking dream gone, save for the pain and the burning in her mind.

Arcadius Verastus looks down at her. He wipes the blood from his nose with the back of his hand. Psycho-stigmatic bruises mark his throat.

‘You know,’ he says, his voice hoarse, ‘it really will be a pleasure to kill you, Severina Raine.’

Wyck and the Antari follow Lydia Zane to the cliff’s edge. She stands there for a moment, buffeted by the wind. The cliff is open and exposed, and it makes Wyck uneasy.

‘You said it was close,’ he says. ‘Where is it?’

Zane turns to look at him. She looks pulled thin, like an animal skin set to cure. ‘It is close,’ she says. ‘Can you not see it?’

Wyck curls his fists. ‘No, I can’t see it, because there is nothing here to see. Now stop with your damned witch-words and start making sense.’

Zane laughs. ‘Follow me,’ she says.

Then she steps off the cliff.

Wyck's hammering heart skips a beat, but Zane doesn't fall. She doesn't scream. She just disappears completely, as if the wind took her.

'Emperor's bloody *wounds*,' says Crys. 'Now what?'

Wyck scowls. He's just worked out why he feels so uneasy, and it's not because they're exposed. It's because there's more witchcraft here, and it's powerful. He spits on the ground at his feet.

'We follow her,' he says, and he takes a step forward.

It's like pushing through a waterfall, all noise and cold for a moment, and then it's behind him and he's standing on a ridge looking down on the mouth of the Maw. The Sighted stronghold. It's a deep, dark hollow cut into the rock, big enough to take the height of a scout titan, fortified with void shielding and gun emplacements. Floodlights make a circle of light in front of the entrance, painting hard black shadows on the ground from the groups of Sighted guarding it.

'Well,' Andren Fel says. 'This isn't going to be easy.'

For once, Wyck finds himself agreeing with the Duskhound. 'We can't fight our way in,' he says. 'Not through that.'

Zane shakes her head. There's frost patterning her shorn scalp. 'We will not have to. I can hide us, just as they hide this place.'

'Just like that?' Wyck says flatly.

Zane's brow furrows. 'Nothing is done *just like that*. I will not just be hiding us from soldiers, but from those who see like I do. It will tax me.'

'But you can do it?' Fel asks.

'If we are fast,' Zane says, with a humourless smile. 'And lucky.'

Wyck looks down at the mounted guns and the low, tracked vehicles and the deep dark mouth of the Maw, and he suppresses a shudder. It's not the thought of running towards his death – it's the thought of trusting Lydia Zane to hide him from it. But then again, he doesn't have a whole lot of choice about either.

And he's been slipping past death for a long while now without it catching hold.

'Do it,' Wyck says. 'Let's end this.'

The Antari pass into the mouth of the Maw, invisible and silent. The world as seen through Zane's projected glamour runs like wet paint. Sound is muted and distant. They pass under the gun emplacements. By the vehicles and patrols. Wyck keeps his rifle levelled. His hands are clammy on the stock and the trigger. It would only take a second. One lapse in Zane's concentration, and the Sighted

will have them. They'll be torn to shreds. It is cold inside the glamour, and getting colder with every passing second. The rasp of Zane's breathing is like a blunt blade on a whetstone.

As the tunnels go deeper into the mountain, they narrow. There are Sighted everywhere, as if they've been called to muster. Wyck watches them through Zane's glamour and realises *muster* is the wrong word. They are all laughing, grinning. Some are singing.

It's a celebration.

'This is bad,' he whispers.

Zane nods. 'There is a darkness at the heart of this place,' she slurs. 'It grows. Every moment.'

She stops walking so suddenly that Wyck nearly slams right into her.

'Do you hear that?' Zane asks.

'What?' Wyck hisses.

She turns and looks at him. There are trails of blood running from her bionic eyes. It freezes on her skin. Wyck fights the urge to run from her.

'It sounds like wings,' Zane says. 'Like beating wings.'

The glamour flickers. Wyck smells the cold air of the cave for an instant. He hears a lot of things, but not the sound of wings.

'Feathers,' Zane murmurs. 'Black wings and talons. They follow like shadows.'

The glamour flickers again, for longer this time. A group of Sighted who just passed in the other direction halt. They stop their singing and one of them looks back and frowns.

'Fix her, sarge,' Crys says in a warning voice.

Fix her. As if there's any fixing something like Lydia Zane. Something wicked and broken and wrong.

'Stop,' he says to Zane. 'It's in your damned head.'

'Shadows,' Zane says, louder now, her voice hoarse. 'Like shadows at my back!'

