

WARHAMMER
40,000



EXECUTION

AN ASTRA MILITARUM STORY BY

RACHEL HARRISON

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A Black Library Publication

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Rachel Harrison

The sky screams. The ground underfoot screams. In the distance, men and women scream too. The noise is catastrophic, underpinned by the thunder of artillery and the crack of the void shields protecting the rebel-held fortress of Morne. They are the sounds of a siege.

A siege that is failing.

Commissar Severina Raine ignores it all. She's focused on the man in front of her. Captain Tevar Lun of the 11th Antari Rifles stands with his lasgun held loose at his side. His grey eyes are locked on hers, unflinching.

It's admirable, considering her bolt pistol is pointed at his face.

'You are refusing your orders,' Raine says coldly.

Lun puts down his rifle, leaning it against the rough wall of the earthworks. The stock of his gun and his flak armour are scored with kill-markings and prayers carved in spiked Antari script. White scratches against the grey-and-green camouflage plates.

'I will not do it,' he says. 'Not my brothers. Not my sisters.'

Lun's eyes flicker to the fortress walls. The wall-mounted guns are firing into the dawn sky, tracking after a flight of Valkyrie gunships that pull up and away, tearing holes in the clouds.

'Those guns are built to kill tanks and aircraft,' he says. 'They turned Keld and his squad to mist.'

Raine saw it too. Not just that, she smelled it on the wind. Rich iron in the cold air. The rebels had disengaged the overrides on the guns and used them that way as a show of force. It was a show of something else as well.

Arrogance.

'Keld was foolish, and slow,' she says. 'Be neither, and the Emperor will see us

across. *I will see us across.*'

It's his one chance. A chance she would not give to most of the guardsmen serving with her. She extends it to Tevar Lun because of what he is. A clear head. A faithful heart. A captain respected by all of the squads under his command.

But Tevar Lun doesn't take the chance he's offered. He shakes his head instead. 'What you ask of us,' he says, 'it's suicide.'

There's a break in the noise of the artillery, as if the world is waiting for her reply. Raine lets out a slow breath. Her aim doesn't waver.

'That is your mistake,' Raine says. 'You think that I am asking.'

And without pause, without doubt, she pulls the trigger. The report of the bolt pistol is a loud, flat bang. Blood spatters her face. She doesn't flinch. Doesn't blink. The blood is hers to bear. As Lun's body collapses, Raine hears the slow release of breath from the other Antari standing around her. The flexing of gloved fingers. A snatch of whispered prayer. Then the artillery starts up again. Compared to that quiet moment, it almost seems a relief.

Raine looks at each of them in turn. At Sergeant Daven Wyck and his Wyldfolk, twenty-five strong. At Lydia Zane and the medic, Nuria Lye. At the storm trooper captain, Andren Fel, and his squad of four. None of them look away, even as their captain's blood soaks the ground at their feet. He made them unflinching too. She is thankful for that.

'We have our orders,' she shouts over the noise. 'We know what needs to be done.'

They all nod, still not looking away. That's how Raine catches the open resentment in some of those grey Antari eyes. First Wyck, who is no surprise, and hardly needs more reason. He resents her because she is not of Antar, though he masks it with careful words. She expects it from him, but this time he isn't alone. It's Varn, too. The big man is breathing hard through his teeth, his fire-scarred hands clenched into fists. The third is Lydia Zane. She was standing close to Lun when he was shot. The others keep a superstitious distance from her. From her pale-veined skin and her crown of cables, and her eyes that see even when they are closed. Zane's face doesn't change, but she puts her hand to her throat. To where her captain's blood has dashed across it. Raine knows that the next moments are critical. That she must turn that resentment against the enemy, against the fortress, or they will fail here and now.

She also knows that if it comes down to it, she will bear more Antari blood to get it done.

'The orders that Captain Lun refused are not just my orders,' she says. 'They

are the orders of Lord-General Serek. They are the orders of High Command.'

She looks at Wyck, then Varn, then Zane.

'Above all, they are the orders of the Emperor himself.'

There is no change in Wyck or Zane, but Varn blinks. His face drains of colour. Raine hears a muttered prayer from the group.

'So it is that I speak for the Emperor,' Raine says. 'Refuse me, and you refuse Him.'

Zane glances down at her bloody fingertips. Wyck shifts his weight. Around them, the trench network stretches for miles. More than half of the regiment has been deployed outside the fortress of Morne. Over three thousand Antari souls. Infantry, mechanised and artillery. They are not alone, either. The Kavrone 21st took heavy losses recapturing the city of Thadar, but they have brought everything they have left in support of the Antari. Tracks and tank-frames rattle. Petro-chem engines roar. Mortars fire. The sky is lit with explosions. A second sunrise over the world of Drast, and the fortress on the hill. Raine tightens her fingers around the grip of her bolt pistol.

'Will you refuse?' she says.

There is a solid, shouted chorus of 'No, commissar,' from every soldier in the trench. It is loudest from Varn, who has his head bowed now, penitent. Zane and Wyck are less so, but they say the words like everyone else. That sits fine with Severina Raine. She doesn't care about their hatred, as long as they obey. Her finger moves away from her pistol's trigger.

'We will open the way for our forces to take the fortress,' Raine says. 'To *break* it.'

The combat engineer Crys bares her teeth in a smile. It's a white stripe in her bloody face.

'Aye, commissar,' she says.

The Antari shift. Their mood is turning. Their conviction growing.

'The rebels in that fortress think that this noise they make is thunder,' Raine says. 'But they have heard nothing of the Antari Rifles.'

They all salute her, arms snapping up to make the sign of the aquila.

'In His name!' Raine cries.

And it isn't just Crys that answers, it's every soldier in the trench.

'In His name!' they shout over the roar of the guns.

Raine can never sleep the night before a deployment. Instead, she sits out on the ridge, watching the sky light with distant fires. The wind brings her the sounds of

war. The taste of smoke and burned earth. She finds it a comfort.

In her hand she holds her timepiece, the same way she always does on those nights. It's brass and bone, marked with her family seal. The only piece of her family that Raine has managed to hang on to.

'Thought I'd find you here.'

The voice comes from behind her. Raine doesn't have to turn to see who it is. She puts the timepiece back into the pocket of her greatcoat.

'Come,' she says. 'Sit.'

Andren Fel sits down beside her on the ridge. He is holding two battered tin cups, and he hands one to her. It's tea. She can see the loose, flat leaves floating in it, even in the dark. Raine had never once had tea. Not until her assignment to the Rifles. Not until she started meeting with Andren Fel. Now it's tradition, and the Antari take their traditions very seriously.

'The burned reaches, then.' Andren follows her gaze. 'At first light.'

'That's what they are called now,' Raine says. 'They were grain fields, once. Crops for miles, like an ocean of gold.'

There is nothing left now of the fields, or anything else, thanks to the rebellion. It had started with small betrayals, as such things often do. A spike in the murder rate. Banned texts found on factory workers. Great, ugly symbols burned into the fields of crops. After eight days, the cities were gripped by riots. Eight days after that, a great pyre was raised in Drast's sprawling capital city of Thadar. Thousands blinded themselves and leapt into the flames one after another in the name of something false and frightening: in the name of the Baleful Eye. Since then, it has not rained, and the sky has become heavy and sick, draped over the world like soaked bandages.

'They're calling it the unbreakable fortress of Morne,' Andren says. 'Saying it's where the rebel leaders are hiding.'

