

WARHAMMER
40,000



FIRE AND THUNDER

**AN ASTRA MILITARUM STORY BY
RACHEL HARRISON**

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FIRE AND THUNDER

Rachel Harrison

The people of Balfar call their planet's twin suns the Eyes of the Emperor.

Before Severina Raine set foot in the cathedral city of Whend, she thought the name an archaism, something poetic that arose from the world's particular interpretation of the Imperial faith. That was before Raine stood beneath the twin suns and felt their unblinking glare. Before the Balfar command group ordered Raine and her regiment to abandon their hard-fought forward position and fall back to the cathedral city's outlands.

Now, as Raine and the 11th Antari Rifles move through Whend's labyrinthine streets, the name doesn't seem an archaism at all. The light of Balfar's twin suns feels fierce. It feels judgemental. And even though they are faithfully enacting orders and they have no choice but to retreat, there is a part of Raine that feels as though she deserves that judgement, because whether the command group call it *falling back* or *tactical redeployment*, it feels like neither to Raine.

It feels like running from a fight.

The avenue around Raine echoes to the sounds of war. The hard, dry-wood *snap* of las-fire, and the clatter of solid-shot weapons. Overhead, aircraft scream by, leaving jet-trail streaks against the wide blue sky. Distant explosions rumble like thunder, sending mortar dust billowing into the air in clouds. It clings to Raine's uniform and dulls the blade of her sabre. It stings her eyes, as she trains her bolt pistol on the enemy and fires. Penance bucks in her hand and the bolt-round hits her target centre-mass. The Sighted soldier is knocked from his feet in a plume of flame, his dull blue flak armour splintered right at the centre of the spiral painted on the chest-plate. A cloud of black blood mists the air.

'Retreat does not mean surrender,' Raine shouts, even as the Sighted she killed is replaced by two more. There are dozens of them giving chase from further up

the avenue, harrying Raine and the Antari like a flock of carrion birds. Their laughter and heretical chanting carries on the scorching wind.

‘Make them pay for every step!’ Raine cries, as she fires the last round in her pistol’s magazine. It sends another of the Sighted sprawling over backwards. More black blood mists the air, and a ragged, hoarse cheer goes up from the Antari falling back all along the avenue around her. Raine ducks into cover with a number of her troops behind a vast slump of rubble and shattered masonry as the Sighted return fire. Hard rounds impact against the white stone, sending gasps of dust into the air. It scatters across Raine as she reloads her bolt pistol with a heavy click. She only has two magazines left before she is down to her sabre and her fists. Raine chances a look over the cover. The Sighted are blue-grey shadows, moving between the columns of pale stone. Shards of mirrored glass glitter against their flak armour.

‘They are trying to close a noose around us, captain,’ Raine says to Yuri Hale.

Hale nods. He is covered in mortar dust that has recoloured his fair hair and settled into the old scars on his face. Raine can barely tell the green of Hale’s uniform from the grey, now. His command squad are just as much of a mess, all bandaged and breathing hard, their lasguns scorched black from use. Across the avenue, the rest of Grey Company’s infantry squads are pinned down. The Fenwalkers, Hartkin and Mistvypers, all caught between fighting back and keeping their wounded from becoming their dead.

‘Mark three infantry squads,’ Hale says, as he takes a look over the rubble. ‘Carbines and shotguns, moving to outflank.’

A twinned whirring sound echoes across the avenue, then, and Hale is forced to duck as heavy gunfire splits the air. The solid shells scatter more thick dust and fragments of coloured glassaic.

‘And two heavy guns,’ Hale says, flatly. Blood starts soaking through the arm of his fatigues where one of the rounds nicked him. He pays it no mind. ‘Crew-served and mobile. Moving through the buildings. They’ll chew through us in seconds if we make a break for it.’

‘We run, we die. We stay here, we die. Have I got that right?’

The question comes from Daven Wyck. The squad sergeant is crouched behind the rubble with what’s left of his Wyldfolk. Wyck is sunburned and filthy, his grey eyes bloodshot. A single, smeared handprint is painted in blood on his flak-plate.

‘Unless we stagger the Sighted, or make a mess of those guns,’ Hale says.

‘Aye, captain,’ Wyck says, and looks to his combat engineer. ‘Crys, what have

you got?’

Yulia Crys shakes her head. The bandage wrapped tightly around the combat engineer’s head is flooded dark, and her tattooed knuckles are split almost to the bone.

‘Absolutely bugger all, sarge,’ she says. ‘No grenades. Not even smoke. Just det-cord, and I reckon if I try to set that now, they might just notice.’

Wyck shakes his head. ‘Fat lot of use you are,’ he says.

Despite how much she is bleeding, and the Sighted trying their best to kill her, Yulia Crys responds the way she always does. She laughs, loudly. For a moment, it seems to drown out the Sighted guns. The rest of the Antari laugh with her. Raine doesn’t. She is busy looking at all of that dust eddying in the air.

‘The buildings,’ Raine says. ‘The ones they are moving up through.’

‘What about them?’ Hale asks.

‘Collapse the frontages,’ she says. ‘It will bury most of the Sighted, and the rest will either be cut off behind the rubble or blinded by the dust. It will give us grace enough to fall back.’

Hale smiles. It pulls at the scars on his face.

‘Now, that’s an option,’ he says.

‘You know I’ll have a go at making charges out of most anything, commissar,’ Crys says, ‘but I’m afraid that’s a bit of an ask for what I’ve got left.’

‘They do not mean for you to do it.’

Lydia Zane’s words are an absent rasp. The Antari psyker is kneeling on the hard stone, her grey robes pooling around her. Her eyes are squeezed closed, and steam coils from the psyker’s skin where the heat of the twin suns meets the psy-frost crawling across her hairless scalp. This fight has already tested Zane sorely. Her nose is bleeding heavily, and her arms are criss-crossed with stigmatic wounds. She breathes like a panicked animal, even at rest.

‘Can you do it?’ Hale asks her.

Zane opens her eyes. The silver discs of her augmetic implants catch the light and turn it away, just like the windows in the buildings all around them. She smiles, and that looks vaguely animal, too.

‘Make ready to run,’ she says.

‘We break cover on my mark,’ Hale says, into the company vox-channel.

Raine braces herself against the collapsed stonework and the Antari do the same. Zane gets to her feet by leaning on her staff and takes a ragged breath.

‘Fire and thunder,’ Hale says.

Zane raises her fist over her heart.

‘Aye, captain,’ she says. ‘Fire, and thunder.’

Then she steps out into the avenue.

The Sighted immediately train all of their guns on Zane. The air around her becomes a storm of light and noise. Solid rounds burst against her projected kine-shield. In a tiny moment of silence in the midst of all of that noise, Raine hears the Antari psyker speak a single word.

‘Enough,’ Zane says, and she claps her thin hands together.

The columns and arches supporting the gothic facades of the buildings on either side of the avenue explode outwards. Glassaic rains down like a winter storm, and then the facades slump and collapse under their own weight with a deafening, tectonic roar, sending rubble spilling into the avenue. The advancing Sighted cry out and disappear behind great cascades of stone. Their guns fall silent. Dust rolls out like a wave sent by an angry sea. Zane staggers, and falls to one knee.

‘Go!’ Hale shouts, over the company channel.

And the Antari break cover. Crys runs for Zane, dragging the psyker easily to her feet and helping her clear. As Raine runs alongside her regiment, hidden from the Eyes of the Emperor by the plume of dust, she hears the psyker murmuring.

‘Fire,’ Zane is saying, over and over again. ‘And thunder.’

It takes another three hours of falling back and fighting through the eastern quarter before they reach the city’s edge and the way out of Whend. The avenue leading down to the Bridge of Graces is steep and choked with hastily built barricades and tank traps. The roar of tank engines and aircraft echoes off the faces of the buildings around Wyck, rattling his eardrums and swelling the migraine taking shape behind his eyes. Spent shells lie scattered across the cobbled roadway like lake stones on the shore. For now, this part of the eastern district is still under Imperial control.

The worship-halls on either side of the avenue are thick with razor wire and heavy guns have been set up behind heaps of sandbags. Wyck catches the tell-tale glint of longshot lenses through broken windows in the upper floors. The air is fouled by white stone dust and the smell of blood and sweat from the hundreds of soldiers making their way to the bridge. It is the last Imperial-held bridge in the city. The last way out by land. The bridge juts out from the city’s edge, spanning the ravine that surrounds Whend. It is vast and old and lined with weather-worn statues that stare up into the twin suns. It was built to give the

poor a path into the cathedral city from the outlands. There are no pilgrims in the outlands now, though. No shanty towns or wooden monuments. There's nothing out there any more but the Imperial encampment. Miles and miles of tents and flakboard huts and temporary airfields. Somewhere in the middle of all that is the Antari camp and Wyck's own tent. A sixty-second shower, and a clean set of fatigues.

And his kitbag, with the rest of his pills and stimm injectors sewn into a pocket in the lining.

'Don't you think, sarge?'

Wyck shakes his head to clear it and looks at Crys. He has no idea what she was asking him.

'Don't I think what?'

'That this feels an awful lot like standing in the forest all bloodied and hoping the wolves won't show.'

Crys nods down the avenue to the Bridge of Graces, and those crossing it. It's slow-going, because the bridge is long and the armoured companies are taking their blessed time. There's a growing crowd of soldiers waiting their turn. Wyck sees Kavrone uniforms, blue and white. Some Antari, too. Devri's Blue Company. Fel's five Duskhounds in their matt-black carapace. They are all stood close together, hemmed in by the city on one side and the deep ravine on the other. Unease claws at Wyck, and he scowls.

'Just keep your eyes open, then at least we'll see the wolves coming.'

Crys snorts a laugh, and the other Wyldfolk join her. Awd and Efri. Dal and Vyne. Broga and Ona. Even Kori, who is pale and dizzied and nursing a badly broken arm. Wyck doesn't laugh with them. He keeps one hand on his slung lasgun as they reach the bottom of the avenue and join up with the crowd waiting to cross. It's even hotter down here, with the press of people. Their voices become a swollen muddle of languages and accents. Prayers and curses and snatches of songs. Wyck glances up at the sky with every scream of aircraft jets. Looks back over his shoulder at every distant detonation. He keeps moving forwards with the others until the armour and the Kavrone and Devri's Blue Company have all made it to the other side. The Duskhounds hang back a moment before crossing the bridge. Wyck sees Fel talking with Hale, and the commissar. Wyck doesn't know where the storm troopers were sent, or what for, but going by the state of Fel's carapace plate, it was bloody. And going by the set of the Duskhound's face, they didn't get chance to finish it, either.

The Munitorum officer on the bridge speaks over a tinny vox-caster.

‘Grey company,’ he says. ‘You’re up.’

‘The wounded go first,’ Hale calls out, stepping aside.

The walking wounded move up. The ones that can’t walk are carried or field-stretchered. Wyck turns and looks at Kori. She hasn’t moved an inch.

‘Get a move on,’ Wyck says.

Kori shakes her head. She is really pale now. Her dark hair is soaked with sweat, and she’s swaying a little on her feet.

‘I’m good, sarge,’ she says. ‘It’ll wait.’