She starts clawing at her face, her arms, fighting something he cannot see. Her nails cut bloody furrows in her skin. Wyck does the only thing he can think to do.

He drives the butt of his rifle into her face.

Zane stumbles and falls to one knee. She is mumbling witch-words and drooling clots of blood onto the ground.

'Don't you break,' Wyck hisses at her. 'Not now.'

The glamour flickers again. Wyck grits his teeth and drops to his knee beside

her, then grabs her by the arm.

For less than a heartbeat, Wyck hears the wings of birds. Sees them, too. A black, heaving cloud of them flapping and crying and tearing with their talons, all pulling to a point that's so dark you could never hope to see through it.

He lets go, his fingers burning with cold and his heart singing with fear. Zane's head snaps up and she locks her false silver eyes onto him.

Just enough, and then no more.

Wyck's mind burns with her voice.

Give me the vial.

She knows. She saw him, like he saw her. He should never have touched her.

Give. Me. The. Vial.

It's his last one, but he can't deny her. She won't let him. He reaches into the pouch at his belt and puts it in her hand in such a way that the others won't see. Zane presses the injector against the inside of her arm. Wyck hears the hiss as it bites, and misses the rush of it.

'We need to move,' Andren Fel says.

The Sighted are right near the edge of Zane's projection, their guns up and their voices loud and wary.

'Get up,' Wyck whispers to Zane.

She's shaking. More blood on the stone.

'Let it hit you,' he hisses. 'And *get up.*'

Zane's hands curl hard. She exhales a ragged breath, then gets to her feet. She glances at the Sighted through the smeared-glass edge of the glamour, and they freeze in place and start murmuring and shaking. Another word Wyck knows. A cousin to the other one.

Death.

The Sighted drop their guns. Their eyes roll back and they shake and bleed from their noses and ears. As one, they stagger back the way they came, impelled. Zane is running with sweat that freezes instantly on her skin. There are open wounds on her arms and face and throat, some from her own nails and some that look as though they were opened by talons.

'Now, we move,' she whispers.

One by one, the Sighted bring their prisoners and chain them at specific points around the central circle of stone. Around the symbol that makes Raine's stomach turn. The symbol on which Arcadius Verastus now stands, arms outstretched. He casts off his cloak of feathers to reveal words burned into his

skin. More push up like new scars even as Raine watches, turning black in seconds. His gemstone eyes flicker as if caught by candlelight.

There are those among the prisoners that Raine knows. One is Antari. Captain Karin Sun, of Gold Company. Then there is regimental advisor Haran Yale. Beside him, Delvaren Kharadesh, the firstborn son of Gholl's most powerful noble house. Then there are others who she does not know. Non-military. Two are dressed in the robes of acolytes. One in the vestments of a priest. One in worker's gear. The last of all is a pale man dressed in ragged clothes. He is old and young all at once with black shadows under his sunken eyes. Cables hang from his scalp, disconnected and severed. A psyker, unchained.

He's the first to have his eyes taken.

One of the Sighted does it, while the psyker screams. It's a long howl that tapers off slowly, replaced by words murmured through his teeth.

'Dark. Dark. Dark.'

The Sighted cuts the psyker's throat in one smooth motion. The murmuring becomes a gargle, then stops altogether. The psyker slumps forward and his blood begins to flow along the channel carved into the floor, towards that central symbol. Towards Verastus.

The woman in the worker's gear takes up the screaming. Kharadesh begs, shouting for clemency, that he has money, power. Secrets. It reminds Raine of Mayir.

I have influence. Anything you want.

Raine doesn't scream. Doesn't beg. She focuses her burning, hurting mind and pulls at her bonds. At the scholam they tested her many times by binding her feet and hands and blindfolding her. They would leave her in the lower levels and wait for them to flood with ice-cold ocean water. It was a test, to see if she would panic or give up.

Raine has never done either.

The chain won't break and nor will the loop. It has been hammered into the stone long enough for fingers of lichen to wrap around it. Raine looks down at her hands. They will break, long before the chain or the loop. She knows from experience.

The Sighted is taking the eyes of the priest now. The man doesn't scream; he only prays loudly and forcefully until the Sighted silences him with a punch that snaps his head back. Another body falls. More blood flows into the centre of the room. Smoke begins to rise from the words painted on Verastus' skin. The feathers of his cloak stir.

Raine pushes against the thumb of her left hand until she hears a snap as it dislocates. Pain blinds her for an instant. She looks at Verastus, but he is catatonic. Shimmering. The Sighted pays her no mind either.

He is busy with Haran Yale.