The rebel leaders. Once Lord and Lady Morne, servants of the Imperium, now traitors. Heretics. Their own heirs were among those sacrificed in Thadar. Raine watches as a bolt of light spears into the sky in the distance. The boom comes a moment later.

'A half-truth,' she says. 'But no fortress is unbreakable. We will drag them out of it, or crush them under it, by His grace.'

Andren puts down his cup, then steeples his fingers for a moment. It's a superstitious gesture that Raine has only ever seen from the Antari. Andren does it often.

'By His grace,' he says.

‘The guns fire six hundred rounds before they need to cycle.’

Raine watches the walls as she speaks. She watches the streaks of white-hot gunfire against the grey sky. Her eyes flicker to the timepiece. The hand ticks down.

Three.

Two.

‘There,’ she says.

The guns cease fire. There’s a high-pitched whine as they run dry, then a grinding clatter that echoes across the open ground as the rebels reload. It is answered by shelling from the Antari lines. Dirt is thrown into the air in great plumes, each shell landing closer to the void shield until they impact against it with loud cracks. Even this far out, Raine can smell the ozone.

‘How long?’ says Daven Wyck, from beside her.

‘Five minutes,’ she says.

The sergeant narrows his eyes and spits on the ground.

‘Plus one or two for them to realign to point downwards,’ says Yulia Crys. ‘If we’re lucky.’

She looks up at the guns, shielding her eyes. Crys is taller than Raine by a head. Broad in the shoulders and hips. The left side of her face is a mess of old burn scars that run up into her hairline and around the ragged mess of her ear.

‘You’re sure?’ Raine says.

‘That’s what it looked like,’ Crys says. ‘When they took out Keld’s Fenwalkers.’

Raine nods. Deaths can be costly, but they are rarely purposeless.

‘You’re confident you can breach those walls without heavy weapons?’ she says.

‘I wouldn’t say no to heavy weapons, but yes, I can breach it. Anything that’s built, sir.’

Raine can believe it. The units in her platoon specialise in demolition, but Crys is an expert among experts.

‘It’ll be the getting there,’ Crys says. ‘Sure as anything there’ll be rebels in the field, and longshots on the walls, in the towers.’

‘We have the Duskhounds,’ Raine says. ‘They will get you there.’

Wyck smiles. Unlike the others, he isn’t scarred or tattooed. He is tall and lean with handsome, even features and fair hair, like the old illuminations of saints. Despite all of that, his smile is wholly unpleasant.

‘More importantly, we have faith,’ he says. ‘And our blades.’

The words sound right, but Raine knows Wyck. He casts good words about him like a cloak to hide the sharp edges of his soul; the part that truly enjoys killing. That's why he's wound tight, his hands white-knuckled on the stock of his gun. That and the stimms. He thinks that she doesn't know. That he's capable of hiding it from her.

Things don't remain hidden from Severina Raine. She digs them out and drags them into the light. When he ceases to be useful, she'll do exactly the same to Daven Wyck.

'There is one more thing,' Raine says. 'Zane.'

There's a flicker of distaste in Wyck's eyes.

'Where is she?' asks Raine.

Crys looks past Raine, back up the trench.

'She's with Lun, sir,' she says.

Lydia Zane sits cross-legged in the trench beside the body of her former captain. He's been draped with his Antari rain-cloak. Zane has hold of the corner of it between her thumb and forefinger. She doesn't open her eyes, doesn't let go.

'I will do what you ask,' she says, before Raine has the chance to speak. 'Whatever you ask.'

'I know,' Raine says.

'Good,' Zane says. 'Duty comes first in all things, though I do not need to tell you so, commissar.'

Raine nods, though Zane's eyes are still closed. She knows that the psyker doesn't need them to see.

'In the moments before he did it, I knew Lun would refuse you,' Zane says. 'Just as I knew how you would answer his refusal. Strange, how even the deaths you expect still sting.'

Zane opens her eyes. They are bloodshot, like always. She smiles, and her thin skin crinkles like parchment left too long in the sun.

'Which I also do not need to tell you, of course.'

Raine doesn't nod this time. She doesn't acknowledge Zane's words at all. The deaths she carries with her are not for sharing. Zane's smile disappears and she looks down at Lun's body.

'He was not afraid, you know,' she says. 'Well, we are all of us afraid sometimes, but that is not why he stood against you.'

Raine looks down at Lun's body as well.

'It doesn't matter why,' she says. 'It was a moment of weakness, and weakness

cannot be tolerated. If you allow cracks to appear in glass, then you should not be surprised when it breaks and bloodies you.'

A long moment passes between them.

'You are correct, of course,' Zane says. 'I know this better than most.'

She lets go of the corner of the drape and gets to her feet, leaning on her staff. It is made of a dark wood, set with gems and wound tight with cables. More cables snake from her hairless head, glimmering silver. A witch's crown. The psyker is tall, like most Antari, but her limbs are corded and thin, the bones showing easily through her skin. It could be mistaken for fragility, but Raine knows better. She has seen Lydia Zane pull apart a tank, piece by piece, peeling the armour back with a curl of her hand. It was chilling to watch, though it was nothing compared to what Zane did to those cowering inside.

'Stick close to the Duskhounds,' Raine says. 'They will watch you. Whatever Fel says, do it without question. As if it were me.'

Zane nods.

'As if it were you, commissar.'

'So, then,' Raine says. 'I believe you owe me a story, captain.'

Andren's posture changes slightly. A shift in his shoulders. It's how he looks at ease, or as close to at ease as a man like Andren Fel can get.

'Sure enough,' he says. 'And what story would you like me to tell?'

The two of them began sharing stories as a way for her to better understand the regiment. At least that's what she told herself it was. Raine couldn't say what it is now, but she knows that she has grown to need it. Another comfort, of a kind.

'Tell me about the Wyldfolk,' Raine says. 'Where does the name come from?'

Andren takes a drink from his cup. The steam catches in the air like gun-smoke.

'The Wyldfolk are Wyck's squad,' Andren says. 'You should ask him.'

'I'm asking you,' she says.

Andren laughs. He does it easily, and often. It's a peculiarity of his.

'That you are. They are a folk story, like all of our squad names.'

Raine nods. She knows this. Andren's own storm troopers are the Duskhounds. It's another Antari story. One about a great hound made of shadow that tears out the throats of those who refuse to die when they are fated to. It's wholly apt for what Andren and his squad do.

'The wyldfolk are forest spirits,' he says. 'Wicked ones.'

Andren puts down his cup and rolls back the sleeve of his black fatigues. His arms are tattooed with lines of scripture. Entwined around the verse, there are

figures. Raine sees the duskhound, inked in grey. Andren points to another tattoo just above it of twisted briars that look like clawed hands.

'Wicked is right,' Raine says. 'So, how does the story go?'

'It goes that a woodsman and his family lived on the edge of the great black forest,' he says. 'The woodsman knew that before anything was taken from the forest, something must be given, lest the wyldfolk grow angry.'

He draws his combat blade from his belt and turns it, resting it against the pad of his thumb.

'Every day, before the woodsman felled timber, or took to the hunt, he would cut his thumb and let three drops of blood fall onto the stump of the same tree.'

Andren presses his thumb against the blade, just hard enough to draw blood. He waits for three fat drops to fall onto the ground before he continues.

'Then he would go into the forest and claim his prize. On his return, the blood would be gone without trace.'

Andren turns his hand, watching blood paint a line down to his palm.