‘I’m not asking,’ Wyck says. ‘You can go now, or I’ll have Crys carry you the rest of the way like a punch bag. Make your choice.’

‘I’ll do it,’ Crys says, taking a step towards her. ‘Wouldn’t even be hard, little thing like you.’

Kori pulls a face. She raises her good hand and waves Crys away.

‘All right, all right. I’m going.’

She salutes the old way with her good hand closed into a fist over her heart, then she moves off through the crowd towards the bridge.

The Duskhounds go next, followed by the Hartkin and the Fenwalkers. All three squads are as good as clear by the time the wounded have made it halfway across.

‘Mistvypers,’ the Munitorum officer calls out, without looking up from the battered data-slate in his hand. ‘You’re next.’

Koy’s lot move forwards, leaving Wyck and his Wyldfolk waiting with Hale and his command squad. Everyone is watching those crossing the bridge, save for Zane. The witch is oblivious, smiling absently and murmuring to herself. The commissar is watching her with half an eye.

‘First in, last out,’ Crys says, with a laugh. ‘Is that how it goes?’

His squad all laugh together, again, but Wyck isn’t laughing, because he can hear something. Something that carries over the noise of the city afire and what’s left of Grey Company milling around him. Something that sounds like the sky screaming.

Artillery.

Wyck yells for the others to take cover as the first shells hit all around them. Up and down the avenue. The buildings. The bridge. It’s a constant, deafening thunder roll. A huge pressure wave sends him sprawling as he tries to run. It’s fire and tremors and smoke and ashes and huge pieces of debris falling like rain. It’s death, come to claim him.

But it never does.

Lydia Zane screams as she conjures a shield to spare them all from oblivion. The witch falls to her knees, new wounds opening on her arms and throat and face. The shield cracks, but Zane keeps up her barrier until the shells and debris have stopped falling. Until death turns away to look elsewhere. Only then does Zane drop her hands and let the shield collapse.

Wyck's vision is smeared and blurring. His ears are aching and ringing as if the barrage is still going. Smoke rolls in as the others stir and get back on their feet. The commissar is the first one up. Raine is covered in mortar dust that turns her black uniform grey. It makes her look like a spirit glimpsed at dusk. Something cruel, sent to haunt them.

'On your feet,' Raine is saying. 'Regroup, quickly.'

Wyck's legs try to buckle under him as he goes to get his Wyldfolk back on their feet. They are bloodied and battered and dizzy with shock, but they can stand, and they can fight.

Not everyone is so lucky.

Lara Koy's Misttypers weren't all under Zane's shield when the shells hit. It takes Wyck a second to realise that the one that Koy is kneeling beside is Asah, because he's such a mess. He moans shapelessly, all red and open to the sky. Hale has to pull Koy away so that Nuria Lye can put Asah out of his misery with one of the needles from her medicae kit. Asah falls quiet, then, but another noise fills the space. A second roll of thunder.

'Sarge,' Crys says, her voice hollow. 'The bridge.'

Wyck looks to see the Bridge of Graces coming apart. The stone shifts and splits and falls away in pieces and the weatherworn statues turn their faces from the sky. Then the whole damned thing collapses into the ravine below, cutting them off from the outlands. From the encampment. From the rest of the regiment.

'Mists alive,' Wyck says, and he turns to Hale. 'We've got a problem.'

'I see it, Dav,' Hale says, hollowly. He calls Kayd over and takes up the vox-handset.

'Anybody alive over there?' Hale says, over the vox. 'This is Hale, raising Grey. Do you read me?'

There is a long hiss, and a lot of distortion. Wyck catches the barest edge of a voice underneath it. Kayd flips switches and turns dials until it comes clear.

'—hear you, Yuri.'

It's Fel.

'*What's your status?*' the Duskhound asks.

‘We lost eight Mistvypers to the barrage,’ Hale says. ‘The rest are bloodied badly, save for Koy. Everyone else can move and fight, but we’ve barely a powercell between us and no way out.’ Hale takes a breath. ‘What’s the damage on your side?’

‘Half of Dol’s Fenwalkers were killed outright,’ Fel says. The schola-bred stillness in his voice makes Wyck want to hit something. *‘Three of Odi’s Hartkin, too. I’ve got two of my own hurting, but they’ll live.’*

‘And the wounded?’ Hale asks.

There’s a momentary hiss before Fel replies. This time, there’s something other than calm in the Duskhound’s voice. *‘They were still on the bridge when it collapsed,’* he says. *‘We couldn’t get them clear, Yuri.’*

Hale is quiet for a moment. Wyck looks out at the void where the bridge used to be and thinks of Kori.

Of how he ordered her to cross it.

‘Understood,’ Hale says. His voice sounds laboured, as though he’s been running drills. The vox-set clicks again, and Fel says something else. Every word is lost to distortion, save for the last two.

Fighters incoming.

Wyck hears it, then. A thunderous snarl from the eastward sky. He turns and looks to see a squadron of Thunderbolts. Three of them, coming up fast like great black hawks, looking to kill what the barrage didn’t.

‘Enemy aircraft!’ Hale shouts. ‘Break for cover!’

They all run for the nearest intact building as the Thunderbolts start to fire. The chatter of autocannons fills the air. Shells kick up the dirt and take chunks out of the rubble all around Wyck. Broga disappears in an instant, torn up by the gunfire. No time to scream. A mist of blood hits Wyck’s face. Zane cries out and stumbles. The Thunderbolts must be low now. They are so loud. The air is alight with live fire. More screams. More blood in the air. The cathedral looms. Wyck is close.

So close.

Wyck throws himself into cover. He hits the marble floor hard and rolls, then puts his hands over his head and waits for the thunder of dropping bombs. He waits for the cathedral to collapse like the bridge did and bury him. The aircraft engines grow louder and louder until they are deafening. Wyck shuts his eyes.

But there is no thunder. No collapse. The engines of the Thunderbolts reach a zenith and then go distant again. Wyck opens his eyes and sits up slowly. Once again, the commissar is first back on her feet. Her eyes are still and cold as the

dark heart of a lake.

‘We need to move,’ she says.

They keep off the streets, falling back through the halls and aisles and archways of Whend’s interconnected buildings, looking for a place to regroup and call for extraction. Progress is slow because of the wounded, and the Antari are quiet and uneasy around Raine, sweeping their lasguns back and forth. Even Crys barely says a word.

As they cross another vaulted hall filled with devotionals, Lydia Zane stops moving. The psyker pauses in a flood of light that’s coming through the shattered windows, and moans through her teeth. Lightning flickers around her scalp cabling, arcing to the crystal at the top of her wooden staff. Raine can smell ozone and ice.

‘Zane,’ Hale says, warily. ‘What do you see?’

The psyker doesn’t answer. Her halo of actinic light dances. Several of the Antari step back from her, their eyes wide with that fear that Raine recognises easily. Fear of the witch. Raine knows that every one of the Antari feel it to some degree. It is as much a part of them as their stories, or their grey eyes.

‘What’s up with her?’ Wyck snarls.

He has all but pulled his rifle on Zane. Raine can see the way his hands tremor, just a little. It’s not solely due to the fear.

‘Wait,’ she says, and takes a step closer to the psyker, keeping her pistol pointed at the white stone floor.

‘Zane,’ she says.

Zane doesn’t answer. Her breathing is fast and shallow, and her hand is pressed against her side, just above her hip. As Raine watches, blood starts dribbling through the psyker’s fingers, and she realises what exactly is wrong with Zane.

‘She’s been shot,’ Raine says.

As if her words give Zane permission, the psyker slumps forwards. Raine holsters her pistol and catches hold of Zane to keep her from falling. The psyker is barely more than bones under her robes. Light and frail, like a bird. Lye jogs over as Raine lowers the psyker to the ground. Judging by the look on her face, Lye is just as afraid as the rest of the Antari, but the medic doesn’t have the luxury of giving into it. She drops to one knee beside Zane and unrolls her field kit. Lye doesn’t have much left, after almost thirty hours of fighting through the city.

‘When did this happen?’ Lye asks.

‘Snagged by the hawks,’ Zane slurs.

‘The hawks,’ Raine says. ‘The Thunderbolts.’

Zane nods. Lye curses. She has cut through Zane’s robes and furs so that she can get a good look at the wound. Blood dribbles freely onto the dusty floor. Raine can’t see the damage clearly for the mess. Hale crouches down with them.

‘How bad is it?’ he asks.

‘Really bad,’ Lye says, her grey eyes wide. ‘It must have been a glance, or a deflected round. I don’t know how she was walking.’

‘I thought I might hold it,’ Zane says, haltingly. ‘Hold myself together until we were rescued.’

‘With witch-work,’ Hale says, somewhere between horrified and impressed. ‘You tried to knit a gunshot wound with a spell.’

Zane nods. Wyck curses this time, vehemently.

‘It’ll take time to treat her properly,’ Lye says. ‘I can’t do it here. It’s not safe.’

Raine catches the sound of gunfire on the wind. It echoes all around them. Most of it sounds distant, but not all of it.

‘No, it isn’t,’ she says.

They hole up in a barracks that belonged to the Balfaran Home Guard before the war. Before most of them turned traitor, and those that didn’t were murdered by the folk they once called kin. The white stone walls are pitted from las-fire and solid rounds and spattered with old, dry blood. The floor is slick with it, too, but that’s not old blood.

It’s witch’s blood.

Daven Wyck keeps his distance as Crys sets Zane down on one of the cots in the barracks’ sleeping quarters. The comedown is hitting Wyck hard now. Taking the edges off everything and making it all seem far away, like watching a vid-capture on a dirty screen.

‘Zane, look at me,’ Lye is saying. ‘Just hold it a little longer.’

Zane doesn’t acknowledge her. The witch is murmuring as if she’s asleep, though her false eyes are wide open. It takes Wyck a moment to catch the words clearly, because her voice is so distant. Slurring and rasping and clotted.

The hounds, she is saying. *They are howling.*

Wyck goes cold from the inside out, because Zane is murmuring about the duskounds. About the old story that Fel’s unit took for their name.

About death, coming close.

‘Dav.’

Lye is looking at him as if he's an idiot. She's bloody to her elbows.

'Get over here and give me a hand,' she says.

Wyck blinks. 'You have got to be joking,' he says.

'Do I look like I'm joking?' Lye snarls.

She doesn't. Wyck's stomach turns.

'You want me to help the witch,' he says, flatly.

Lye makes an exasperated noise.

'I want you to help *me*,' she says. 'I've got no staff. Hardly any kit. You've got field basic, so get over here and do something useful.'

Wyck curls his aching hands. If it were anyone else he'd walk right out, but he won't do that to Lye. There's too much blood spent between them for that.

Plus, he could always use another owing from the medic.

Wyck goes to join her, his boots sticking in the spilled witch's blood. It's cold, close to Zane. Ice is flaking away from her, and her skin is grey and sallow, like something long-dead.

'It must have been a ricochet, because she's not dead,' Lye says. 'But she is full of shrapnel. I need to get it out and close up what's severed.'

'Mother of spring,' Crys mumbles.

She looks almost as grey as Zane does at the sight of all that mess.

'You hold her,' Lye says to Crys. 'Keep her still.'