The regimental advisor doesn't make a sound. Somehow it's worse than the screaming. Verastus is alight now. No, not alight. It's an *unlight* that streams from him. From everything but his glittering eyes.

The chains binding her slacken, just barely. Raine wriggles her feet, loosening them further.

One of the acolytes dies in a noisy, messy thrashing. More blood, more feathers. Verastus' cloak encircles him like folding wings. His hands curl like talons. The air in the cave is cold and howling, carrying flakes of ice with it.

Raine is next around the circle. Next to have her eyes taken. Despite her focus and her fury, she is afraid. Her heart is loud. She thinks of Lydia Zane, who lost her own eyes on Drast. About the mess of those dark sockets.

The Sighted pads across the stone in front of her.

'Severina Raine,' he says. 'It is time to make your fate.'

She looks up at him, at the knife with which he means to cut her.

'Yes, it is,' she says, pulling free of her bonds.

Raine's legs are numb and her head sings with pain, but she throws herself at the Sighted and knocks him flat on his back. The knife goes skidding across the stone circle. Raine puts her knee on the Sighted's throat, drives her fist into his face, once, twice. His nose bursts. His lip splits. On the third swing, her arm freezes and locks, the Sighted struggling beneath her. On the dais, Verastus throws up his hand, and Raine is pulled towards him. He catches her by the throat, his arm trailing darkness.

'Always fighting,' he says in a twinned, echoing voice. 'Even when you have no hope.'

Raine can barely take a breath. The claw of his hand closes tighter.

'There is always hope, if you have faith,' she rasps.

'You speak to me of faith as if I do not understand it.'

Raine's vision tunnels until Verastus fills it. 'Because you don't,' she says. 'You will die. Your lord will die. Your lies will die.'

Arcadius Verastus laughs loudly.

'No,' he says. 'You will die, but first I must take those eyes of yours.'

Verastus raises his other hand. His skin is iridescent and the fingers are tipped with talons. They get so close to her eyes that they go out of focus. Raine

struggles and kicks and thrashes.

Then she hears a sound, echoing and strange, but familiar.

It's a voice.

Lydia Zane's voice.

We have you, commissar.

It's Raine's turn to laugh. Verastus freezes, and Raine realises he can hear Zane as clearly as she can.

'They are—' he begins.

Verastus never gets to finish. Wounds open up across his face, scattering Raine with his black, oily blood. He staggers back and drops her. Raine falls hard, the impact knocking the air from her lungs and crashing her teeth together. She looks around through half-lidded eyes to see Lydia Zane stepping up to join her at the circle's edge, her arm outstretched. Her skin covered with wounds and glittering with frost. Wyck is with her, along with what's left of the Wyldfolk. Five more, clad in shadow grey. The Duskhounds, and Andren Fel. Their lasguns light the cave as they put down the Sighted who have begun to flood the room.

Raine drags herself to her feet, her body alight with pain from head to toe. She pushes her dislocated thumb back into its joint and takes the heavy laspistol that Andren Fel gives to her, holding it in her right hand. Her good hand.

'What are you?' Lydia Zane says to Verastus, taking a step forward. 'Theta? Zeta, perhaps. Is that why you need to seek strength elsewhere?'

Arcadius Verastus seems to fold light around him. His cloak flutters. He raises a taloned hand, the action staggered and stuttering as Zane works to deny him.

'I am blessed,' he says in his doubled voice. 'By true gods. By the fates.'

Lydia Zane smiles a wolf's smile. Blood runs in a thick stripe from her nose and down her chin.

'What a mighty creature you must be,' she says. 'But I am Epsilon.'

She raises her hand. More wounds open across his arms, his throat.

'I am Antari.'

She lifts him from his feet.

'And I deny your liar gods.'

Zane throws her hands out. There's a thunderclap of pressure. The snapping of bones. Verastus is hurled through the air, trailing blood and feathers. He lands in a crumpled heap and goes still. Raine takes a step forward, her pistol raised.

'Is he dead?' Wyck says.

Raine opens her mouth to speak, but Verastus answers for her. He regains his feet with a clicking and resetting of bones, those words on his skin glowing with

bright blue light.

'Enough,' he says, and the unreal becomes real.

Wyck doesn't see the cult leader anymore. He sees something that floods him with fear and makes him want to run. It's a great black hound, trailing smoke and shadow, locked onto him with red crystal eyes. Its growl is the thunder of guns. It's just like the old Antari story. The one that Fel's storm troopers took for their name. It's a duskhound. It's death.

And it's coming right for him.