'One day, the woodsman's wife came down with a sickness,' he says. 'And so he sent his son to take the hunt alone. He gave him his bow, his arrows and his cutting knife. The woodsman's son went to the stump of the same tree, but he was too cowardly to cut his hand. Too selfish to pay the price. Thinking he could fool the forest, the woodsman's son tipped three drops from his waterskin onto the stump, then slipped between the trees, laughing.'

The first time Raine saw a forest was after the scholam, when she first went to war as a junior commissar. The smell comes back to her as Andren speaks. Such a strange smell. Wet and rich and living.

'The woodsman's son followed his father's path, but soon found it blocked by coiling briars,' Andren continues. 'When he turned back, they stood behind him too. The woodsman's son waited, hoping they would uncoil and let him pass. The forest grew dark. The shadows long. The woodsman's son grew hungry. He could not wait any longer, so he pushed his way through the briars. They snagged at his clothes and raked him with their thorns. The boy cursed the briars. Cursed the forest. Then he set to running, bleeding from the dozens of shallow cuts they had given him.'

Andren wipes the blade of his knife on the leg of his fatigues and sheathes it.

'The woodsman's son tried to run home, but the path seemed to wend in ways it hadn't before. The cuts he had been given kept bleeding until he was weak. Until he stumbled and fell. Still, he did not stop bleeding. Not until every drop was spilt and taken by the forest. For cuts from the wyldfolk never close, and they

always kill.'

'That is how it goes?' Raine says.

'That is how it goes.'

For a moment, they both just watch the blood well up on Andren's thumb.

'A whole year, and I haven't heard an Antari story yet that isn't made up of blood and death,' Raine says.

Andren looks at her and laughs.

'Aren't everyone's?' he says.

Raine watches her timepiece again as the mounted guns roar. The glass is scuffed from use, and there is a tiny fracture in the edge of it, right at the very top of the face. The fracture has been there since the day it came into her possession. It does not seem right to fix it. To undo the damage.

She opens a vox channel to two of the other sergeants that fell under Lun's command. Now her blood to bear. They are far along the line from her position, hunkered in their own stretches of the earthworks.

'Hartkin,' she says. *'Mistvypers. Acknowledge.'*

'Aye, commissar,' says Selk in reply. The Mistvyper sergeant's voice is a semi-mechanical rasp, thanks to the augmetics replacing a good deal of her larynx.

'Receiving, commissar.'

By contrast, Rom Odi's voice is soft, with the strong lilt of Antar's southern settlements.

'We move on the next cycling,' Raine says. *'Up to the shield and through it. Once we reach the other side, the guns will no longer have sight on you.'*

'Nor will their rebels, when I have finished with them,' Selk says.

Raine would expect nothing less of Selk. The Mistvyper is one of the regiment's best marksmen. Andren often says she should have been a Duskhound.

'Breach at the base of your target bastion, then make haste to the twelfth level,' Raine says. *'We will silence the guns from there.'*

Her eyes flick to her timepiece. There are mere moments until the guns cycle. Her limbs burn in anticipation of the charge.

'Ready yourselves,' she says.

'Aye, commissar,' Selk says.

'On your mark,' says Odi.

She looks along the line.

'Ten seconds,' she shouts.

Around her, the Antari brace themselves against the earthworks. Raine can hear Zane humming to herself in the scant moments between the firing of the guns. It's a song Andren hums sometimes. Something from Antar.

'Five!'

The hand ticks down, approaching that tiny fracture in the glass.

'Four!'

Wyck laughs, all edges.

'Three!'

Andren Fel steeples his fingers, that same Antari gesture.

'Two!'

Crys puts her hand on the top of the earthworks.

'Forwards!'

Raine calls the charge as she leaps up the slope and out of the trench. The mounted guns run dry with a whine. The cycling starts, the clatter echoing across the open ground in front of her.

Raine runs. Her heart hammers in her ears. The air is dust and dirt and smoke that catches in her throat, stings her eyes. Beside her, the Wyldfolk run too. Andren's Duskhounds are a couple of paces behind with Crys and Zane. She can hear the psyker's ragged breathing. The Mistvypers and the Hartkin are moving up from their own positions along the trench network.

As they run, the Antari forces still within the trench line start their own concentrated assault, pummeling the void shield with mortars and rockets and long-range autocannon fire. The void shield flickers, but doesn't fall. It's not expected to. Their assault is a distraction. A means to draw that baleful eye away from Raine and her platoon. Spears of light punch up into the sky far to Raine's left, and the vox crackles in her ear.

'We have been noticed, commissar. They aren't pleased.'

Devri sounds pleased, though. The captain of the fourth platoon is the type who wants desperately to prove his worth. To write legends. That fervour makes him endlessly useful.

'Keep it up,' Raine says, between breaths. 'As much noise as you can.'

'More thunder,' Devri says. *'Aye, commissar.'*

A moment later, Raine hears a distant series of booms, as if the surface of Drast is trying to throw them all clear. Devri's thunder. The noise makes her heart sing as she runs.

The land they have to cross to reach the fortress walls was once fortified with forward staging posts and bunkers, and expansive airfields for the Drastian

airforce to mobilise from. The berths and refuelling stations are now blasted wrecks, the smooth rockcrete cracked and torn up. Trench lines have been carved into the earth by both sides, wounds cut deep into the face of Drast. Raine and her soldiers run between the slumped remains of fortifications and foxholes; between the burned-out shells of tanks and jagged-edged craters. Everywhere there are coils of razor wire. Those Antari soldiers who pushed forward the previous day are tangled in them, bloodied, torn and dead. They are not the only bodies. Rebels and Antari alike lay all around, whole and in pieces. Looming over all of this is the fortress, a slab-sided edifice that has stood, unbroken on the hill, for a thousand years or more. It is still unbroken. Untouched, even. Protected by a void shield of ancient design, there is not a mark on the stone that the rebels did not put there themselves. The greatest of these is the baleful eye that the rebels have taken for their name, rendered in crimson and gold on a ragged banner that hangs half the height of the fortress wall.

‘They do not see us!’

The shout comes from Gryl. He is running ahead and to Raine’s left.

‘An eye like that, and still they are blind!’

Gryl laughs loud at his own joke, at least until a bolt of high-powered lasfire silences him. He falls forwards, dead. A series of cracks follow, and more lasbolts blaze the air. It’s not coming from the fortress. There are rebel soldiers firing from their own trenches and emplacements all around them. Raine sees the glint of rust-red carapace armour, deliberately dulled with mud and dust. She hears the lies the rebels shout, carried on the wind. Blasphemies that make her grit her teeth.

‘To those without faith, we bring thunder!’ she cries. ‘Put them down!’

She aims her bolt pistol at the closest of the rebels as he comes up over the top of his own trench. He is an officer, wearing a curved chestplate trimmed with gold. Across the silver surface he has carved that baleful eye. He’s done the same to the skin of his face. Dozens more rebels swarm behind him, clawing their way up and out of the earthworks. The officer raises his own bolt pistol. Opens his mouth to shout. For a moment it is like looking into a dark mirror.

Then Raine fires.

That chestplate can’t protect him from a headshot. His body falls backwards into the trench. Onto his own rebel soldiers. The Antari cheer.

‘Forwards!’ Raine shouts.

She sees Wyck up ahead. He’s firing his rifle in twitchy bursts. Twice she sees him shoot out their knees, rather than go for a clean kill.

Yulia Crys ducks into the shadow of a collapsed hangar, then takes a grenade from the bandolier slung across her chest. She pitches it hard and high. It lands well within the rebels' trench network, detonating with a throaty boom.