Crys nods and puts her big hands on Zane. Lye looks at Wyck.

'External aortic compression,' she says. 'Do you remember how to do it?'

'What?'

'Throne's *sake*, Dav,' she says. 'Hands, here.'

She puts his hands just below Zane's ribs, one on top of the other. Even through the ragged mess of the witch's robes, Wyck's skin crawls at touching her. He is struck by the animal urge to run.

'Lean all of your weight on her and don't let up, not until I tell you.'

Wyck does as he's told, and Zane makes a terrible, wordless noise. Lye doesn't wait. She starts digging around in the wound with a pair of forceps, pulling out slivers of metal. Zane tries to thrash free, but Crys holds her still. Ice blizzards in the air and the stink of witch-blood makes Wyck want to throw up. Lye stops pulling shrapnel and starts cautery and stitching. That smells even worse. Zane makes another unholy noise, and seizes. Her hand snaps up and grabs hold of Wyck's arm. Lightning crackles over his skin, arcing between them.

'Don't let up!' Lye shouts, but her voice is drowned out by the witch-words echoing in Wyck's head.

+You cannot escape, Daven Wyck,+ Zane says. +Death is watching you.+

‘Mists and moors and *shit*,’ he says, and he reels back from her.

‘Damn it, Dav!’ Lye shouts, as Zane arches and tremors even with Crys pinning her to the table, but Wyck can’t go near her. He won’t go near her. The words are still bouncing around in his head.

Death is watching you.

And then Zane stops her trembling and falls still. Lye curses, loudly.

‘Is she dead?’ Wyck asks, numbly.

Lye checks Zane’s pulse with bloody fingers and lets out a slow breath.

‘No,’ she says. ‘She’s alive. Just.’

Crys barks a laugh out of shock. Lye wipes at the blood on her face with the back of her hand. Wyck watches Zane barely breathing and those words ring loud in his head again, and he can’t help wishing Lye’s answer were different.

Light streams through the leaded windows of the barracks’ mess hall, catching on the casing of Raine’s timepiece as she turns it absently in her hands. Yuri Hale is sitting on one of the pale wooden benches with his elbows resting on his knees. He is tilting his canteen forwards and backwards, swilling what little water remains inside it. Makar Kayd sits cross-legged on the floor between them with his vox-set, trying for the dozenth time to raise the Balfar command group.

‘This is Makar Kayd, Eleventh Antari Rifles, hailing Balfar command group. Signal priority alpha. Please respond, over.’

Kayd releases the broadcast trigger and waits as the vox-set hisses. The sound echoes around the mess hall, carrying up into the rafters. Kayd shakes his head and tries again.

‘I repeat,’ Kayd says. ‘This is Makar Kayd, Grey Company vox-officer, Eleventh Antari Rifles, hailing Balfar command group. Signal priority alpha. Please respond, over.’

He releases the broadcast trigger. The vox-set hisses.

‘Come on,’ Hale mutters. ‘For Throne’s sake.’

And the vox-set clicks and the hissing stops.

‘This is Tacticae Officer Logun of Balfar command group. Please disclose situation, disposition and location, over.’

Kayd smiles. His teeth look very white against all the blood and dirt on his face.

‘Acknowledged, Balfar command,’ he says. ‘We were cut off during the bombardment that collapsed the Bridge of Graces. Disposition is twenty-three

souls. We have secured ourselves in grid number oh-six-five, Whend's western quarter. The secondary Balfaran barracks. We have injured personnel and require extraction, over.'

There is a long hiss of vox. Raine has stopped turning the timepiece. It ticks against her palm softly. Kayd's smile fades a little.

'Do you read me, Balfar command?' he says. 'Please acknowledge.'

The vox-set clicks.

'Information received and acknowledged,' says Logun. *'There is no possibility of extraction at this time, over.'*

Kayd blinks. 'What?' he asks.

'The Sighted maintain air superiority over the city,' Logun says. *'We cannot risk aircraft for the sake of twenty-three souls.'*

Raine closes her hand so tightly around the timepiece that the winding stud digs into her palm. Hale gets up from the bench and takes the vox-handset from Kayd.

'This is Captain Hale,' he says. 'I want to speak with the Antari general. Get me Juna Keene, right now.'

'There is no possibility at this time,' Logun says, again. *'Command group advise that you will need to exit the city by alternative means. Please confirm you understand.'*

'Teeth of winter,' Hale says. 'Listen to me. I've got people wounded. Dying. Just let me speak with Juna Keene.'

'There is no possibility at this time. Please confirm you understand prior orders.'

'They will not change their mind,' Raine says. 'No matter the cost.'

Hale exhales slowly, and heavily. The vox-handset creaks in his grip.

'Understood,' he says. 'We'll find our own way out.'

'Confirmed,' says Logun. *'May the Emperor watch over you.'*

The vox-set goes back to hissing until Kayd flips a switch and shuts it down.

'We're on our own, then,' he says, hollowly.

'Bloody looks like it,' Hale says.

Raine uncurls her fingers from around the timepiece. She pushes down her anger and frustration. Her exhaustion.

'We have achieved much more, with a lot less,' she says. 'This will be no different. We just need to make a plan.'

Hale exhales a slow breath and nods.

'All right, then,' he says. 'Let's make a plan.'

‘What are our options?’ Raine asks, as Yuri Hale unfolds his field-map onto one of the mess hall’s wooden tables. The map is creased and bloodstained, frayed along all of the folds, but it is still intact. Whend is illustrated in exacting detail from edge to edge, with the deep ravine that surrounds the city on all sides depicted as a thick black line. Raine can see where Hale has been marking and remarking borders and territories across the city over the course of the conflict in red ink. Pushing the Imperial lines back, over and over again.

‘There are no more bridges in Imperial territory,’ Hales says, then he shakes his head. ‘Not that there’s much in the way of Imperial territory, now, either. The eastern quarter was our last beachhead.’

‘Then we must go back into the city,’ Raine says.

‘And back into the fight,’ Hale says, picking up his inkmarker pen.

‘There’s another bridge in the northern quarter,’ he says, reaching over the table and marking the location. He has to lean a good way to do it. ‘The Gildroad. It’s a sixteen-mile march.’

Raine doesn’t have to consider it for long. Just three ticks of the timepiece in her pocket.

‘The Sighted set the northern quarter alight days ago, and it is still burning now,’ she says. ‘It would be a difficult march without the wounded. With them, it will be near impossible, especially given Zane’s condition.’

Hale leans heavily on the table, frowning at the map. For a moment he looks as tired as he must feel.

‘I won’t leave the wounded behind,’ he says. ‘Even Zane. She might be a witch, but she has saved us twice today. There’s an owing in that.’

Raine doesn’t have to consider that at all.

‘We might not have a choice,’ she says. ‘If we cannot find a path that the wounded can take, then we cannot take the wounded with us.’

‘I’d rather die alongside my own than leave them for the enemy,’ Hale says.

‘I would not leave them for the enemy, captain,’ Raine says. ‘Be sure of that.’

Hale exhales slowly.

‘You are talking about killing them, when they’ve fought so hard not to die.’

‘I am talking about choices, captain,’ Raine says, levelly. ‘Whether they are favourable or not.’

Raine has performed many executions since becoming a commissar. She has levelled her pistol at officers and infantry alike in the name of punishment and of mercy. On every occasion she has pulled the trigger without malice, or cruelty, because those things are not the purpose of a commissar. A commissar’s purpose

is to drive those they serve with to act despite their fear, or their misgivings. To make difficult choices when others will not.

And to bear the weight of those choices, no matter how heavy they might be.

‘If we can find a way out of the city with Zane, then it is a choice I will not need to make,’ Raine says. ‘She is a valuable asset, but I cannot allow the loss of so many for the sake of a single life.’

Despite his self-control, Raine can see the same old feelings written on Hale’s face. That instinctual hatred that Raine has known every day since she took up her pistol and sabre. She pays it no mind.

‘Is that clear, captain?’ she asks him.

Hale stops leaning on the table and straightens up. Somehow, it makes him look more tired than before.

‘Clear, commissar,’ Hale says. ‘We’ll find another way.’

They go back to the map, then, proposing and discarding options. Many of the minor bridges connecting Whend to the outlands are collapsed, like the Bridge of Graces, or they are too far away, like the Gildroad. Raine’s timepiece ticks on. The snap of lasgun fire echoes down the avenues, and aircraft thunder overhead, rattling the glassaic in the windows. Raine is about to say that they have spent enough time looking when she catches sight of something.

‘The Deadways,’ she says.

Hale frowns.

‘The burial district,’ he says. ‘There’s no bridge there. No room for aircraft to put down either, even if we could call one. The place is a labyrinth.’

Raine shakes her head. ‘There is no bridge,’ she says. ‘But there is something like one.’ She walks around to his side of the table and puts her fingers to the map, tracing along the eastern edge of the city where it meets the ravine.

‘There,’ Raine says, pointing to a thin line that joins the city to the outlands. It is not marked as a bridge because it isn’t one. Not really. Raine nearly smiles.

‘The Saint’s Blessing,’ Hale says, reading from the map. ‘An aqueduct.’

Raine nods. ‘The oldest one in the city, built in honour of their patron saint and crowned with her likeness in stone.’

Raine remembers the pics from the pre-deployment briefing. She remembers Saint Selayna’s outstretched hand, and her benevolent, upturned face.

‘The Saint’s Blessing serves the entire western quarter,’ Raine says. ‘Which means it will likely still be standing, unless the Sighted can do without water.’

Hale picks up his inkmarker again. He circles the aqueduct on the map, before drawing a line back through the burial district to their current position.

‘Looks like it’s just over nine miles of built-up terrain,’ he says. ‘The Deadways are old. All ossuaries and burial halls. Crypts and tombs. Plenty of cover.’

‘The avenues are narrow, too,’ Raine says. ‘Too narrow for heavy armour.’

Hale huffs a humourless laugh. ‘Or for aircraft to strafe,’ he says.

Raine nods. ‘If we strike out at dusk then we could be at the aqueduct by dawn, with only the Sighted themselves to kill on the way.’

Hale nods, slowly.

‘Devri took Blue Company into the Deadways days ago,’ he says. ‘They got bloodied badly for the trouble. He had to pull back even before the order went out for the full-scale retreat.’ Hale pauses, and frowns. ‘He said the Sighted had made it a slaughterhouse.’

‘That may be,’ Raine says. ‘But objectively speaking, it is our best option.’

Hale casts his eyes once more over the map, and sighs.

‘I’d say so too,’ he says. ‘The Deadways it is.’

With an hour to go until dusk, most of the others try to get some sleep. Crys is out almost before she hits the bunk. She can sleep anywhere. Wyck has seen her fold her arms, close her eyes and doze off only a mile from a front-line barrage. Her snoring damn near drowned out the artillery. Koy sleeps too, propped up against the barracks wall with her legs stretched out in front of her. The Mistvyper rests one tattooed hand on the stock of her rifle, the cell disengaged. In the other, Koy clings to a bunch of ident-tags, the chains wound around and around her hand. Some of the tags are scorched and twisted. All of them are spotted with blood. Those who can’t sleep spend their time praying, like Awd, or sharing what little food they’ve got and telling one another quiet stories from home. Wyck is too edgy for stories or prayers. Too nauseous to eat. Too wracked with aches in his body and his head to sleep.