Wyck fumbles his rifle and takes a couple of steps backwards. The firing mechanism is locked, and his fingers are clumsy and slow and the hound is so close. He drops the rifle, letting it swing from the strap. Gets his hand on his blade.

And out of fear and fury, Daven Wyck tries to cut death.

The knife snags. Cold blood runs over his fingers. The hound howls, and it flickers and changes, all except for those red crystal eyes. Its true shape is a man in a feathered cloak, with painted words on his skin. Wyck brings the knife around again, but he's too slow. He sees the cult leader's gemstone eyes flash and there's an impact that knocks the air out of his lungs and his feet out from under him. He sees the silvered stone of the cave rush up to meet him, then he hits it hard, and sees nothing more.

Verastus tears through the Wyldfolk towards Raine. He's flickering and changing, becoming nightmare shapes or vanishing altogether with a turn of that feathered cloak. She can't draw sight on him. The Antari are staggered and shouting, all seeing their own fears. Verastus opens Nial's throat with a swipe of his clawed hand. Breaks Awd's bones with another boom of pressure. Puts Crys on her back, bleeding. Andren Fel shouts warding words, somehow keeping his feet the first time Verastus hits him. The second blow splinters his carapace armour and shatters his mask. He falls silent. Falls to his knees. Raine levels her pistol. She can barely hold it steady as Verastus tears his way towards her. She fires once. Twice. Feathers and oil-black blood burst from him, but he doesn't stop. He reaches for her, his hands outstretched. Raine sees herself reflected a dozen times in his gory gemstone eyes. But then Arcadius Verastus slows. Stops. Snarls through his teeth. Frost crawls over his skin as Lydia Zane staggers forward, breathing hard through bloody lips.

'Do it,' Zane says. *'Kill him.'*

Raine presses the barrel of her pistol against Verastus' forehead. *'It seems your*

false god did not see fit to show you your own fate,' she says.

Arcadius Verastus, Ninth of Nine, smiles slowly. 'Of course he did. He shows me all fates. All truths. In my dreams I have seen you standing there, with your brightly burning soul. In this fate, you shoot me and I die.'

'Then you always knew you would fail.'

Verastus shakes his head. Frost glitters on the hard angles of his gemstone eyes. 'Death is not failure,' he says. 'You know this, Severina Raine of Darpex then Gloam. Bastard child of a coward and a queen. Death always has a purpose, so give me mine. Shoot me, kill me, and know that you go on making fates by the will of my lord.'

It's the way he says it. Her name. Her home. Her family. The way he aligns her so assuredly with his false god. Raine cannot stand it. She fires the pistol and keeps firing until there is not even a trace of his gemstone eyes left. When the magazine is empty and smoke coils from the barrel, she sees feathers scudding across the floor of the cave. One brushes the toe of her boot.

Death is not a failure, echoes the voice of Arcadius Verastus.

With Verastus dead, the Sighted break like springtime ice. Some keep fighting. Most flee. A few try to surrender, pleading that they were tricked. Manipulated. All of them get a swift death. It's a mercy that they hardly deserve.

Wyck only lost Nial in the stone circle. The rest of the Wyldfolk are hurt, bleeding and broken, but they're alive enough to run with Zane protecting them. The psyker is at the limits of her strength, pale and muttering about feathers and shadows at her back. Raine sticks by her, that borrowed pistol at the ready. Andren Fel and his Duskhounds carry the rest of the prisoners between them, defending them from those Sighted who still have the will to fight. Wyck stumbles and staggers but he doesn't stop running. He'll be damned if he's going to survive cutting death itself just to have High Command bring the mountain down on top of him.

They clear the mouth of the Maw and run out into the cold air. It's fully dark, the sky lit with stars. Wyck's legs burn and ache and it's agony to breathe with all of those broken ribs, but he's still among the first to hit the top of the ridge. To look back and see the star that grows brighter than the others.

'Get down!'

His words are stolen as the orbital lance spears down into the mountainside. Wyck throws himself to the ground alongside the others and squeezes his eyes shut, but there's still a moment when his world is light and pressure and heat.

When it fades, there's nothing left of the mouth, just the Maw. It has opened wide, massive, broken pieces of stone sliding down into it to be swallowed whole. For a moment, Wyck could swear he sees red crystal eyes in that darkness.

'You would think that would silence it,' Zane says. 'Wouldn't you?'

Wyck looks at her. At the way she draws her robes close with her thin fingers hooked like claws. At her open wounds and the dried blood and the way her silver eyes seem to see deep into the Maw.

'What?' he says.