Lydia Zane flicks her hand upwards and a rebel soldier flies ten or twelve metres into the air. He screams until he hits the earth. Andren Fel and his Duskhounds move around her, making clean kills, never passing in front of one another. Five shadows in matt-black armour with snarling faces painted on their masks.

'How long before we have the big guns to worry about?' Andren says over the vox.

Raine fires her bolt pistol. The soldier charging her falls backwards, his rifle firing wildly into the sky. She has been counting since they left the trench.

'Three minutes,' she says. *'Roughly.'*

'We are wading when we should be running.'

'Agreed,' Raine says.

She's about to call out to push through when a bolt of lasfire hits her shoulder and knocks the breath from her lungs. It spins her. Staggers her. Her cap of office falls from her head, landing in the dirt. Raine stops. A second lasbolt scores her thigh, burning like a brand.

Pain blooms in her shoulder, in her leg. It's dizzying, but she does not falter. Raine finds her breath. Grits her teeth. Then she stoops and picks up her peaked cap, letting lasbolts crackle around her. She puts it back on her head, square and straight, then looks to the rebel soldier who shot her. Like the officer, he has cut his face into patterns. Between those angry red lines, his mouth splits, showing blackened stubs of teeth.

'Theatrics,' he says, in accented Gothic.

He drops his rifle and draws a long, curved combat knife from his belt. His intention is to charge her, to force her to duel him. Severina Raine does not enter into honour duels with heretics. She shoots the rebel soldier before he can put one foot forward. The bolt-round makes a crater of his chest, and he falls backwards, bloody foam spilling from his mouth. She keeps moving, firing again to finish him.

When she looks around, Raine sees Andren watching her. He doesn't say a thing, just turns away and goes after the rebels. But Andren Fel isn't the only one. She can feel the eyes of all of the Antari on her, even as they fight and die. Just glimpses and glances, but each one significant. Each one followed by a battle cry.

Not theatrics, Raine thinks, as she draws her sword. Symbolism.

'One for one,' Andren says. 'Now you owe me a story.'

It's fully dark now. In the landing fields behind them, the Antari are performing combat drills. Raine wonders if they would be sleeping either, if they could. The fortress keeps drawing her eyes. A distant grey shape, lit by floodlights and fires. The unbreakable fortress of Morne.

'I was raised in one of the scholams on Gloam,' she says. 'Do you know it?'
Andren shakes his head.

'Gloam is a cold world with a dim star,' Raine says. 'No forests. No fauna but vermin. The oceans that remain are made black by industry. It hates life, yet we persist there, as if to spite it.'

'We are at our best when we are pitted against things that hate us,' Andren says. 'Worlds included.'

Raine nods.

'There was a task they had us do,' she says. 'A test, I suppose.'

'I can imagine,' he says.

She knows he can. He lived it as well, in the scholam on Antar. She's heard the stories. Seen the scars.

'Gloam is a hive,' she says. 'Layers stacked up on one another so you can't say for sure where the real ground is anymore. In the deeper layers, the vermin grow big. They are numerous and cunning.'

Andren looks out to the fortress. The shadows catch in the deep scar that runs up his cheek and across the bridge of his nose. His grey eyes narrow.

'As vermin are inclined to be,' he says.

The void shield that protects the fortress is invisible, but Raine knows when they are getting close. It's not because of their position relative to the grey stone, or because of how far they've run.

It's how the fortress looks, slightly out of step with the world around it. How the air is sharp with ozone. How minute reverberations run along her bones and rattle her teeth. Somewhere between pleasant and painful.

'That feeling is hateful,' Wyck says, clearly tending more towards the latter. 'It's like being boiled from the inside.'

The sergeant is breathing hard as he runs. It isn't because he's tired. It's because he's frenzied. His arms are scorched with lasburns, and the bayonet has snapped clean off his rifle. He left it buried in a rebel soldier's chest.

'So we just go right through?' Wyck asks, as he runs up the shattered hull of a

tank.

‘Right through,’ Raine says. ‘The shield might be proof against bombardments and energy weapons, but it won’t stop us.’

That’s what every report and technical specification she has read says, anyway.

In front of them, a full squad of rebel soldiers charge from the shadows of a collapsed pillbox. They are screaming, but the words aren’t Drastian. They are something odious that turns Raine’s stomach. The Antari clash with the rebels, green-grey striking against crimson. Wyck drops two of them with bursts of lasfire, then slides down the other side of the tank. A third charges Raine. He is clad in thick red armour plating from his knees to his neck. Imperial sigils have been scratched out. Defaced. He bellows at her. She should see the whites of his eyes this close, but there are no whites to see. Just black orbs that shine like ocean stones. For a moment, she thinks of nightfall on Gloam. Of the sound of the sea, hidden by the darkness. How it roars, hungering for the land.

The rebel swings at her with a jagged-edged sword; the kind that will snag when it cuts. Raine knocks the blade aside with her own. The power field of her sword crackles. She ducks under the next swing, dodges the one after. It reminds her of close-quarters training with new recruits back at the scholam. The rebel is bigger than her, so he thinks he’s stronger.

He’s wrong.

Raine turns away another frenzied blow. The rebel curses in his own tongue, but he’s cut short when she drives her sword through his chest. Raine pulls downwards, shoulder to hip, splitting the plated armour just as easily as the flesh beneath it. When she pulls her sword free, blood clings to the blade, despite the power field. It is black too, like his eyes. She kicks the gutted soldier onto his back and sets to running again, her legs burning. That’s the last of them. There’s not another rebel standing between them and the void shield.

‘How long?’ says Wyck, keeping pace with her.

Raine is about to answer when the clattering noise from the fortress grinds to a halt. It is swiftly replaced by a building whine.

The rebels have finished reloading the guns.

They are out of time.

‘There’s a particular kind of vermin on Gloam,’ Raine says. ‘An especially dangerous kind. The drill abbots called them sin-thieves, because they would come from their holes to gnaw on the wicked and the weak, growing fat on their sin.’

'Sound like rats to me,' says Andren.

'Perhaps they were, once,' she says. 'But they'd become something else. Something worse. As things often do when they are left to their own devices.'

Andren nods.

'One of the scholam boys awoke screaming one night because one of them was sitting on his chest, biting the flesh from his arms. It was the size of a mastiff.'

Andren does a low whistle.

'He killed it, him and one of the others, but his wounds went bad by morning. Everyone said that all the sin they stole had poured back into him.'

'And you call us superstitious,' Andren says.

Raine permits herself a smile.

'The drill abbots could not bear it, nor could we. None of us wanted to go bad. To have stolen sin poured into us by a vermin's teeth.'

'So what did you do?'

Raine's smile fades.

'We went to find the nest.'

'Through the shield!' Raine's vox broadcast goes out to the Wyldfolk and Duskhounds with her. The Mistvypers and Hartkin along the line, too.

'Crys,' Raine calls the combat engineer to her side. 'Gather up the demo charges. We need that breach as fast as you're able.'

Crys grins and tugs at her bandolier.

'I even saved my grenades, sir,' she says. 'Well, most of them.'

She looks back over her shoulder to another of the Wyldfolk. One who is a good way behind.

'Varn,' she voxes back. 'Hey, Varn, move your arse! I need your charges.'

Varn shakes his head. He is a big man. Big enough to make the grenade launcher he carries look small.

'I am not built for this sort of running,' he says, picking up his pace. 'Not with all this kit.'