And then there’s Hale’s plan.

The Deadways. Going slow through the long Balfaran darkness with Zane in the hope of reaching The Saint’s Blessing. It doesn’t feel like a blessing at all. It feels like a joke. Like a death sentence. The witch’s words come back to Wyck again and they feel like prophecy. Like a curse.

Death is watching you.

Wyck can’t sit there any more while everyone else laughs and talks and eats and sleeps, so he leaves the others to their own devices and goes looking for Nuria Lye instead.

He finds the medic coming out of a room at the far end of the hallway. It was an

isolation chamber once. A punishment cell. It's where she's letting Zane rest up before they move out.

'Seems appropriate,' Wyck says, as she pulls the door closed. 'Putting the witch in a room that bolts from the outside.'

Lye turns and frowns at him. There was a time, years ago, when she might have smiled at the sight of him, but not now.

'I'd ask what you want, but I think I can guess,' she says.

Wyck offers Lye a smile. Even that hurts.

'Maybe I just came to talk to you, like old times,' he says.

Lye shakes her head. 'Cut the crap. We both know that's not true.'

It's how their conversations always go now. That used to be different too, before. Wyck glances back down the hallway to make sure there's nobody else around.

'I don't need much,' he says, in a low voice. 'Just enough to make it to dawn.'

Lye's frown escalates. 'You should have plenty,' she says. 'I gave you six doses before deployment. How many have you got left?'

'One,' he says.

It's not a frown on her face any more. It's thunder.

'*One?*' she hisses. 'Are you a damned fool? I thought that taking the stimms was about trying not to die.'

Her words sting, and Wyck feels his temper boil up. It happens all the time lately.

'I needed it,' he says, because he did. Because he's forgotten what it's like not to. 'And I won't get out of this place without more.'

Lye shakes her head.

'You'll have to,' she says. 'I've got nothing to give you.'

Wyck feels the world tilt.

'What?' he asks, and his own voice sounds far off, as if he's hearing it over water.

'You heard me,' Lye says. 'This is a *warzone*, Dav. I'm carrying field kit and that's it, and I've barely got more than bandages left even then. I'm sorry, but I can't help you. Not this time. You'll have to make do with what you've got.'

Wyck shakes his head. There was a time when one dose would have been just enough to go until dawn, even on a world like this, but not now. It gets worse after every war. The rush gets shorter and shorter. Lately he's been doubling most of his doses, though she's always told him never to do that, because it's the only thing that works. That keeps death away.

‘And when it wears off?’ he snarls. ‘When I’m slow as anything in all that darkness, what do I do then?’

Lye puts her hand on his shoulder. The contact makes him flinch. Makes his pulse fire like he’s under threat. Wyck has to physically keep himself from reacting to it. From hitting her.

‘The same as the rest of us,’ Lye says. ‘Fight, pray and try not to die.’

Raine sits alone in the barracks’ mess hall, with what is left to her arrayed on the table. One complete magazine for her bolt pistol. Just eight shells. Her sabre, and a short knife for fieldcraft. Three packs of dry rations. One canteen, two-thirds full. Her timepiece. It sits open on the table, counting down to dusk. Raine doesn’t really need it for the time. Hale will call for her when it is time to deploy. Raine put the timepiece out on the table because she finds the ticking of it a comfort. She finds it calming, when she is troubled.

It is not the impending march through the Deadways that troubles Raine. As she told Hale, it is the best option. The most survivable. What is troubling Raine is the bombardment that collapsed the Bridge of Graces. Not the shock of it, or the damage it caused, or the lives that it took.

It’s the fact that the Sighted have not used artillery once during Raine’s deployment in Whend. Aircraft and armour, yes, but not artillery. Just as when she was planning with Hale, Raine considers the possibilities as she packs away her weapons and gear.

The first is that the Sighted captured an artillery piece during the conflict. That is something that Raine has certainly known the enemy to do. They loot and steal. They corrupt and coerce. It would not be the first time.

But then, surely, the bombardment would have come from the northern quarter, or the west. The moment of the bombardment was chaotic, but Raine is almost certain that the shells came from the east. From the outlands. Which makes the second possibility the more likely one.

That they were fired on, in error, by their own forces.

Raine exhales a slow breath. She stands from the bench. Slides her magazine back into her pistol and picks up her sabre. Puts her timepiece back in the inside pocket of her greatcoat. Raine briefly considers telling Hale what she suspects but decides against it. The Antari are already shaken. Bloodied and exhausted. She will not risk demoralising them for the sake of a possibility. Of a hunch.

Even if she is almost entirely certain that she is right.

Without the light from the twin suns, Whend is pitch-dark. It’s not just the light

they lose, either. The temperature falls away quickly as the wide night sky drinks up the day's heat. Despite the cool air, Wyck is still sweating through his fatigues as he moves through the Deadways with his squad. Zane limps alongside them, half carried by Crys. The witch is breathing like a set of split bellows. The sound of it makes Wyck's ears ache and sets his temper afire. His palms are slick on the stock of his gun, and he has to count his breathing in and out to keep it steady. Without the stimms, his awareness is narrowed. Sight and sound and hearing. It's like looking at everything through a smeared scope. Like trying to hear footsteps after a charge has gone off. Everything looks like something it isn't. Like a threat. But Wyck can't dose. The commissar is too damned near. So he keeps counting every breath in his head as he jogs along the narrow avenue.

Breathe in. One. Two. Three.

The burial district is still and quiet. Every lantern has been smashed or smothered. The buildings twist up tall on either side of him, clustered together like trees.

Breathe out. One. Two. Three.

Tiny embers carry down on the wind, kicked up by the northern quarter as it burns. They wander through the air like lights left behind by restless souls. Where they hit Wyck's flak-plate and fatigues, they snuff themselves out.

Breathe in. One. Two. Three.

Wyck raises his hand for his squad to stop and moves ahead to take up overwatch in the arched doorway of a burial hall. Narrow bridges criss-cross overhead, and devotional banners snap in the wind. The burial hall is decorated with the weatherworn bones of the faithful dead. Wyck glimpses long bones and splayed ribcages. Finger bones and spines.

Hundreds and hundreds of grinning skulls.

Death is watching you.

Wyck shakes his head.

Breathe out. One. Two. Three.

He sights down his rifle, straining his eyes to see if there's anything waiting in the darkness ahead. For a moment he thinks he sees a figure moving against the black, but then it's gone again. He can't be sure it was ever there.

Breathe in. One. Two. Three.

'Are we clear?' Hale asks, over the vox.

Wyck can't say yes. He can't say no. He can't be sure. He *needs* to be sure, otherwise he's damning them all to death. It would all be his fault.

And it wouldn't be the first time.

‘Hold on,’ Wyck replies, glancing back to make sure the others stay where they are.

He wanted to wait until halfway, but he can’t. He needs to be sure. He needs to dose. His heart is already rattling for the rush. For the focus, so sharp that he’ll forget everything else. It only has to get him to the edge. To the way out. Clear of death’s jaws for one more day.

Wyck goes into the pouch at his belt where he keeps the vial and takes it out, but his heart starts sinking because it’s lighter than it should be. Wyck tries to breathe, to count to three, but he can’t.

Because the vial is cracked, and every drop of the dark liquid inside is gone.

‘No,’ he murmurs. ‘No. *No.*’

Wyck closes his fist tight around the vial to break it the rest of the way, hoping that there’s something left on the glass. Anything. Blood bubbles up through his fingers, and he counts the seconds, but he feels *nothing*. No rush, no focus, just the stinging of his hand where he’s cut it, right along the old oath-scar on his palm. Dread rolls over him like lake fog in winter. He’s got nothing to get him through this. Nothing to keep him clear of death’s jaws. Wyck tries to swallow, but it feels as though his mouth is full of mortar dust. His fatigues are soaked with sweat and sticking to him.

‘*Dav,*’ Hale says, over the vox. ‘*Is it clear?*’

‘Hold on, Yuri,’ Wyck manages to say. ‘Give me a second.’

He drops what’s left of the injector and sights down his rifle again, his bloody hand slipping on the stock. Wyck stares into the darkness. Holds his breath until his lungs ache. He can’t see the figure again. Not right now. It must have just been the darkness. Just his mind, making shapes of it. Wyck finally exhales and counts it out.

One.

Two.

Three.

‘Clear,’ he says, his voice a rasp.

The Sighted hunting party is made up of two squads of nine.

It is the third of its kind that Raine and the Antari have come across since entering the burial district two hours earlier. Just like the others, the Sighted are little better than reavers. Their flak-plate is scored with spiral patterns and their scarified faces are painted with thick stripes of blood. Wave-bladed obsidian swords hang at their waists, and they sweep their stub-rifles back and forth as

they advance up the avenue. Trophies made from broken bones clatter against their armour as the Sighted step over debris, and the dead. When Devri had told Hale that the Deadways was a slaughterhouse, he had not been exaggerating. The burial district is fortified and barricaded. Cratered with shell-holes and littered with shell casings and abandoned fieldworks and the still, stinking dead.

'We let them get much closer and they'll see us,' Wyck says, over the vox.

Like Raine, Wyck is crouched with his Wyldfolk behind one of the pockmarked, ash-stained barricades that criss-cross the avenue, watching the Sighted approach. His flint-grey eyes are wide, and he is tapping an absent, silent pattern on his rifle's stock as he sights down the barrel. Raine keeps half an eye on him, as she has been doing in the hours since the bridge collapsed. Since she joined the regiment, almost two years ago. Like Zane, Wyck is an asset that can be used to great effect, despite his failings. He is a fighter by nature, with more recorded kills than any of the other Antari sergeants. Save for the Duskhounds, Wyck's Wyldfolk are Grey Company's sharpest edge. But just like with Zane, it is only a matter of time before Wyck becomes more of a risk than an asset. Before Raine has to bring him to task for every one of his failings.

'Hold position,' Hale murmurs, in reply. *'Wait for my mark.'*

Hale is in position further along the line with the rest of his command squad. The Sighted reavers tread closer, speaking to one another in low voices. They step right over Crys' carefully disguised cables and cords. Raine tightens her fingers around the hilt of her sword. The Sighted are close, now. Close enough that Raine can clearly see the fate-marks cut into their faces.

'Now,' Hale says.

Raine sees Yulia Crys thumb her detonator trigger. Det-cord hisses to life behind the Sighted reavers, blocking their escape. A series of small shrapnel charges detonate. Two of the Sighted go over wounded and reeling as the Wyldfolk and the Mistvypers open fire. Three more of the Sighted fall, but the rest of them charge towards the barricades. Right towards Raine and the Antari. The ambush quickly becomes a melee. A series of violent instances that Raine glimpses between every strike and clash of her own sword. Yuri Hale shoots one of the Sighted with his pistol, sending the reaver sprawling, a twist of smoke spiralling up from the killing shot. Wyck slams another of the Sighted against the barricades, then opens the reaver's throat with his knife. The rest of the Wyldfolk put themselves between the Sighted and Lydia Zane. Yulia Crys fires her sidearm until the cell blinks empty, and then sets about breaking bones.