Zane starts to laugh, and Wyck thinks that she really is wicked and broken and wrong. Maybe more so than before.

'On your feet. This whole area could collapse.'

Raine's voice makes Wyck flinch. The commissar is a wreck, covered in blood, both hers and the cult leader's. Her hands are skinned and bruised and her wrists are swollen from the restraints. Her braids are a matted tangle, her clothes tattered. Despite all of that, her eyes are clear and sharp. It is, after all, not the uniform that makes Raine a commissar.

But now he knows that's not all there is to her. He knows about that timepiece. That it made Lydia Zane cry even with her false eyes and her broken soul. He knows about the name carved into the brass.

Lucia.

Now he just has to figure out how to use it.

Raine takes her seat at the table opposite Lydia Zane. She puts the thick parchment file down. Her pen and ink. Raine opens the file and flips through the pages until she reaches an empty form.

'Post-mission debrief,' she says, loud and clear for the vox-recorder. 'Operation one hundred and sixty-two. The infiltration and destruction of the Sighted stronghold in the Caulder mountain range on Gholl.'

She uncaps her pen and dips it into the ink.

'Name and rank,' Raine says.

Zane doesn't shift in her chair. Her silver eyes are focused on the surface of the table. Her hands are knitted in her lap. Lye has cleaned the blood off her and stitched her wounds, but it only serves to make her look as though she has been brought up from the mortuary tent. Silver cables run from the ports in her scalp to the psy-reader on the table. She is locked to her seat by the collar bolted at her neck. It is studded with sedative injectors, primed to fire.

‘Lydia Zane,’ she says. ‘Primaris psyker. Graded Epsilon. Eleventh Antari Rifles.’

The psy-reader starts to push out parchment, marking gentle spikes onto the paper with an auto-quill. Raine holds her own pen ready. Ink beads on the point.

‘Where were you born?’ she asks.

Zane still doesn’t shift. ‘On Antar,’ she says. ‘On the western coastline, in a settlement on the cliffs overlooking the sea.’

More gentle spikes track on the reader. Raine writes down Zane’s words verbatim. She keeps every transcript. Compares and contrasts them. Checks for inconsistencies that might point to a problem.

‘What did it look like?’ Raine asks, though she knows. She has asked this question many times.

‘The cliffs were grey,’ Zane says. ‘The sea was grey, too. They say that is why our eyes are grey, because they took their colour from the sea and the stones, but that is just a story like so many others.’

‘And were there storms?’ Raine asks.

‘Storms,’ Zane says. ‘Yes. Especially in the winter months. Rain and hail, but the sea never froze. You cannot freeze so much water.’

Raine scratches the answer onto the form. ‘And in yourself? Are there storms?’

Zane scratches at the stitched wound on her forearm. ‘Storms,’ she says again, still looking at that same spot on the table.

The psy-reader scratches too. The spikes climb a little steeper. Blood bubbles up under Zane’s fingernails.

‘No,’ she says. ‘Not storms. Just thoughts. Stories. Shadows.’

The spikes on the psy-feed grow steeper still. A mountain range, etched in black ink. Just like the Maw.

‘Shadows?’ Raine says. ‘What do you mean?’

Zane finally looks up from that spot on the table. ‘Dark spaces in my head, made from the things that I have done. Nothing more.’

‘What sort of things?’ Raine asks.

A wan smile grows on Zane’s face. ‘Everything,’ she says. ‘Every action casts a shadow, for good or for ill.’

Raine looks to the feed as the psy-reader’s auto-quill goes back to painting shallow spikes. Even the steepest it has captured are still within the acceptable range. She waits for a few heartbeats, thinking about her own shadows, paraded before her by Verastus in the cave beneath the Maw.

‘Will that be all, commissar?’ Zane asks.

Raine watches for a moment more, but the peaks stay shallow and even. The auto-quill doesn't twitch, and now neither does Zane. She is still again, not worrying at her wounds.

'That will be all,' Raine says. 'For today.'

Raine's debriefing duties on her return to the Antari staging grounds take hours, and the weather has turned when she finally arrives back at her command tent. Raine pauses for a moment upon entering, listening to the way the rain lashes the canvas. She walks over to the table and picks up the tin cup. It is stamped with a *Departamento Munitorum* mark and chipped around the rim, cool to the touch. It feels real. Raine lets out a slow breath and puts the cup back down.