'I carry kit just like yours,' Crys says. 'You just like your rations too much.'

Lydia Zane is close by when she turns to look at Varn. Her eyes go wide.

'Run,' she says, in her rough-edged voice.

'What?' Varn says, panicking.

'Move!'

Raine yells her order at Varn, but her voice is lost beneath the roar of the wall-mounted guns as they fire. Raine sees Varn duck his head and throw up his arms,

but the rounds never hit him, they stop short and burst instead into dozens of bright white blooms of light. Zane's hands are up, curled like claws. She's shielding him. The psyker starts to bleed from her nose and ears.

'Through the void shield!' Raine shouts to the others over the vox. 'Through the damned shield, now!'

Varn keeps running. High above, the guns track across the line, angling to follow him and the others that Zane is protecting. Her kine-shield starts to crack.

'Run!' Crys shouts. 'Run, you great big fool!'

Zane wavers. More rounds impact against her shield. The cracks spread.

'Varn!' Raine shouts with her. 'The charges!'

The kine-shield fails when Varn is seconds away from the shield's edge. He tries to throw his bag of demo charges the rest of the way, but it never leaves his hands. The rounds from the wall-mounted guns are made to punch through tanks. They punch through Varn with no trouble at all. Even over the racket, Raine hears Yulia Crys cry out. Then the demo charges Varn was carrying go up and Raine is thrown backwards. The world becomes a series of sensations:

Heat.

Light.

Noise.

Then something else, a stinging, like knives running over her bones. Sound drops away. The siege drops away. Raine hits the dirt, landing flat on her back. She watches as the explosion that killed Varn washes upwards and away from her across the surface of the void shield. The explosion hurled her straight through it. The ringing in her ears fades. The fortress guns can track no steeper. They strafe along the line on the other side of the shield, churning the earth, splintering rock and armour and bone. Raine lets out a slow breath. Then she hears something else. A booming voice coming from inside the fortress.

The Imperium of Man is dead, it says. The Imperium of Man is dead.

Raine gets to her feet, her mind reeling at the rebels' blasphemies. She's still reeling from the explosion, too, but she doesn't have time for that.

The Imperium of Man is dead.

The Wyldfolk surround her, burned and battered. Depleted. There are eighteen of them still breathing, and only fifteen standing. Nuria Lye is already bandaging wounds and staunching bleeds. Crys is alive, though. And Zane. Andren and his Duskhounds are with them, their armour scorched, peeled back to silver. He looks to her. They all do.

Raine speaks up over the distant voice.

‘They say the Imperium of Man is dead,’ she says. ‘But the Imperium of Man is every one of us. Every soldier. Every tank on the field. Every ship in orbit. Every single faithful heart from here to Holy Terra. Soldier, citizen, priest and pilgrim.’

She looks up at the fortress, and the ragged banner emblazoned with the baleful eye.

‘We are many. We are strong. Most of all, we are *right*.’

Severina Raine spits blood and ash onto the ground.

‘And that is something you cannot kill.’

Raine drags Crys to her feet and into the shadow of a crumpled Chimera chassis. The hull is caved in, flattening the crew compartment. This close, Raine can smell old blood.

‘The wall,’ Raine says. ‘Can you still breach it?’

Crys looks down. Her left arm is limp and useless, the wrist completely shattered. Nuria Lye sets to strapping it with the supplies from her kit.

‘I favour my right hand, so yes.’

‘And with the charges you have?’

Crys looks past Raine for a second, out beyond the curve of the shield.

‘Without Varn’s?’ she says.

It seems an effort for her to say his name. Her throat works and her eyes flicker, but when she looks back, she’s composed. Everything pushed down inside. Raine knows this, because it’s the way you keep going. The way you get your duty done.

‘Yes, sir,’ Crys says. ‘But I’ll need Gereth Awd, if he’s still walking.’

‘To help you set the charges?’ Raine says.

Crys smiles, all teeth.

‘No, sir,’ she says. ‘I need his flamer tanks.’

Raine watches from behind the shell of the tank as Crys sets her improvised charge against the fortress wall. They are breaching at the foot of one of three bastions, equidistant around the central keep. One for the Wyldfolk, one for the Mistvypers, and one for the Hartkin. Three cuts in the fortress’ flanks. Three wounds that will not close.

Crys stays low and flat against the wall. She picks a join in the stone where it will be weakest and packs it with grenades. First, two melta bombs. Next, her own bag of demo charges, except two, which Raine told her to save. Lastly, she binds the lot together with Awd’s flamer pack and sets a detonator line. All the while, that voice echoes from inside the fortress, bellowing heresies at the sky.

‘The emplacements and the guards are silenced,’ Andren Fel says. ‘They won’t know we’re here until we tell them.’

There are few who can approach Raine without her hearing it, but Andren Fel can. He crouches down beside her, his hellgun slung. The snarling face on his mask is painted anew with spatters of blood. There are deep scores from knife blades on his carapace plate.

Raine looks past him to where Lydia Zane waits. The psyker has her eyes tightly closed. Blood has dried around her mouth and nose. It makes her look like a winter-thin wolf that has been at the kill.

‘Remember what I said,’ Raine says to Andren.

‘Protect Crys,’ he says. ‘Protect Zane. No matter what.’

Andren looks back at the psyker.

‘Though what I’ve seen Zane do...’ he says, in a low voice.

‘Makes you wonder who needs protecting,’ answers Lydia Zane, as her eyes flicker open.

Andren sighs.

‘No offence meant,’ he says. ‘And I wish you wouldn’t do that.’

Zane grins. It makes her look even more wolfish.

‘None taken,’ she says. ‘Though perhaps you should not think so loudly, captain.’

Andren shakes his head. The vox crackles in Raine’s ear.

‘Mistvypers, ready to breach.’

‘Hartkin?’ Raine says. ‘Are you ready?’

More crackling. Raine’s chest aches. She realises it’s because she’s holding her breath.

‘Aye,’ comes the answer, after a moment. *‘Just had to quell a little resistance here, commissar.’*

‘Good,’ Raine says. ‘Crys?’

She doesn’t have to see the combat engineer to know she’s grinning.

‘More than ready,’ Crys says.

‘All squads,’ Raine says. ‘Breach.’

Raine ducks down behind the cover and jams her hands over her ears. The Antari do the same.

A few seconds later, Yulia Crys’ improvised charge detonates. The noise is catastrophic, even with the distance and cover between them and the blast. Raine hears fragments of rock clatter against Andren’s carapace armour. She clearly hears Crys whoop in the aftermath. When Raine looks over the cover, she sees

why.

There's a hole blown clear through the fortress wall. Fire clings to the stonework. Some of it has run like slag from the heat. It's an impressive mess.

'She has got a gift,' says Andren from beside her, and he laughs.

'Good work, Crys,' Raine says over the vox.

She sees Crys salute her from where she kneels behind shattered lumps of masonry.

'Anything that's built, sir,' she says.

'We followed the smell down into the lower levels under the scholam.'

Raine thinks back to the dank tunnel. The sagging support beams. Water ran everywhere down there, dirty and black.

'There were three of us. Me, Lem and Bayti.'

Raine hasn't thought of them in a long time. Lem with her wide eyes, like the porcelain dishes the drill abbots used. How she could turn a knife on you with just a flick of her thin wrists. Bayti with his void-born height and pale skin.

'We had fuel-lit torches that made the shadows flicker. No pistols, just short training blades.' She pauses, remembering. *'Our shoes were soft and thin. They let in all of the water.'*

Raine takes a sip of her tea.