One of the Sighted charges to face Raine down. The reaver is lithe and tall, her

crest of hair coloured with dye and laced with feathers. A cut gemstone glitters where her right eye should be, and her wave-bladed sword shines like a mirror as she swings it. The Sighted is skilled with the blade, and quick, too. The wave-bladed sword catches Raine across the arm and puts a deep groove in her silver chest-plate, but Raine has been training and fighting with a blade since the day she was old enough to lift one unaided. She is skilled, too.

And she is *much* quicker.

Raine catches the Sighted's sword on her own and twists the blade upwards and away, before cutting the reaver open from shoulder to hip with a downward strike. Evenfall hums, the powered blade cutting straight through armour and flesh and bone. The Sighted's human eye goes wide and she drops her sword, falling first to her knees and then onto her face. Around Raine the Antari are bleeding anew, but still standing while all of the Sighted are dead, save for one. The reaver is slumped against the barricades, lung-shot and struggling for air. As Wyck levels his rifle at the Sighted, the reaver lifts his lolling head and smiles through blackened, bloody teeth.

'You are all fools,' he laughs, his words running together. 'Blind to where the path takes you. A shadow grows within, and every death is a gift. Change is comi—'

Wyck fires. The burst of rounds hits the reaver centre-mass and silences him. The Sighted collapses heavily onto his side, but his smile stays fixed, even in death.

'A shadow grows within,' Hale growls. 'The hells is that supposed to mean?'

Wyck lowers his rifle, slowly. 'Nothing good,' he says.

Raine looks at where the reaver's blood runs into the cracks between the cobblestones and thinks of everything she has seen, from Gholl to Umbra. Of the Sighted's growing strength and influence.

And for once, she finds herself in agreement with Daven Wyck.

'The Deadways,' Yuri Hale says. 'A name twice earned.'

Looking at the way ahead, Raine cannot help but agree. Overhead, Balfar's slender moon has reached its zenith, casting dim, pale grey light into the avenue. It catches on the white stone faces of the buildings. On the thousands of skulls and bones cladding them.

And on the countless dead, strewn across the cobblestones.

There are so many bodies that Raine and the Antari have to pick their way through slowly. Every breath is cloying and thick with the smell of spoiling

blood. Vermin hiss and skitter away, their fur slick-wet under the stablight beams. Raine sees the blue-and-white livery of the Kavrone Dragoons amongst the dead. The Sighted, too, with their spiral sigils and their mirrored cloaks. There are even Balfaran civilians, barefoot and dressed in white. All of them are lying flat on their backs, as if they have been turned to face the sky. Their arms are outstretched, like those of the statues on the Bridge of Graces.

Or like wings.

‘Mother of spring,’ Hale says, softly.

He stops moving and crouches down by one of the bodies.

‘This is one of Devri’s,’ Hale says. ‘And they have made quite a mess of him.’

Raine passes the stablight mounted on her pistol over the dead man. He is one of Blue Company, going by the armband, but she could not say who. The Antari trooper’s throat has been messily slit. His grey eyes are gone, and a single numeral has been marked in his skin, over and over.

Nine. Nine. Nine. Nine. Nine. Nine. Nine. Nine. Nine.

‘It’s not just him,’ Wyck says. ‘It’s all of them. Even their own.’

Raine casts her stablight around and sees that he is right. Every one of the bodies has been blinded and opened at the throat. The Sighted have used the blood to paint deliberate, careful shapes on the stone.

‘Every death is a gift,’ Wyck says, with dread in his voice.

‘It was not enough,’ Zane murmurs.

The psyker’s words startle Crys so badly that she curses and lets go of Zane. The psyker falls to her hands and knees amongst the dead. Her staff hits the roadway with a clatter. Raine moves straight over to where the psyker is kneeling and crouches down beside her.

‘What are you talking about?’ she asks. ‘What was not enough?’

Zane drools thickly onto her robes.

‘They tried to run,’ she says, ‘but they were not quick enough. There is no escape from death.’

It is Wyck who curses this time.

‘Shut up,’ he hisses at Zane. ‘Shut your damned mouth.’

Zane does not listen. She just keeps murmuring with lightning crackling across her scalp.

‘There is no escape,’ she says, her voice growing louder. ‘No escape.’

Zane’s words run together into one long, shapeless moan that echoes across the avenue.

‘Mists alive,’ Wyck snarls. ‘She’s going to get us killed.’

Hale orders Lye to quiet the psyker. The medic runs over and draws a needle, but as Lye pushes it under Zane's skin and depresses the plunger, Zane snaps her head up.

'Death is coming,' she slurs.

In that moment, several things seem to happen all at once.

Gunfire splits the air with a series of loud, flat bangs. Raine ducks reflexively. Zane moans through her teeth. One of Koy's Mistvypers stumbles forwards, gasping and pawing at the mess that's left of her throat before falling onto her face.

'Break for the buildings!' Hale shouts. 'Move, now!'

Raine grabs hold of Lydia Zane and drags the half-conscious psyker to her feet, putting her staff back into her hand. 'Crys,' she says. 'Take her and go.'

The combat engineer doesn't look happy about it, but Crys is nothing if not obedient. She grabs hold of Zane bodily and runs as a rasping, wicked chorus echoes around the avenue, coming from the flock of Sighted reavers running out of the memorial hall opposite. More than a hunting pack, this time. There are dozens of them.

Raine raises her pistol and fires at the advancing Sighted. Penance kicks in her hand, and two of the Sighted spill over backwards, but they keep coming. More take their place. Raine knows that she only has six rounds left. Around her, the Antari fall back firing. Yuri Hale is half dragging Makar Kayd. The vox-operator is hit, stumbling and bleeding all over the roadway. Lara Koy gets clipped by a solid round. The Mistvyper cries out as she loses her rifle and most of her right hand in a spray of blood.

'We must slow them!' Raine shouts.

Beside her, Wyck's rifle runs empty. He ejects the cell and replaces it with a hard click.

'Awd!' he calls out. 'Burn them!'

'Aye, sergeant,' Awd says.

Awd slows pace to let everyone pass him before triggering his flamer and sending a gout of promethium into the avenue. He moves backwards, sweeping the flamer back and forth to keep the Sighted at bay. Raine keeps firing at them through the wall of promethium.

Five rounds left.

Four.

Three.

The fire clings hungrily to the stone and the dead. To the Sighted, too, as they

try to run through it.

Two rounds left.

Wyck and Awd follow up the fire with smoke grenades. They burst and hiss, throwing thick plumes of grey, choking smoke into the air. Raine can no longer see the Sighted, but as she runs for the buildings alongside the Antari she can hear them laughing and chanting.

Every death is a gift.

Wyck can still hear the Sighted laughing.

The sound carries weirdly in the ossuary halls, wending around the tunnels and corridors and up into the rafters, sounding close and far away all at once. Sometimes he can hear them ring their blades against the stone, too.

Clatter, clatter, clatter.

Wyck pans his rifle back and forth as he leads his squad up the hallway. The way ahead is dark save for the stablight mounted on Wyck's rifle. It paints a circle of white light everywhere he looks, illuminating the grinning, gilded skulls mounted on the walls and making everything else dark as a night without stars. Just like before, his mind keeps making shapes of that darkness. Inventing threats where there are none. Wyck takes a breath and resettles his clammy hands on the stock of his rifle. This isn't his sort of fight. He likes to be able to see what he's facing. Cut it and kill it and keep running. With every archway they pass, and every half-closed set of doors, Wyck waits for the Sighted to descend on them like hunting birds. A part of him wants for it, too. The part that finds quiet in killing. The Sighted don't descend, though. They just keep their distance, laughing and rattling their blades.

Clatter, clatter, clatter.

'What are they hiding for?'

Crys' voice is a low snarl. She is still keeping the witch upright. Zane is in even worse shape than before. Drooling all over herself and bleeding again where Lye sewed her up earlier. Crys isn't faring too well either. She is limping badly, her breathing ragged and uneven. Hale's lot are just as bad. They are following a little further back with the commissar, slowed down by Lye as she tries to fix up the wounded on the move.

'They want to make it last, that's why,' Ona says, with dread in his voice.

He is the youngest of Wyck's Wyldfolk, one of the newblood called up after their losses on Gholl. Ona's eyes are wide under the brim of his helmet. The chinstrap hangs loose on him, because there's nothing to him but cords and

bones, no matter how much food he puts away.

Crys glances at Ona and clucks her tongue.

‘Those are dark thoughts, little one,’ she says. ‘Best not to think them.’

Ona would usually give her hell over that nickname, but he doesn’t now. He’s worn too thin from the day. Wyck can see it in the newblood’s face. He remembers then that it’s only Ona’s second major engagement, and it makes Wyck think of Cawter, because that was his. Because that was where everything changed.

Where death started chasing him, looking for what is owed.

Wyck shakes his head. ‘If they come for us, we’ll kill them. That’s all there is to it.’ He glances at Ona. ‘Stay sharp. I’ve already got too many fires to light.’

Ona’s face is still bloodless and pinched, but he nods. ‘Aye, sergeant,’ he says.

They keep moving along the hallways in silence, save for the dull scraping of boots and the sounds of breathing. After almost an hour, the Sighted’s laughter fades away altogether, leaving nothing but the sound of the wind singing through the twisting hallways. That should be a relief, but it isn’t, because it doesn’t feel like the Sighted are gone.

It just feels like they are waiting.

Eventually, the hallway that they are following opens up into another vast, vaulted space. The ceiling is glassaic, so everything is painted in greys by the moonlight. Wyck sees more skulls. More bones. More dead bodies, all turned to face the skylight ceiling. All blinded, just like the ones in the avenue.

‘Hag’s teeth,’ Awd murmurs, in a low voice.

Wyck looks to see words painted on the wall to their left in dribbling, angry strokes.

The Emperor cannot see you here.

Anger twists up inside him. He scowls, and spits on the ground.

‘Spread out,’ Wyck says, in a low voice. ‘Check for threats.’

A handful of murmured *Aye, sirs* answer him as the Wyldfolk start to pick their way through the chamber, moving in a ragged spread. The smell of the dead makes Wyck’s eyes water. Insects burr their wings in the darkness around him. He sees more Balfarans amongst the dead. More Kavrone, too. He stops beside one of them. The Kavrone’s uniform is gilded and strung with gold braiding, her lapels set with stones. Wyck knows enough about the Kavrone Dragoons and their finery to know that makes her a captain. Or *made* her a captain. Now she’s just as much a mess as all the others.

Save for her rifle.

Wyck lets his own lasgun hang by the strap and crouches down beside the dead Kavrone captain. Her weapon is a sniper rifle. Solid shot. Bolt-action. It is made from matt-black metals and wood with inlays that are as gilded as she is. Wyck unhooks the strap from the dead Kavrone captain's shoulder and picks up the rifle. He hasn't held a sharpshooter's weapon for years. Not since Keller tried to make a longshot of him, all that time ago. The weight of the rifle puts Wyck all the way back before Cawter, when he was just about eighteen, and doing firing drills in the driving rain. He'd hated every second of it. Not because he was a poor shot, but because using a rifle like that felt distant. One step removed.

Crys does a low, quiet whistle from beside him.