Her uniform awaits her on the table. Her medals, greatcoat and gloves. Her peaked hat. They have been carefully folded, but they still bear tatters and bloodstains. She puts on her gloves first, then her coat. Her hat last of all. The weight of the coat, the creak of the gloves. The borrowed pistol in the holster at her hip. It's all a comfort. A restorative act more so than any amount of pain medication or rest. Not that there's time for rest. She has their new deployment orders sitting in her pocket. There is always another fight. Another war. Another duty, unfinished.

Raine puts her hand into the inner pocket of her coat and her fingers close around cool brass. Ticking burrs against her hand. There's no damage to the timepiece, except for that crack it already had. Raine can't quite believe it. She turns it over in her hand and runs her thumb over the engraved letters of her sister's name. Remembers how she made those shapes with the point of a pocket knife, and why.

What about that timepiece you carry? Tell me about that.

Raine turns at the sound of Andren Fel's voice, but there is no sign of the Duskhound. No sign of anyone at all, just the howl of the wind and the lashing of the rain against the tent's canvas.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rachel Harrison is the author of the Warhammer 40,000 short stories 'Execution' and 'A Company of Shadows', featuring the character Commissar Severina Raine. She has also written the short story 'Dirty Dealings' for Necromunda, as well as a number of other Warhammer 40,000 short stories including 'The Third War' and 'Dishonoured'.

An extract from *Cadia Stands*.



Below them, the planet was poised half in light and half in darkness.

Major Isaia Bendikt could not tell if a new day was coming on, or if the night was falling. He stood with Warmaster Ryse and his posse of command staff on the viewing platforms of the *Fidelitas Vector* and remembered how he'd left Cadia over twenty years before.

In those twenty years, he'd had more than his fair share of benighted ice-worlds, void-moons and jungle worlds with blood-sucking nanobes that dropped onto you from the branches above.

He'd seen the worst of the galaxy and now, looking down upon Cadia, he remembered his last moments on his home world.

A young Whiteshield, without a kill to his name.

Bendikt's father had never got the chance to go off-planet. He was one of the one in ten Cadian Shock Troopers whose draft drew them as a territorial guard. It was his life to stay at home and stand ready to protect Cadia. But war had not come, and that uneventful career was a shame that had discoloured his life.

When the sixteen-year-old Isaia Bendikt drew an off-world draft he was both proud and envious of his son. It was a hard thing for a dour father to express, so he'd done what many fathers had before him – bought a bottle of Arcady Pride and got both himself and Bendikt drunk.

Bendikt remembered the night clearly. They had been sitting at the round camp table that stood in the middle of the small sub-hab central room of their home. His father had drawn up the camp chairs and slammed the bottle down between them, set two shot glasses on the table.

He had forced a smile as he unscrewed the top, crumpled it up in his hand and threw it back over his shoulder, where it had rattled in the corner of the room. His mother had left them a few plates of boiled grox-slab and cabbage on the table. Bendikt had tried to line his stomach as his father poured them a shot glass

each.

‘Here,’ he’d said and held out the brimming glass.

They’d tapped the rims against each other and tipped the glasses high. Shot by shot they’d drunk and slowly knocked the bottle back. When the muster bell rang there was only a little amasec in the bottom of the bottle. ‘To your first kill!’ his father had slurred. His mother, a thin, worn, earnest-looking woman, had joined in with the last toast.

It was a short walk to the muster point, where other Whiteshields were being loaded onto rail trucks, their apprehensive faces staring out from under their Cadian-pattern helmets. All the tracks led straight to the landing fields outside Kasr Tyrok.

Bendikt and his parents pushed through the crowds to find his truck. Both his mother and his father had last words for him, though he was damned if he could remember them. He was only sixteen and so drunk he could barely stand. There were no tears. It was poor form to show sadness when a Cadian was sent to fight. It was part of the rhythm of life: birth, training, conscription, death. It was natural that a young Whiteshield would go and kill the enemies of the Imperium.

Bendikt had imagined himself many times taking the straight route south, and never seeing his home again. Before climbing aboard, he checked himself one more time to make sure that in his drunken state he had not forgotten anything.

He had boots, webbing, jacket, belt, combat knife, lasrifle, three battery packs, Imperial Primer in his left breast pocket, water canteen in his right. He pulled in a deep breath. He was ready, he told himself, to face anything the galaxy could throw at him.

‘So,’ Bendikt said. They said goodbye to one another, and his mother briefly embraced him and stuffed a packet of folded brown paper into his jacket pocket. ‘Grox-jerky,’ she whispered.

She was a tough woman, brought up on a planet where the only trade was war, and little given to expressions of emotion.

‘I want to thank both of you for giving me life. I promise you I will be all that a Cadian should,’ he said. It was a speech he had prepared, but being drunk he stumbled on his words and left much of it out.