'The nest was in one of the old store-chambers. You could see where the sin-thieves had worried away at the stone and metal to make a hole. How it had been made wider over time. Cut by claws and teeth and smoothed by the water and the passing of the vermin.'

The whole tunnel had been dark. Gloam itself was dark. But that hole had seemed the darkest thing she'd ever seen.

'The door to the store chamber had been closed for decades,' Raine says. 'It was frozen stiff and warped in the frame. The handle was rusted and weak. Even if we could have broken it down, the vermin would have fled by the time we'd done so.'

Andren looks at her.

'You had to go through the hole made by the rats,' he says.

The explosion didn't just make a mess of the stone and metal of the fortress. Dozens of rebels lie crumpled and broken just inside the breach, caked in blood and thick stone dust. Some haven't had the grace to die. They gasp and whisper and drag themselves after the Antari, digging their hands into the churned earth like claws. The Duskhounds finish them with single shots from their hellguns.

‘Keep moving,’ Raine cries. ‘Into the bastion!’

Even as she gestures to the nearby structure with her sword, a tide of rebels spills out of the base of it. A klaxon blares. The Antari cannot afford to stop, so they push into the Drastians. The gunfight quickly becomes a melee. A press. Raine draws her sword, cutting her way through turncoats and heretics. Not all are soldiers. Raine sees the remains of courtly dress and serving clothes alike. Every one of them has marked their face with that same symbol. Some are raw and bleeding. They smell as if they’ve been dead a week, their black eyes glassy and unblinking. Their breath is hot on her face. She is hit with the butt of a gun. A knife slices her arm. None of it goes unanswered as she strikes back with sword and pistol, pushing through into the bastion. In scant moments between each swing and each cut, she catches sight of the muted grey-and-green splinter camouflage of the Wyldfolk, and the black carapace and red eye-lenses of the Duskhounds. The robes of Lydia Zane. Raine can hear the psyker snapping bones and armour alike, even over the racket.

Raine smashes the butt of her pistol into the face of a man who tries to bite her. No, not a man. Not anymore. The impact breaks apart the pattern carved into his face, and he sinks at her feet. She feels the press start to ease. The shouting eases with it. The smell doesn’t. If anything, it gets worse.

Raine looks around, catching her breath. She is inside the bastion. The Antari are all still with her.

‘Keep moving,’ she says.

They all do, save for one. Daven Wyck is crouched over one of the rebels, his knee pressing on the soldier’s throat.

‘The Wyldfolk have you,’ he says, sing-song.

Raine sees the rebel’s hands opening and closing, scrabbling at the stone floor.

‘Wyck,’ she says.

He draws the combat blade from his belt and buries it in the rebel’s stomach in one swift movement.

‘Cuts from us always kill,’ he says, with a smile.

He pulls the blade free and gets to his feet.

‘Yes, commissar,’ he says.

‘Quick kills,’ she says. ‘We are not animals.’

Every Antari she’s met has grey eyes. When Raine was first assigned to the regiment, she thought that they were all the same grey. After a while she began to notice the differences. Wyck’s are a cold grey, like chips of flint. Right now, the grey is almost swallowed by the black of his pupils.

Those eyes flicker down to the combat blade in his hand, then Wyck wipes it against the leg of his fatigues. It leaves a black stain. His smile disappears slowly, like clouds moving in front of the sun.

‘Understood, commissar,’ he says, softly. ‘My apologies.’

Commissar Raine follows after him up the stairs, knowing that sooner or later, she’s going to have to do something about Daven Wyck.

Raine and the Wyldfolk push their way up the bastion’s central stairway, towards the mounted gun. The Mistvypers do the same to the east, the Hartkin to the west. Despite the odds against them, the Antari still treat it like a contest.

‘Third level secured,’ says Odi over the vox.

Wyck laughs.

‘Hurry your feet, Rom,’ he says. ‘We have already taken the fourth.’

The sergeant of the Hartkin’s displeasure can be heard in his reply.

‘I bet you have,’ he says, over the sound of lasfire. ‘You have the Duskhounds, and the witch.’

Wyck snorts a laugh.

‘Exactly,’ he says. ‘Even with them slowing us down, we are still one level above you.’

Zane bares her teeth in a scowl. Andren shakes his head. Neither get a chance to answer, because they are interrupted by a throaty bellow from the stairs leading up to the next level. A figure emerges, overmuscled, abhuman, clad in crimson armour. It is so big that the armour plates on its shoulders scrape along the walls. A slab shield protects it, ankle to throat. In its other hand it carries a power maul half as long as Raine is tall. Through the vision slit in the shield, Raine sees deep-set black eyes under a heavy brow.

‘Kill,’ the bullgryn says in a low, slow voice.

Behind it, two more bullgryns clatter their weapons against their shields.

‘Kill!’ they echo.

They thunder out of the stairwell and into the room, armour clanking, power mauls humming. The Antari cannot go backwards, and they cannot slip around them. It leaves them only one option.

‘Through them!’ Raine shouts.

The lead bullgryn swings for her. Raine steps backwards, feeling the rush of air as the maul misses caving in her chest by inches. The head of the maul buries itself in the floor, shattering the stonework with a burst of energy. The bullgryn roars and wrenches it clear. Raine brings her sword down, but the bullgryn’s

shield comes up. Her sword slides across it, putting a deep furrow in the metal without parting it. The bullgryn twists at the waist and swings again, pushing her further backwards. This time, she barely blocks with her own sword. The force of the blow rattles her arm, sends it numb to the shoulder. The maul comes down again. She blocks a second time, her back against the wall now. That arm isn't numb anymore. It's in agony, probably fractured in a dozen places. Her grip starts to loosen. The bullgryn is laughing, a wet, throaty bark. It twists and raises its maul again. Raine hears the distinct sound of hellgun fire from behind the bullgryn, punching into the few areas of exposed flesh on its back. The bullgryn roars. That's the moment. The break in its guard. Raine spins away and the bullgryn drives its maul into the wall where she once stood. Stone and plascrete explode outwards. She feels a shard cut her face. Blood runs into her eyes.

Raine jumps on the bullgryn's back and grabs hold of its armoured collar. Her injured arm sings with pain. She yells and brings her sword down, cutting its head free from its shoulders. It takes her two strikes to get through the thick, overmuscled neck. More blood spatters into her eyes.

The bullgryn's headless body falls forward, crashing into the wall and sliding down it. Raine tumbles free. Somehow, she's still holding on to her sword. She has to lean on the wall to get to her feet. The other two bullgryns are still standing, laying about them with their crackling mauls and bellowing wordlessly. The Wyldfolk are backing up, lasguns blazing. The bullgryns shrug off wounds that should slow them. Yulia Crys is busy firing at the second bullgryn when the first swings at her. Andren interposes himself and takes the hit. Raine hears his chestplate crack from across the room. His Duskhounds riddle the bullgryn with lasfire. Andren is on his knees, but he keeps his aim and fires too. The lasbolt tears out the bullgryn's throat, and it falls backwards with a crash.

The throat, Raine thinks. He is a Duskhound to his bones.

Daven Wyck ducks under the remaining bullgryn's swing and buries his combat blade between its armour plates. It bellows and knocks him clear off his feet with a thrust of its shield. He lands on his back and goes still. Raine only knows he's still alive because she can hear him trying to get air. The bullgryn goes after him, roaring, Wyck's knife still sticking out of its gut.