'Now that is a lovely thing,' she says, in a low voice. 'I have to say, though, sarge. I don't think it'll be all that much use in a place like this.'

Crys is right. There's no use for it in the Deadways. Certainly not inside the buildings. A rifle like this is made for distance, and quiet. But once Wyck's out of here – once he's made it through the night, the Saint's Blessing and back to the outlands – there he'll find a use for it. Wyck knows a good number of bad souls who would pay a hell of a handful of trade-coins just for the components.

'You never know,' he says to Crys, as he straightens up. 'Might come in handy.'

Wyck clears the breech, then checks the rifle's short clip. The Kavrone had fired all but one of the high-calibre rounds. Looking at the state of her, she should have used all eight. Wyck slings the sniper rifle over his shoulder, but before he can move off again there's a sudden, loud curse from Ona as the newblood fires a noisy burst of las-rounds into the dead and the darkness. Wyck snaps his own lasgun up and draws sight on what Ona shot at, only to see a fat, blood-slick rat twitching itself to death on the stone.

'Throne,' Ona stammers, as the echo of las-fire fades. 'Oh, *Throne*.'

'*Shhh*,' Wyck hisses, cutting him off.

For a moment, they all just stand there in silence, listening. Frozen. Waiting for the Sighted's laughter to echo around the chamber.

It doesn't.

Wyck walks over and grabs hold of Ona by the collar of his flak-plate and shakes him.

'Mists alive,' he hisses. 'What did I tell you?'

'Stay sharp,' Ona says. 'Sorry, sergeant.'

Crys huffs a quiet laugh from behind them. 'Looks as though he stayed pretty sharp to me, sarge, hitting something that size in the half-dark.'

Wyck shakes his head and lets go of Ona.

‘Keep moving,’ he says.

Ona nods his head, looking ashamed.

‘Aye, sir,’ he says, and he goes back to stepping carefully over the dead. Wyck does the same, panning his rifle back and forth. The stablight catches on armour plates, and shell casings. Bits of stone and bone.

Then, something else. Something glittering by Ona’s feet. Wyck’s exhausted, fogged mind turns it over slowly, and he lunges to grab hold of Ona. Opens his mouth to speak.

But he’s not quick enough.

Ona takes another step, and there’s a loud *click* that’s immediately followed by a *boom* and a bright rush of light and heat. One moment, Wyck is on his feet, the next he is flat on his back on the floor with his ears ringing. Motes of fire drift overhead. A word bubbles up through the white noise in Wyck’s head. The word he was too slow to say.

Tripwire.

Wyck drags himself upright. His vision blurs and runs. As sound starts to filter back in, he catches Crys cursing.

And Ona moaning.

Wyck gets up, though his legs are trying their best to give out and the room is spinning lazily around him. He doesn’t let himself fall to his knees until he reaches Ona’s side.

‘Damn it,’ he says, softly.

Ona’s right leg is gone, almost to the hip. His left is a mess. All ragged and twisted the wrong way. His grey eyes are wide, and he’s breathing like a hunted thing.

‘S-s-sorry,’ he says, between breaths. ‘S-should have seen it.’

‘Shut up,’ Wyck says, because it’s not Ona’s fault. It’s his. He should have been quicker.

Wyck unwinds his scarf and tries to staunch the bleeding, but there’s no stopping it. It just floods right through. Lye comes running through the dead and drops to her knees opposite Wyck. She takes one look at Ona and her face pales.

‘Dav,’ she says.

‘You have to fix him,’ Wyck says, interrupting her. ‘Now.’

Lye runs a bloody hand over her hair and then shakes her head. He knows what that means.

There’s no fixing him.

Wyck knows it too, really. That they don’t have the time, or the kit to do it. It

doesn't stop the moment feeling like shell shock over again, though. It doesn't stop him wanting to hit Lye or shake her or shout at her. It's not just about Ona. It's the fact that every loss feels like death drawing closer. Cutting through his own kin to get to him.

Wyck draws his combat blade.

'Dav,' Lye says, in a low voice. 'I can do it.'

Wyck shakes his head, because she can't. Ona is one of his own. He looks Ona in the eyes.

'You know what I'm going to do,' he says. 'What I have to do.'

Ona nods. His teeth are chattering, and his pupils are dark and fixed.

'W-when you get out, will you light a fire?' he stammers. 'G-give up my name?'

Wyck nods his head. Puts one arm under Ona's shoulders so that he can lift him.

'Right away,' he says. 'I swear it.'

'T-thank you,' Ona says.

And then Wyck lifts Ona half-upright and buries his combat blade in the newblood's chest. Under the armour. One quick, deep cut, right to the heart. Ona chokes and seizes and then goes still. Wyck lowers him back to the ground, slowly. Pulls his knife. His hand is slick with Ona's blood. It feels like it's soaking right through his skin. Leaving a mark on the inside. Wyck can't speak. Can't think. Everything is the wrong kind of rush.

Thank you. That was what Ona just said.

Thank you.

'Dav.'

Wyck looks up to see Hale standing there.

'The Sighted will be coming,' he says. 'We need to keep moving.'

Wyck looks around the chamber at the others. Koy is leaning heavily against the wall with her bandaged, mangled hand strapped to her chest. Crys and Awd are still reeling from the tripwire charge. Dal's arm is broken. Efri's face is a mask of blood. Kayd is slumped over his vox-kit, with one hand clamped over the gunshot wound in his side. He looks back at Ona. At the pool of blood that's spread all around the newblood's body. It's soaking into Wyck's fatigues. Going cold. The rush becomes a roar. Wyck gets to his feet.

'Keep *moving*?' he snarls. 'What, so they can bleed us, one at a time, until there's nothing left? It's madness.'

Hale's face clouds over. 'It's a damned *order*,' he says. 'So get your squad, and

get a move on. We're marching for The Saint's Blessing.'

Wyck has known Hale a long time. Much longer than either of them has held rank. There's a part of Wyck that knows Hale is just trying to get them out alive, but it's much quieter than the part of him that's guilty and angry and spoiling for a fight.

'This thing has been a shit-show from the first sunrise,' Wyck says. 'Look around, Yuri. We're not going to make it to the damned aqueduct. You've killed the lot of us and you know it. You're just too much of a coward to admit it.'

Just like the explosion, Wyck is too slow to get clear of the punch Hale throws. It bursts Wyck's lip and sets his head ringing like a bell.

'Call me that again, you insubordinate bastard,' Hale says.

Wyck rights himself, feeling foolish enough to fight back. He raises his fists to do it, but freezes when he hears another deadly *click*, this time right by his ear.

Wyck turns slowly to see the muzzle of a bolt pistol pointed at his face.

'Enough,' Raine says.

'Stand down,' Raine says. 'Now.'

There is a moment of silence. Raine listens to her timepiece ticking in her coat pocket. Wyck has five seconds to back down. To prove he's more of an asset than a risk. That he can still be controlled. Wyck's eyes are wide and flooded. Full of anger and grief. Raine tenses her finger on her pistol's trigger.

And then Wyck lowers his hands and backs down.

Raine lowers her pistol a fraction, but not completely. Her work is not done yet. Wyck might have been the one to speak the words, but she knows full well that he is not the only one to think them. Raine can see the same feelings written plainly in the rest of the Antari, too. In almost two years, she has never seen them so close to broken. They are all exhausted and wounded. Grieving and angry. That last emotion is the one that Raine needs if she is going to get them out of Whend alive.

She looks around the room, making sure to catch each pair of grey Antari eyes.

'You know full well what the Sighted have done here,' Raine says, without raising her voice. She doesn't have to. She knows that they are listening. 'The evidence is all around you. Look at the dead.'

They glance downwards. Some make warding gestures with their bloody hands.

'This is the fate that awaits every world from here to the sector's edge, should we give in,' Raine says. 'This is Steadfast, and Drast. Every world we have fought to win back. It is Antar. The home that you fight to keep safe.'

Raine sees them stir at the mention of their home world. At the word *fate*.

‘The only way to prevent this fate is to fight without cease. To deny our enemies, and their blasphemies. Every weapon arrayed against the Sighted counts. Every faithful heart.’

Raine lowers her pistol.

‘If you truly think yourselves dead, then lie down beside all of these others and wait for the enemy to claim you. If you want to live, though. If you want to fight without cease and never give in, then stand with me, because I refuse to die here when there is so much left undone.’

There is a brief moment of silence, during which Raine can hear the distant echo of the Sighted’s laughter once more, drawing closer.

‘Make your choice,’ Raine says. ‘Now.’

And they do. The Antari salute her as one. Even Wyck.

‘We choose to fight, commissar,’ they say, in war-broken voices.

The others are all spurred by the commissar’s words. Wyck can see it in their eyes. In the way they fight their way through the ossuary halls, and the burial shrines. Through the endless, twisting hallways. His kinfolk are all bright eyes and gritted teeth. Good order and discipline. They almost seem renewed. It’s always the same when Raine makes one of her speeches, because the commissar knows exactly which threads to pull. Wyck isn’t one for grand words, or speeches, but something Raine said sticks with him nonetheless.

I refuse to die here.

That’s why he is fighting. Not because of honour or glory. Not because of grand words. Wyck is fighting because he refuses to die here, too. He might be owed death a dozen times over, but he’s not ready for it. For the hounds to close their jaws around his throat and drag him to the After. For the judgement that waits in the black.

For the counting of all of his sins.

So Wyck fights hard and quick and fiercely, even without the stimms. He goes through his last two lasgun cells and then the ones he took from Ona, too, firing in short bursts, aiming for where the armour is weakest, or there’s no armour at all. Knees. Guts. Throats. The Kavrone rifle is useless in the narrow halls, so once Wyck’s lasgun is done, he resorts to his combat blade and his sidearm. Wyck has always favoured a blade. He can’t remember a time when he didn’t carry one. When he didn’t know how to use one. When Wyck was first tithed, they would all make jokes about it. That Wyck was made to be Wyldfolk,

because he'd always rather cut to kill. His kinfolk would all sit around him and laugh, but he'd never join in.

It isn't his kinfolk laughing now, though. It's the Sighted.

Even pinned to the floor, with Wyck's knee on his chest, the reaver still laughs. It's a wet, clotted sound, because Wyck has already buried his knife in the reaver's chest twice.

'Fool,' the Sighted spits, through his teeth. 'Change is coming. Every. Death. Is. A—'

The Sighted never gets to finish his words. Wyck cuts them short by cutting the reaver's throat. Blood wells and spills and bubbles up with air escaping from the wound. It runs over Wyck's hands. Soaks into his sleeves. A momentary quiet descends over him. A stillness, for less than a second.

'Push forwards! Give them no quarter!'

Raine's voice cuts through that quiet. Wyck pulls his knife and gets back on his feet. Back to running right towards the enemy, because if he's killing, then he's not dying. If he's killing, he's not thinking on the commissar's other words. The ones she spoke only to him, after her grand speech. Her outsider's voice had been low, and emotionless. Cold as a winter's dawn.

Never again.

Wyck didn't have to ask what it meant. It was clear from the look in Raine's depthless eyes. He's on the blade's edge, now.

And Wyck knows that is another judgement he's not ready for.