Then he saluted and turned to climb aboard the truck. He looked out to wave goodbye to his parents, but darkness was falling and they had already turned for home. That was the last Bendikt had ever seen or heard of his family. For the next twenty years, other Guardsmen had been his brothers and sisters, and the

Emperor his father.

Bendikt found it hard to remember his father's face but had never forgotten the hug his father had given him, and feeling his father's thick arms wrap around him, his broad, rough hands on his back. His mother's voice had never left him; he could recall her whispering 'grox-jerky' into his ear, and those words stayed with him, and somehow came to mean 'Look after yourself', and even 'You are well-loved, my son.'

As Cadia revolved beneath them Warmaster Ryse put both hands to the carefully tooled brass railings and leaned forward, his breath misting a little on the chill of the foot-thick glass.

He wanted to mark this moment with something momentous, yet poetic and memorable. Something that could go in his memoirs when, and if, retirement came. As if sensing its moment, the Warmaster's servitor-scribe, an emaciated body with augmetic stylus right arm and waist-mounted scroll, shuffled forward, knocking a few other sycophants out of the way.

The scribe had come with the title of Warmaster and Ryse seemed to rather like having his every word taken down for posterity. And now that there was no more Deucalion Crusade for Ryse to lead, it had occurred to many of them that perhaps Ryse might not be a Warmaster much longer.

Perhaps, many were thinking, Ryse's star was on the wane, and it was time for them to find one that was rising.

Ryse coughed to clear his throat, then his bass-baritone rang out, 'We have returned to our mother in her time of direst need.'

There was more, and Bendikt thought the Warmaster's speech could have been better, but the Warmaster finished with a flourish, like an Imperial preacher waxing lyrical. 'Men shall not say that we forgot our duty, nor that we forgot from whence we came.'

As he spoke, there was the scratch of stylus on vellum, leaving a trail of precise minuscule, in neatly justified blocks of text. Bendikt could not help reading over the scribe's shoulder while Ryse paused as if waiting for it to catch up, letting the words ring through his head.

Bendikt looked away. The Warmaster turned, and as if picking him out for not paying due attention, asked, 'What do you think, Major Bendikt?'

'She looks peaceful enough to me,' Bendikt stammered.

Ryse smiled indulgently. 'Yes. Cadia sent out the call and we have returned. Her need has not been forgotten.' The motors of the Warmaster's bionic arm

whined gently as he patted Bendikt on the back. No doubt he had meant this to be a human gesture, but Bendikt did not find the crude press of metal fingers comforting.

‘How long until we disembark?’ Ryse asked a thin, pale officer with a shock of white hair.

The officer snapped his heels together. ‘Governor Porelska has sent his personal barge to bring you down, Warmaster. *Sacramentum* is being loaded onto it as we speak. As soon as it is stowed down, I will let you know, sir. The freight captain did not think it would be more than a few hours.’

Sacramentum was Ryse’s Leviathan. A brass-worked marvel of gunnery and armour and engineering that had spearheaded at least two assaults on the hive world of Owwen.

‘Good,’ Ryse said. ‘Good.’ He was one of those men who liked to fill silences with his own voice. At that moment one of the adjutants touched the Warmaster’s sleeve. The commander of a battalion of Mordians had arrived on the viewing deck. They were standing by the lift in a formal and uninviting group, waiting for an introduction.

‘Ah!’ Ryse said as if a passing chat with the Mordians was all he wanted in the world, and nodded to them all. ‘Excuse me, gentlemen.’

As Ryse’s entourage fell away only one other man remained, staring down at Cadia.

Bendikt took him in through the corner of his eye. He was a first-degree general from his epaulette, but he wore combat drab, not dress uniform, and had both hands placed firmly on the brass railing, his fists clenching it so tightly that his knuckles had gone white.

His boots had not been polished since embarkation. There were mud splatters on the hem of his coat and dried mud stains on his knees as well. That was a detail worthy of note: generals didn’t often kneel, never mind in mud.

Bendikt couldn’t hold himself back. ‘Excuse me, sir,’ he ventured. ‘Are you General Creed?’

The man turned to him. He was broad and bull-necked, with close-shaven hair. His eyes were hard and intense. Bendikt coloured. ‘Sorry. I mean, are you *the* General Creed?’

‘Well, there are four generals named Creed last I counted.’ The other man’s eyes had a mischievous twinkle.

‘General Ursarkar Creed?’