Raine sheathes her sword and raises her pistol. Her vision swims as she takes a few steps closer. The bullgryn slides in and out of her gunsights. She blinks the blood out of her eyes.

Then the bullgryn is lifted bodily into the air and slammed against the ceiling. It

falls to the ground with a boom that rivals Crys' improvised explosives. Raine can hear it panting wetly. Lydia Zane approaches, hand outstretched. She is bloodied, but serene. She flicks her wrist and drives the bullgryn up into the ceiling again and again, as if it weighs nothing. After the fourth impact, Raine can't hear panting anymore.

Well, not from the bullgryn, anyway.

Daven Wyck eases himself onto his elbow. He is winded, his flak armour splintered and dented. His breathing skips and wheezes.

Lydia Zane pulls his combat knife out of the bullgryn's broken body and walks over to him.

'Do not let me slow you down,' she says, throwing the blade onto the ground.

There's a mixture of fury and fear in Wyck's eyes. He snatches up his blade and gets to his feet.

'Funny,' he manages to say, between breaths. 'Very funny.'

Across the room, Andren Fel starts to laugh, though it clearly hurts him to do it.

'Oh, I think so,' he says. 'I really do.'

'Bayti started talking in his starborn tongue,' Raine says. 'I hadn't heard him do it since he first arrived at the scholam. I didn't know it well, but I knew enough.'

Raine remembers Bayti splashing backwards through that glossy water, his eyes glossy too.

'It is an interpretive language. Heavily contextual. What he was saying either meant "can't" or "won't".'

'So, what did you do?' Andren says.

'I told him that there was no room for either can't or won't. That cowardice was a sin. I told him that the vermin would smell it and come for him. That they'd strip the sin from his bones and his flesh with it.'

'Did he refuse?' Andren asks.

She remembers the way her fists had curled, ready to strike Bayti. Clammy palms. She remembers the way her heart hammered in her chest. Then, finally, she remembers the way Bayti had looked at her then, as so many others had since.

'No,' she says. 'In that moment he was more afraid of me than he was of the sin-thieves.'

Raine leads the Antari to level twelve of the bastion. It's not the top level, where the mounted gun itself sits, it's a few floors below, protected by double-thick walls and a unit of well-armoured and well-armed rebel soldiers. Once Raine

and her Antari have killed their way through and breached the chamber, they see why.

‘Golden *Throne*,’ says Crys. ‘What have they done?’

The huge, square chamber is the munitions store for the wall-mounted guns, and the armoury for every rebel soldier on this section of the walls. Belts of shells shine with a dull gleam. Demo charges and mines are crated and boxed. There are missiles and promethium canisters. Rockets and grenades. Every single one of them has been marked with that baleful eye, painted on or scratched into the metal. There is another painted on the floor in the centre of the room. From the smell, Raine thinks probably in blood.

‘I need you to detonate it,’ Raine says. ‘All of it.’

Crys nods once, her jaw set.

‘With pleasure,’ she says, then glances over. ‘You mean remotely, right, sir?’

Raine doesn’t break eye contact. She has considered both options. She has considered all of the options.

‘If you can.’

Crys lets out a long breath.

‘I can rig it,’ she says.

‘How long do you need?’ Raine asks.

Crys looks around at the heaped munitions. She rubs absently at the ruin of her left ear.

‘Ten minutes,’ she says. ‘Give or take.’

‘You’ll have it,’ Raine says. ‘Just concentrate on rigging the explosives, and get the Hartkin and the Misttypers on the vox. Make sure they’re doing the same. Walk them through it if you need to.’

Crys nods, already pulling what’s left of her kit out of her bag.

‘Sir?’ The call comes from by the door. It’s Andren. ‘We have company incoming.’

Raine doesn’t need telling. She can already hear the thunder of feet, the bellowed blasphemies and all the while underneath that booming voice.

The Imperium of Man is dead.

Not today, thinks Severina Raine.

She draws her pistol in one smooth action, even with her shattered arm bound loosely to her chest.

Not ever.

Raine ducks back behind the door of the arming chamber as solid shot rounds

impact the wall beside her head. They are keeping the Drastians out, but it gets more difficult with every passing second.

‘Crys!’ she shouts.

‘Almost there,’ the combat engineer yells in reply.

Opposite Raine, Ekar Wain takes a solid round to the face. It shatters the storm trooper’s mask, and he slumps sideways. Three more rounds punch into him, torso and legs, before his squad can drag him back into cover. He leaves a dark smear of blood on the stone.

‘Mists take them,’ Andren snarls.

He leans around the doorframe and fires twice. Two dead rebels. More push their bodies aside and take their place.

‘Commissar,’ Zane calls out.

Raine moves over to her, keeping low. The psyker has her eyes closed and her hands curled. Blood runs sluggishly from her nose as she projects a kine-shield around Yulia Crys.

‘What is it?’

Zane frowns more deeply.

‘The three bastions,’ she says in a low voice. ‘The fire that we make of them. I try to look further, but it is the last thing I see.’

She opens her eyes, just barely.

‘I can smell it. Hear it. I see nothing but fire.’

Zane’s mouth quirks up in a pained smile as she looks at Raine.

‘But I do not need to tell you this,’ she says. ‘Do I?’

Raine meets Zane’s eyes. She lets out a long, slow breath. She has, after all, considered all of the options.

‘You know what must be done,’ she says. ‘Duty comes first.’

There’s a flicker in Zane’s expression. A momentary tremor. Then she laughs, a hollow sound.

‘That it does,’ she replies. ‘In all things.’

‘Done,’ shouts Crys. ‘It’s done!’

‘Cover me,’ Raine shouts, before running across the room to Crys. She feels the kine-shield envelop her, a distinct winter chill.

‘It’ll go remotely, as you asked,’ Crys says. She’s wound her two demolition charges in parchment from her kit. Each strip is marked with prayers in her spiked handwriting. ‘The range is enough for us to make it back outside the walls. Odi and Selk had their teams do the same.’

There’s a solid boom from the stairwell outside. Raine hears Andren curse.

‘All squads,’ Raine says, over the open channel. ‘Do not detonate until I give the order. They must all go at once, or this will have been for nothing. Is that clear?’

‘Understood,’ says Odi.

‘Yes, sir,’ says Selk.

Crys’ gaze slides to the door, to where the fighting is still thick and furious. She closes her grey eyes for a second and mutters a prayer. It’s in Antari, but Raine knows it.

May He be with us as we live and die, it goes. For it is not ours to question why.
Then she sets the charges.

‘We came out of the passage inside the nest. It filled the storeroom, wall to wall. Made of parchment and filth and bones. Human bones. Small ones that broke underfoot.’

Raine pauses and drains the last of her tea. Even after such a long time, thinking of those bones still sends a chill up her spine.

‘Bayti cried out,’ she says. ‘It was the bones that did it. The vermin heard him and came hissing and baring their fangs.’

She shakes her head.

‘Bayti panicked and threw his torch hard and high into the centre of it. Lem followed suit. The vermin started to scatter. I could see that we wouldn’t catch them all, that some would pass us and escape.’

She keeps her eyes on the distant fortress as she speaks.

‘I threw my torch behind us, setting everything around the entrance alight. It caught so quickly, all that parchment and oil and filth. The vermin were mewling. Bayti was screaming. I grabbed him, and Lem, and pulled them down into the shallow water at our feet.’

Raine remembers the black water, gritty and vile in her mouth. The vermin, scrabbling around and over them, all aflame. Bayti, thrashing and getting to his knees even as Lem tried in vain to keep him under the water.