It takes hours for Raine and the Antari to kill their way through the ossuaries, and the burial halls. Through the crypts and mausoleums. Hours of fighting under the hollow eyes of the faithful dead. Hours of running under fire. Of clashing swords and thundering guns.

Hours of blood, and of killing.

The Sighted come for them again and again, flocking from the darkness armed with wicked blades and rifles. Clad in mirrors and sigils. Vyne loses an eye to a Sighted reaver with an obsidian blade. He panics and shakes, and Lye has to use the last of her morpha to make him still enough for Efri to carry. Hale has his nose broken, and his scalp opened nearly to the bone. Koy loses one of her Mistvypers to a wire trap. It cuts Gile so deeply across his chest that he can't even scream. Koy is the one to offer mercy. She does so with her own rifle, and a hollow look in her grey eyes. But the Antari don't stop. They keep fighting without cease, just as Raine ordered them to. Cutting and killing their way

towards The Saint's Blessing, step by bloody step.

They spend every shot in every powercell they carry, then resort to looting ammunition and guns from the dead. Wyck makes blade kill after blade kill until his green-and-grey uniform is soaked rust red. Crys builds shrapnel charges from loops of det-cord and handfuls of spent shells. Awd empties his flamer tanks and discards his kit so that they can use the remaining fumes as a makeshift explosive. With no bolt shells left, Raine has to rely on her sabre and her fists alone. She loses count of how many kills she makes, but it is enough that her arm goes numb to the shoulder from the constant clashing of swords. Raine is cut in return, across her arms and her legs. Across her face. She does not allow herself to slow, though, or to falter. She does not give in, or stop fighting, because what she said to the Antari is true.

She refuses to die here.

So Raine fights and she kills, and the Antari do the same around her, winning a little more ground with every kill, until the reavers stop coming and they finally emerge from the labyrinthine buildings into the open. The air is clear outside, not choked with smoke or dust or the smell of the dead. The sky is growing pale at the edges with the oncoming dawn. Ahead of them, the avenue slopes downwards steeply to terminate at another plateau that gives way to a steep cliff, and Whend's enclosing ravine.

'The Saint's Blessing,' Hale says, and he laughs, despite everything. Or perhaps because of everything. 'You were right, commissar. It is still standing.'

Raine can't help but smile as she looks down the steep slope towards the aqueduct. Water glitters as it is pulled gently towards the city across the top of the white stone structure. The vast monument to Saint Selayna stands beside it with one hand extended, as though she is reaching out towards them. Calling them to the outlands. To safety. Raine can hear the water moving, even at this distance. It sounds strangely peaceful, as though the city is breathing in its sleep.

'It looks as though nobody is down there,' Crys says. 'Maybe we should go now, quickly, before they show up again.'

'There is definitely *someone* down there,' Wyck says. 'There's no such thing as an easy win.'

'Now, that's a truth,' Hale says, solemn again. 'We go slow, two on two. Wounded in the centre. I know we all want out of here, but I'd rather not run into their teeth.'

He looks at Wyck. 'Unless you have a problem with that?'

Raine sees Wyck glance at her momentarily before he shakes his head.

‘No, sir,’ he says.

‘Good,’ Hale says. ‘All right, Rifles. Let’s get ourselves out of this mess.’

They move down the avenue slowly, sticking close to the fronts of the buildings. Wyck takes point like always, with Awd beside him. The twin suns are almost ready to rise, now. The sky is gilded at the seams, and the wind is already getting warmer. It does nothing to stop Wyck from shivering inside his skin. He can smell the water on the wind. It makes his throat ache and he realises over again how sunburned he is. How dehydrated. How bruised and bloody and exhausted. But he’s so close, now. So close to the aqueduct and the outlands. So close to keeping clear of the jaws of death, for one more day.

But then Wyck catches sight of something down his sidearm’s sights. Another momentary glimmering, just like back in the ossuary halls. Just like with Ona. Only this time the glimmerings are located in the second- and third-level windows on the other side of the avenue.

And this time, he is just about quick enough.

‘Longshots!’ Wyck shouts. ‘South side!’

As he says the words, the Sighted snipers open fire. A series of loud *cracks* echo in the avenue. Mortar dust blows out in clouds from the building’s facade behind Wyck as he fires back at the closest of them with his sidearm.

‘Break and run!’ Hale shouts. ‘Go!’

Wyck runs. The avenue is steep and uneven. Stone fragments cut the air all around him as the snipers chew up the cobblestones in an effort to cut the Antari down. Awd gets cut by it, badly. He staggers, but keeps running. Crys is fully carrying Zane, now. Another of Koy’s Mistvypers goes over heavy, dead in an instant. There’s a break in the sniper fire as they hit the bottom of the avenue, and for a split second Wyck thinks that maybe they’ve outrun them. Saint Selayna smiles down at him from above. The aqueduct is nothing but a short sprint away.

But then Wyck hears laughter.

The Sighted come spilling from the buildings on either side of the avenue like rats, cutting them off from the Saint’s Blessing. There are dozens of them. All mirrored masks and fate-marks and wide-mouth smiles and that constant, hateful laughter.

‘Stay together!’ Hale shouts. ‘Cut through! Don’t stop!’

Wyck doesn’t stop. He fires his sidearm until it empties and locks in his hands, then breaks open the pistol’s casing by using it to break one of the reavers. Wyck

drops what's left. Uses his knife. His hands. There are so many of the Sighted. It's a press. A howling, laughing, coiling press that smells of blood and sweat and death. One of the Sighted's knives slides along Wyck's ribs, right under his flak-plate. He opens the Sighted's throat in return, but the pain is blinding. Numb and burning, all at once. Wyck's vision tunnels. He staggers. Blood soaks into his fatigues in a wide, hot circle. In that moment, he catches sight of Raine. The commissar's greatcoat is tattered and torn. The left side of her face is a bloody mask, and her sword's blade is scorched black from use. The wounds should make her look more human, but they don't. They make her look like something sent from the After.

Like vengeance, given form.

'Do not give in!' Raine shouts over the chanting and the laughter. 'You made a choice! Tell me again, what was it?'

It's not the words that do it. It's her eyes. They are as cold as lake-depths, and just as unforgiving. Wyck has no choice but to answer alongside his kin.

To fight.

So Wyck fights. Bleeding and dizzy, he cuts and struggles and pushes and kills his way through the press, until he breaks through alongside his kin. Until the Sighted are behind them, and the shadow of Saint Selayna falls across him. Wyck keeps running. His Wyldfolk hit the aqueduct steps ahead of him. Awd and Efri. Dal and Vyne. Koy is there, too, with two of her own. Hale and Lye are carrying Kayd between them. Wyck reaches the steps alongside Crys. The combat engineer is cut and bleeding and gasping for breath, somehow still dragging Zane with her. Raine is the last to set foot on the aqueduct. Thirteen souls, from the twenty-three who left the Balfaran barracks. Wyck looks back, then, to see if the Sighted are still giving chase, because he can't hear them any more over the racket of the water.

Then he realises it's not just the water.

'No,' he says, softly.

Against the dawn-pink sky, Wyck can see the shape of an aircraft approaching at attack speed from over the city. It's a Thunderbolt, just like before. Wyck hears Hale call '*Incoming!*' He hears Crys swear vehemently as Zane struggles free of her grip. The witch sways on her feet, bleeding and shaking. She raises a hand towards the approaching Thunderbolt and makes a hateful, animal sound as she does her damndest to pull the fighter to earth. Lightning arcs around her. Deep wounds open themselves along Zane's arms. The Thunderbolt's echoing engines struggle. Wyck's pulse fires. For less than a second, he's elated.

But the Thunderbolt doesn't fall. Zane does.

The witch slumps forwards onto her knees, drooling and moaning. She can't do it. Not this time. Wyck hears Hale shout for them to run for the outlands, to get across the aqueduct, but it's too late. The fighter is already too close. They won't outrun it. Their only hope is to kill it.

Wyck unslings the Kavrone rifle from his shoulder and drops to one knee.

'Dav!' Lye shouts. 'What in the hells are you doing?'

'Shut up and run!' he shouts back at her as he sights down the rifle.

Wyck only has seconds before the Thunderbolt hits outside range and starts firing on them. It's hardly long enough to settle the scope, never mind adjust for distance or wind or to do any of the things Keller told him all that time ago. He zeroes on the Thunderbolt. On the cockpit armourglass. The fighter wavers around inside the crosshairs. Wyck's hands are shaking and slick on the stock. His vision is bleary and dazzled. The Thunderbolt's engines are deafening, but he can't fire. Not yet. He's got to be sure. If he misses, they're all dead. He'll break his oath to Ona and get dragged to the After and have to stand sentence for all of his sins. For all of the blood on his hands. Wyck takes a breath and holds it.

One.

His lungs ache.

Two.

His eyes water.

Three.

The Thunderbolt falls into the heart of the sights.

'God-Emperor, *please,*' Wyck murmurs, and he pulls the trigger.

The Kavrone rifle bellows and kicks like a bastard. A tiny instant of stillness descends over him, just like after a blade kill. He's missed it. He's sure of it. Wyck lowers the rifle, and he almost laughs, because Zane's witch-words were right after all.

He cannot escape from death.

But then the Thunderbolt starts to slew in the air. The fighter rolls over and spins and then spirals downwards, engines screaming. It hits the plateau and the city side of the aqueduct and detonates. Wyck is knocked sprawling. Chunks of stone and metal hit the water and the walkway around him. Smoke rolls over, thick and black and choking. The aqueduct tremors and groans, but it doesn't give. It doesn't collapse. Saint Selayna remains standing, untouched by the fire or the destruction. Water rains down all around Wyck, displaced by the

explosion. For a moment, it's like being caught in a storm. It's like home. Wyck does laugh, then. Or something like it. Something that hurts. As the smoke starts to blow clear, he sees the others stirring. His Wyldfolk. Koy, and her Mistvypers. Lye. Hale. Even Zane. The witch is still kneeling beside him, pale and bloody and more than half-dead. There's a half-smile on her face that looks all too much like a rictus.

'Looks as though your witch-words didn't come true,' Wyck says.

Zane turns to look at him, fixing him with her silver eyes.

'Oh, no,' she says, in her rasping, sing-song voice. 'They are true.'

Something stirs in the smoke, then. A dark shape. Wyck draws his knife, but lowers it again when he sees the figure clearly. Raine is limping and bloodied, but her face is impassive, as if she is cut from stone. The twin suns finally break the horizon behind her, haloing the commissar in fire and gold.

'On your feet.' Raine's voice is cold. 'It is not over, yet.'

Wyck does as she says, leaving the Kavrone rifle lying on the stone. He can't take it with her dark eyes fixed on him like that. It's like being watched by the Emperor twice over. Wyck realises then what Zane meant. Why the witch is still smiling.

You cannot escape. Death is watching you.

Zane wasn't talking about the Sighted, or the city.

She was talking about Severina Raine.