‘Yes. I am one of two whose name is Ursarkar Creed. The other, a fine old man of three hundred and twenty years, has retired to the training world of Katak. I spent six months with him there, working with Catachans. Good bunch. General Ursarkar Creed had a particularly good stock of amasec, though I didn’t think much of his stubs. They were a little too refined for me. I like something with a little more punch.’

Creed’s mouth almost smiled. ‘As he came first, *he* has the honour of being plain General Ursarkar Creed. Because I am the second, I am known as Ursarkar *E.* Creed.’ He put out a hand and Bendikt returned the hard grip.

‘I am honoured to meet you,’ Bendikt said.

Creed seemed amused by the word. ‘Honoured?’

‘Yes,’ Bendikt said. ‘We were in the same draft.’

‘Were we now?’

‘Yes. I always thought that my career had gone well until I heard you had made general. The first of our draft.’

To make general by the age of forty years, Terran standard, was a feat almost unheard of.

Once he’d got over his envy, he’d studied Creed and his tactics, and when they’d been in the same warzone, Bendikt had followed Creed’s career through memos and regimental dispatches.

‘How do you feel? I mean, you’ve been predicting this recall for nearly two years now,’ Bendikt said.

Creed seemed impressed, but there was no joy for him in being right. ‘I have. You’re right. It would have been better if the recall had started two years earlier.’

‘And you were demoted for your troubles.’

‘Only pending investigation. Ryse – should I say, Warmaster Ryse – stuck by me.’

‘Is that because you saved the day on Relion V?’

Creed laughed. His breath smelled faintly of amasec. Creed was also famous for his prodigious appetite for the bottle. ‘That’s probably half the reason. The other half is that Ryse is no fool.’

There was a moment’s pause as Creed took in Bendikt’s uniform and regimental badge. ‘You must be Major Isaia Bendikt of the Cadian One Hundred and First. Twice awarded the Valorous Unit Citation. You have one of the most highly decorated tank regiments in the whole of Cadia. Between you, your crew has won six Steel Crosses, four Steel Aquila and the Order of the Eagle’s Claw.’

Bendikt’s cheeks coloured and he didn’t know what to say. ‘Well, yes, sir. My

regiment prides itself on its service to the Golden Throne.’

The smell of amasec grew stronger as Creed leaned in and spoke to Bendikt in a low, confidential voice. ‘Did you ever think you would make it back to Cadia alive?’

Bendikt knew the statistics as well as any other: half of all able-bodied Cadians left the planet to fight across the Imperium of Man but fewer than one in a thousand of those ever returned. He barely needed to think. ‘Never. You?’

Creed pursed his lips as his knuckles whitened again. Night was falling on Cadia and the Eye of Terror was starting to glow. There was a long pause. Creed smiled. ‘Oh, I’ve always known that I would come back.’

Bendikt did not know how to answer that. He looked down at their home world – grey and blue in the half-light of her sun.

‘And you really think Cadia is in danger?’

‘The utmost danger.’ Creed’s nostrils flared. ‘The whole sector has been under attack for years. Plague. Treachery. Heresy. We see all these proud defences, but Cadia is like a kasr whose walls have already been undermined.’

Bendikt was lost for words again. They both looked up to the viewing dome above their heads. In the darkness of space they could see the turret lights of orbital defences, floating gun-rigs and the bright engine flares of patrolling frigates and stub-nosed defence monitors.

‘You really think so?’

‘I know so.’ Creed smiled humourlessly, and his eyes flickered briefly across the room to where a rather embarrassed-looking Ryse was trying to explain a joke to the Mordian commander. ‘Our enemies have planned for this for a thousand years. Maybe more. And we have grown complacent. Look. Ryse is more interested in little pleasantries with those dreadful Mordians than planning for the war. Cadian High Command is full of men like him. They have no idea how present the threat is. Even the High Lords of Terra suspect little, I guess. The Cadian Gate is in utmost danger and it is up to us – honest men like you and me – to ensure that she does not fall. Cadia cannot fall. She *will* not fall.’

There was a long pause.

Bendikt felt flattered by the word ‘us’, but he was shaken by the ominous warnings. ‘What can we do?’

‘We shall fight like bastards,’ Creed said. ‘And we have to be more devious than our foes.’

Bendikt smiled. ‘Is that possible?’

‘Life in the Guard has taught me three things,’ Creed said. ‘Endurance, grit and

the understanding that with faith and courage and good leadership, anything is possible.'

'I hope you're right.'

Creed gave him a long look and leaned in once more. 'When I was young my drill sergeant had a favourite saying.'

'What is that?'

'Hope,' Creed said, 'is the first step on the road to disappointment.'

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