Screaming. Fire. Smoke.

‘There was a huge rush of heat and light. I closed my eyes and I prayed.’

She lets out a slow breath.

‘When I opened them again, I had been dragged clear of the storeroom and into the tunnel. The door was open, broken from the hinges. Drill-abbot Ifyn was there. He had been all along, I suppose.’

‘What about Lem,’ Andren says. ‘And Bayti?’

'He told me that Bayti died trying to run. That Lem died trying to save him. He said that their choices had cost them, as all choices do. I interrupted him then, for the first and last time. I told him that I had made Bayti crawl through the hole. That I had thrown the torch and cut off our own escape to ensure our success. That surely their deaths were in part due to me.'

She remembers the way Ifyn had looked at her then. Pitiless but patient.

'What did he say?' Andren asks.

'That I was right. That my choices also had a cost.'

She finally looks at Andren.

'And that my purpose was to bear it.'

Fighting out of the bastion is bloody work. They lose the youngest of the Wyldfolk, Ludi, to a tripwire set by the Drastians. It happens so quickly that Raine is dazzled by the burst of flame. No time to blink. Those closest are cut by stone chips and bits of bone. There is no time to stop either. They keep running instead, the sound of their ragged breathing echoing off the walls as they descend the stairs. Raine can feel the adrenaline wearing off. The skin of her injured arm feels tight under her greatcoat and she's lost all the movement in her wrist.

When they reach the foot of the steps, the vox crackles in her ear.

'Hartkin are out and free,' says Odi. *'Who is quickest now, Wyck?'*

Daven Wyck spits blood on the floor. His nose is badly broken from where the bullgryn hit him. It's changed the shape of his face, making it better match the ugliness he carries with him.

'Mists take you, Odi,' he says. *'Trust you to win at running away.'*

The words that come back are Antari, and clearly colourful. Raine doesn't even know all of them.

'Cut the chatter,' she says. *'Odi, hole up and wait to trigger on my command.'*

They get clear of the bottom of the tower, and make for the breach point in the wall.

'Just how big are we expecting this explosion to be?' Wyck says as he runs.

Crys glances backwards, her eyes wide.

'If I reckon right, it'll do more than just quiet those guns,' she says. *'It'll bring the whole bloody bastion down.'*

Andren Fel slows pace, just barely. He looks at the bastions, then at Raine. She sees herself reflected in his eye lenses. Painted in red from the glass and from the blood on her face. Her own and theirs.

‘Not just the bastion,’ he says. ‘It’s the whole thing. We’re collapsing the nest.’

Raine doesn’t get a chance to answer. She is interrupted by a loud crack. A solid shell hits Andren in the shoulder, right between his armour plates. The other two Duskhounds, Tyl and Jeth, return fire as their captain stumbles. Watching Andren Fel bleed, Raine feels something she can’t afford. Something she has no time to feel. The first shot is just the edge of the coming storm. More follow as a noise grows that threatens to drown out even the booming voice. It’s the sound of boots on stone. The Antari fire back, but it’s like spitting into the wind. Together, they fall back into the shadow of the tower as the might of the Drastian forces spills out of the central keep.

‘*Commissar,*’ the vox crackles. It’s Odi. ‘*They are coming. We cannot stay here.*’

Raine fires her pistol at the oncoming rebels until the clip runs dry. Most of her shots miss. She’s struggling to keep the gun steady. To see. The rebels seem to smear like ink.

The Imperium of Man is dead, says the voice.

‘All squads,’ she says. ‘Detonate, now.’

Crys looks at her.

‘Now!’ Raine cries.

She hears two acknowledgement clicks over the vox from Odi and Selk.

Crys thumbs the detonator.

‘Zane!’ Raine shouts.

The Imperium of Man is—

The words are stolen as the towers detonate in almost perfect synchronicity. The sky becomes fire as three colossal explosions reach upwards and join, curving on the inside face of the void shield. The pressure wave is repelled by the shield, and every ounce of force is directed back down at the fortress. At the towers. At the Drastian rebels.

At Severina Raine and her Antari soldiers.

The rebels out in the open are silenced. They fall to the ground, dead. Their lungs burst. Their eyes bleed. They are turned to black dust by incredible heat under pressure. Masonry and twisted metal rains to the earth. The great grey shape of the unbreakable fortress of Morne shifts. Cracks.

Then, with a thunderous boom, it breaks.

It’s like the Time of Ending, Raine thinks, as she and her Antari soldiers watch the fortress die from their knees, through Lydia Zane’s kine-shield. The psyker is screaming, lightning arcing across her limbs and from her eyes. None of them

can touch her. Her shield is crazed with cracks. Even as the world stops ending, Zane keeps screaming until the cables that crown her flare with light, and she collapses. Her kine-shield collapses with her. Gentle curls of smoke drift from the ruin of her eyes. Raine puts her fingers to Zane's throat, and the psyker stirs.

'It is the last thing I see,' she says, before falling unconscious.

Around them, the fortress caves inwards, momentous and slow, burying anyone still left inside. Scraps of the tattered banner float to earth, still burning. The baleful eye, consumed by fire.

'Spared,' Andren says, barely audible over the ringing in Raine's ears. 'By Him, and by her.'

Raine nods. It makes her vision swim. The psyker had saved them, just as Raine knew she would, and she had paid for it with her grey Antari eyes. It isn't the only price paid. The vox-link to the Mistvypers returns only static, and when Raine gets through to Odi, he barely acknowledges. Before the link is cut, she hears the sergeant of the Hartkin mumbling the Antari words for the dead. The sound of it will stay with her, always.

With the fortress broken, the clouds choose that moment to break too. Drops begin to fall, cold against Raine's skin. The Antari stir around her, dazed and shell-shocked. Andren unfastens his mask and pulls it off. His dark hair is matted to his head. Blood pinks his teeth.

'The armour was never coming,' he says. 'Was it?'

Raine keeps looking at him, right in those grey eyes.

'No,' she says.

'You kept it from us,' he says. 'The truth of it.'

Raine nods. She had known before she'd led the charge. Before she had executed Tevar Lun. Before sharing stories with Andren on the ridge. She had also known that the fortress could be broken without the armour as long as she kept them strong. As long as they did not falter. So she had made a choice to keep it from them.

That choice, like the cost of it, is hers to bear.

'I did,' she says. 'As is my right, captain.'

Andren looks as if he might say something else, but then he blinks. Straightens his shoulders. It's as though he remembers himself. Where he is. What she is. He bows his head.

'As is your right, of course,' he says. 'Commissar.'

Raine gets to her feet. Her limbs don't feel like her own. Blood gums her eyelashes. Her ears ring and her head aches. Around her, the Antari start to rise.

Those that can. They lean on one another, breathing ragged. She turns to them and draws her sword with her one good arm. She can hear the distant sound of the other forces moving up. Engines and armour and boots on the ground. Hymnals, sung loud. A flight of Valkyrie gunships split the sky. Under all of that, the drum of the rain as it washes the world clean.

‘The Imperium of Man can never die,’ she says, her voice hoarse.

‘Not today,’ say the Antari.

‘Not ever,’ says Commissar Severina Raine.

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The disgraced Vostroyan 77th face an uprising on a prison planet, not to mention the hostile attentions of their new commissar. Can they achieve victory and restore their reputation?



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A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION

Published in Great Britain in 2017 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd,
Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.
Fortress illustration by Ahmed Aldoori.

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ISBN: 978-1-78572-825-9

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