On their return to the forward command camp, Raine and those Antari who survived the Deadways undergo hours of debriefing and medicae assessment. Their weapons and armour are taken for refit and repair, as are those too badly wounded to be immediately cleared for service. Raine endures the process with deliberate patience. It takes so long that night is falling again by the time Raine reaches the Commissariat headquarters. It is a low building made of flakboard and iron struts. On the outside, the panels are painted black. On the inside, they are a bright, uncomfortable white. The lumens overhead are harsh. The room that Raine is summoned to is spare and small, with just enough room for two chairs. One is low to the ground, deliberately uncomfortable, and occupied by a fidgeting, discomfited figure in a grey cloth uniform. Raine elects not to take the other seat. Her legs are aching from the fight through the Deadways, but now is not the time for rest.

'Do you know how many members of the Eleventh Antari Rifles were killed in the bombardment that collapsed the Bridge of Graces?' she asks.

Tacticae Officer Logun looks up at her. He is young and fair-haired, with one limpid blue eye and one silver augmetic. Other than that, Logun is unscarred.

‘Thirty-nine,’ he says. ‘Another fifteen were injured. Five of those will require augmentation before being cleared for service.’

Raine nods. ‘Thirty-nine,’ she says. ‘Ten more died cutting through the Deadways to escape. The remaining thirteen are all injured. Some may yet die from their wounds.’

Logun pales, and nods.

‘Extraction was not a viable option,’ he says. ‘The Sighted—’

‘Had air superiority,’ Raine interrupts. ‘I know. Your assessment was correct. I am not here to question a tactically sound decision.’

Logun frowns.

‘You aren’t?’ he asks.

‘No,’ Raine says. ‘I am here to ask you to confirm an order script for me.’

Logun’s human eye is wide and wary as he takes the script from Raine. As he reads it, he pales further and his hand starts to shake.

‘What does it say?’ Raine asks.

Logun clears his throat. It takes two tries.

‘It is an order confirmation for an artillery strike,’ he says. ‘A full-scale bombardment of a key Sighted-held territory in the western quarter of Whend.’

‘The grid reference?’ Raine asks.

Logun’s hand is shaking even more, now.

‘Oh-six-five,’ Logun says.

‘Who provided the grid reference?’ Raine asks.

‘The strike was authorised by the Balfaran command council,’ Logun stammers. ‘By Generals Sylar and Lafoil—’

‘I did not ask you who authorised it,’ Raine says. ‘I asked who provided the grid reference.’

Logun exhales a shuddering breath.

‘I did,’ he says. ‘But I do not make mistakes, commissar. This is a failing of the artillery positioning. Of the ground team. They must have miscalculated their firing angles.’

‘The order script says oh-six-five,’ Raine says. ‘The ground team hit the target you told them to hit. The Bridge of Graces, and the Imperial troops crossing it.’

‘No,’ Logun stammers. ‘No, I—’

‘Not only that,’ Raine says, ‘but the script goes on to detail your request for the deletion of that order from command group records. That would be a strange

thing to do, were you unaware of your own mistake.'

Logun keeps his eyes on the script. He is quiet for a long moment. Raine hears the timepiece in her pocket tick five times.

'The days here are so long,' Logun says, eventually. 'And the heat. The suns. I did not realise that I had misread the grid reference until the order had been authorised. By then, I had no opportunity to stop it. I swear, I never intended to cause harm. I was tired. Exhausted. It was an honest mistake.'

Raine goes into her coat pocket and takes out a roll of parchment. It is handwritten and dirtied by her own bloody fingerprints. She holds it out, and Logun takes it, warily.

'What is this?' he asks, as he unrolls it.

'Names,' Raine says. 'Those are the names of the forty-nine Antari dead. The twenty-eight wounded. They are the cost of your honest mistake, tacticae officer.'

Raine waits while Logun reads the list. She doesn't have to see it to remember the names. When he reaches the end of it, a tear is sliding from his unaugmented eye.

'Are you here to kill me?' he asks.

'No,' Raine says. 'You will be condemned by the Commissariat representative attached to the Balfar command group. I merely came here to show you why.'

Logun falls quiet again. After a long moment, he nods.

'Thank you, commissar,' he says.

Raine nods, and then she turns and walks out of the small, spare room without another word, leaving Logun alone amongst the dead.

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 *Dark Imperium: Plague War*



Weak light bobbed through pitchy black, casting a pale round that grew and shrank upon polished blue marble quarried on a world long ago laid waste. The hum of a grav motor sawed at the quiet of the abandoned hall, though not loudly enough to banish the peace of ages that lay upon it. The lamp was dim as candlelight, and greatly obscured by the iron lantern framing it. The angles of the servo-skull that bore the lantern further cut the glow, but even in the feeble luminance the stone gleamed with flecks of gold. The floor awoke for brief moments at its caress, glinting with a nebula's richness, before the servo-skull moved on and the paving's glory was lost to the dark again.

The lonely figure of a man walked at the edge of the light, sometimes embraced by it completely, more often reduced to a collection of shadows and mellow highlights at its edge. The hood of his rough homespun robe was pulled over his head. Sandals woven of cord chased the light at a steady pace. The circle of light was small, but the echo of the man's footsteps revealed the space it traversed as vast. Less could be discerned about the man, were there anyone there to see him. He was a priest. Little else could be said besides that. It would certainly not be obvious to a casual observer he was militant-apostolic to the Lord Commander. He did not dress as men of his office ordinarily would, in brocade and jewels. He did not seem exalted. He certainly did not feel so. To himself, and to those poor souls he offered the succour of the Emperor's blessing, he was simply Mathieu.

Mathieu was a man of faith, and to him the Space Marines seemed faithless, ignorant of the true majesty of the Emperor's divinity, but the *Mortuis Ad Monumentum* had the air of sanctity nevertheless.

Mathieu liked it for that reason.

Beyond the slap of the priest's shoes and the whine of the skull, the silence in the *Mortuis Ad Monumentum* was so total, the sense of isolation so complete, that not even the background thrum of the giant engines pushing the *Macragge's Honour* through the warp intruded. The rest of the ship vibrated, sometimes

violently, sometimes softly, the growl of the systems always there. Not where the priest walked. The stillness of the ancient hall would not allow it. Within its confines time itself held its breath.

Mathieu had spent his quieter days exploring the hall. Its most singular features were the statues thronging the margins. They were not just in ones or twos, effigies given space to be walked around and admired, nor were they ensconced in alcoves to decorate or commemorate. No, there were crowds of stone men, in places forty deep, all Adeptus Astartes in ancient marks of armour. It may be that they were placed with care once, but no longer, and further into the hall, the more jumbled their arrangements became. The hall had been breached in days gone by, and the statues destroyed. Untidy heaps of limbs were bulldozed carelessly aside and ugly patching marked wounds from ancient times.

The warriors remembered by the statues had died ten thousand years before Mathieu's birth. Perhaps they had even fallen in the Emperor's wars to create the Imperium itself. Such an incredible length of years, hard to comprehend, and yet now the being who had led these self-same dead men commanded the ship again.

It dizzied Mathieu that he served a son of the Emperor. He could not quite believe it, even after all that had happened, all that he had seen.

Mathieu stopped in the dark where a group of statues huddled together. White stone glowed grey in the gloom. He had the terrifying notion that they had come alive and gathered to block his path, a phalanx of ghosts angered by profanity. He put aside the thought. He ignored the cold hand of fear creeping up his back. He had come off course, nothing more. It was easy enough to get lost in a hall half a mile wide and almost as long.

His servo-skull bore a large HV upon its forehead. By the letter V alone he called it. He could not bring himself to refer to it by her name.

'V,' he said. His voice was pure and strong. It cut the shadows and frightened back the dark. Mathieu was an unimposing man, young, slight, but his voice was remarkable; a weapon greater than the worn laspistol he carried on his left hip, or the chainsword he bore into battle. Loud and commanding before his congregations, it seemed tiny in the face of the dead past, but like a silver bell chiming deep in winter-stilled woods, it was clear and bright and lovely.

V emitted a flat, static-laced melody of acknowledgement.

'Ascend five feet. Elevate lamp, pan left to right.'

The skull's motors pulsed. It rose up into the high voids of the monumentum. The light abandoned Mathieu, angling instead for the still figures surrounding him. Stone faces leapt from the dark, as if snatching the chance to be

remembered, quickly drowning again in the black as V turned away. For a moment Mathieu's fear came back. He did not recognise where he was, until V's pale lamplight washed over a Space Marine captain of some unremembered era, the right arm held so proudly aloft broken off at the elbow. This warrior he recognised.

Mathieu breathed in relief. 'Descend to original height. Rotate lantern downwards to light my way. Proceed.'

V voiced its fractured compliance. There were pretensions to musicality in the signal, but the limited vox-unit was fifth hand at least, scavenged like all V's other fittings, and overuse had blunted its harmonies.

'Proceed to the hermitage, quickly now. My time for this duty is running out.'

V banked around and swept onwards. Mathieu picked up his pace to keep up.

The Adeptus Astartes pretended to disdain worship. It was well known among the Adeptus Ministorum that they did not regard the Emperor as a god. Mathieu had known this all through his calling. The truth had proved to be not so simple. On the ship there were many shrines, decorated lovingly with images of death, and containing the bones of heroes in reliquaries that rivalled those of the most lauded saint in their ostentation. The Ultramarines' cult was strong, though they did not worship. In chapels that denied religion their skull-masked priests protested loudly about the human nature of the Emperor and the primarchs while venerating them as gods in all but name. Their practice of honour, duty and obedience was conducted with a fanatical devotion.

There was an element of wilful blindness to their practices, thought Mathieu.

The way the Adeptus Astartes reacted to Roboute Guilliman bordered on awe. From the beginning Guilliman had warned Mathieu himself not to be worshipful, that he was not the son of a god. The priest had witnessed how irritated the primarch became with those who did not heed his words. And yet, these godless sons of his looked upon him, and they could barely hide their fervour.

Mathieu did as he had been told. He affected to see the man Guilliman wished to be, but his familiarity with the primarch was largely an act. Mathieu did revere the primarch, sincerely and deeply.

Previous militant-apostolics had carved themselves out a little realm in Guilliman's palace spire atop the giant battleship. The position came with appropriately luxurious quarters. Some time before Mathieu's tenure the largest room had been converted into a chapel of the Imperial Cult. It was gaudy, too concerned with expressions of wealth and influence and not faith. Mathieu had done his best to make it more austere. He removed some of the more vulgar

fixtures, replaced statues of ancient cardinals with those of his favourite saints. There had been a sculpture of the Emperor in Glory standing proudly, sword in hand, upon the altar. Mathieu had replaced that with an effigy of the Emperor in Service; a grimacing corpse bound to the Golden Throne. Mathieu had always preferred that representation for it honoured the great sacrifice the Emperor made for His species. The Emperor's service to mankind was so much more important than His aspects as a warrior, ruler, scientist or seer. Mathieu always tried to follow the example of the Emperor in Service, giving up what little comfort he had to aid the suffering mass of humanity.

The chapel was tainted by the dishonesties of holy men. He preferred to lead worship with the ship's bonded crew in their oily churches. He maintained the private chapel only because the display was expected of him. He rarely prayed there.

For his private devotions he came down to this deserted cult monument of irreligious men.

At the back of the hall was a small charnel house, where the stacked skulls of fallen heroes were cemented in grim patterns. The dust lay thick on all its decoration when Mathieu had discovered it. Nobody had been there for a long time.

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