

The illustration depicts a dramatic scene from the Warhammer 40,000 universe. In the foreground, a female Imperial Knight in full plate armor stands on a dark, jagged rock formation. She wears a black and red uniform with gold accents, a black helmet with a red plume, and a large black cape with a red lining. Her armor is dark and shows signs of battle, with a skull emblem on her belt. She holds a large, ornate power sword in her right hand, which is glowing with a golden light. In the background, several Imperial Knights are engaged in combat. One Knight in the mid-ground is shown in profile, holding a power sword and a large, multi-barreled weapon. The background is filled with the chaos of battle, including smoke, fire, and the silhouettes of other Knights. The overall atmosphere is dark and intense, with a strong sense of action and conflict.

WARHAMMER
40,000

THE DARKLING HOURS

RACHEL HARRISON

A detailed illustration for a Warhammer 40,000 book cover. The central figure is a female Imperial Guard officer in full ceremonial armor, including a black and red tunic with gold trim, a black cap with a gold crest, and a flowing black cape with red lining. She holds a large, ornate golden power fist in her right hand and a sword in her left. In the background, several Imperial Guard soldiers in full combat armor are visible, some with red glowing eyes. The setting is a dark, industrial interior with a bright light source on the left, creating a dramatic atmosphere. The text 'WARHAMMER 40,000' is at the top, and 'THE DARKLING HOURS' and 'RACHEL HARRISON' are at the bottom.

WARHAMMER
40,000

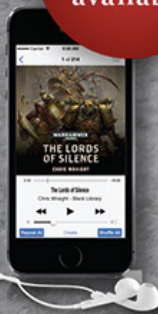
THE DARKLING HOURS
RACHEL HARRISON

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THE DARKLING HOURS

By Rachel Harrison

The city of Termina never stops singing.

Commissar Severina Raine knows that the sound is just the wind cutting through the city's many mineshafts and tunnels. It can be heard all over Termina, from the refineries on the surface to the processing plants far below, where Raine and her regiment, the Eleventh Antari Rifles, are billeted. There is no escaping the city's singing, but in the old overseer's watch room where Raine now sits and waits it is at least a little quieter. The hanging lumens overhead turn in that same wind as it finds its way through cracks in the poorly plastered walls. Light glances off the casing of Raine's timepiece as she watches the hands tick around towards the crack in the top of the face. Her body aches from the previous day of fighting and her eyes are dry and gritty. She should be taking the time she has been given to sleep, but she finds that she cannot. Not while the fight goes on above her.

And certainly not with the city singing.

'It sounds like something living, don't you think?'

Raine clicks her timepiece closed and puts it back in the chest pocket of her coat. Andren Fel takes a seat on the opposite side of the overseer's table and hands her a tin cup with a loop of thorns scored into the rim. It is warm to the touch from the windfall tea inside it. 'I think it sounds like singing,' Raine says.

'Or howling,' Fel says. 'Either way, it is sorrowful.'

The storm trooper captain is unarmoured, clad in black fatigues that are sewn with the red bars that mark his rank. Fel's dark hair has got nearly to

the length where it can tangle, and his face is cut and bruised. His densely tattooed hands are split badly across the knuckles. He is also meant to be taking the two hours they have been given to rest, but Raine knows that is as difficult for him as it is for her. That is why they often spend these hours talking.

'Shouldn't howling be a comfort for a Duskhound?' Raine asks.

Fel laughs at that, a low chuckle. 'True enough,' he says.

A tremor runs through the undercroft that makes the overhead lumens flicker and hum. Dust falls in fine columns from the ceiling and scatters on the wooden surface of the table.

'I saw Devri on the way up,' Fel says. 'He had to pull Blue Company out of the docks. The Sighted sank the lot to keep them from pushing up to the drilling fields.'

Raine nods and drinks from her tin cup. The windfall tea is bitter and spiced. It only grows on Antar, and only in the Northwilder, where Fel was raised before he was taken for the Schola Antari.

'Whatever the Sighted intend to take from Termina, it is in the mines,' Raine says. 'They have either abandoned or destroyed key locations all across the city, but they refuse to surrender the pits.'

'Seems a lot of blood to spend for the sake of promethium,' Fel says.

Raine nods. 'If they just wanted promethium they wouldn't have fled the refineries. It must be something else. Something they can twist and use.'

'Something buried deep,' Fel says.

A second, larger tremor shakes the room. More dust falls from the ceiling, and the lumens fail altogether for a moment. In the brief instant of absolute darkness Raine can't help thinking of the battle before this one, on Gholl, where she was captured by the Sighted and taken into the crystal caverns under the surface.

Buried, deep.

Raine pushes the memory - and the unease that comes with it - aside. She drinks from her tin cup again, nearly draining it. When she puts it down, the leaves cling to the enamel inside.

'You read the leaves before every fight, don't you?' she asks Fel.

He looks down at his own cup and nods. 'I do.'

'Would you show me how it's done?'

'I thought you didn't believe in omens or fates,' he says.

Raine shakes her head. 'I don't, but you do.'

Fel smiles. 'All right,' he says. 'I'll show you.'

Raine holds out her cup to hand it to him, but he shakes his head.

'It has to be you that sets the leaves, so that our fates don't get crossed.' He shows her using his own cup. 'Turn the tea three times, and then tip out what's left.'

Raine does as he says, and tips the remains of her windfall tea out onto the floor before putting her cup back on table between them.

'Where did you learn this?' Raine asks.

'My mother taught me,' Fel says simply.

Raine understands then why the ritual means so much, because it must remind him of home, and of the family he lost. Raine feels the timepiece ticking in her pocket like a second heartbeat.

Fel picks up the cup in his tattooed hand and frowns. Raine cannot help it. She leans forward, just slightly. 'What do you see?' she asks.

'Hunting birds,' he says, turning the cup so that she can see. 'For a chase that ends in blood.'

Raine catches herself smiling.

'Not so surprising,' she says. 'And the rest?'

He turns the cup as if to look at it another way, still frowning. 'The duskhound,' he says, after a moment.

'The story that your squad is named for,' Raine says.

Fel nods.

'What does it mean?' Raine asks, though she can guess, because he's told her the old story.

Fel puts the cup down on the table.

'It means death, following close by.'

The overhead lumens stutter again.

'Isn't it always?' Raine asks.

The vox-bead Raine wears crackles in her ear before Fel can answer her. It is the Antari general, Juna Keene. From the way Fel reacts, Raine can tell he is receiving the same message.

'The timetable has moved up. Tactical briefing in ten minutes in the main control hub.'

'Acknowledged,' Raine says, into her vox-link. She hears Fel do the same.

'Back to duty, then, captain,' she says.

Fel nods and picks up the tin cups.

'Aye, commissar,' he says.

In the quiet that follows his words, Raine listens to the sound echoing from Termina's tunnels and hollows, and realises that she was wrong, and Fel was right.

It really does sound like howling.

The tactical briefing takes place in the old refinery control hub around a hololith projector that's been mounted on the main console. The other lights in the large, rust-stained chamber are switched off to allow the projection to show clearly, leaving most of the hub in shadows.

Andren Fel stands in those shadows and watches the hololith turn, memorising the details by habit. Distances and depth. The number of menial crew. Ingress points and exit options. It is how he always prepares for an operation, but today it is more than that. It is a welcome distraction from the shape he saw in the leaves. In Raine's fate.

The duskhound.

Death.

Raine stands on the opposite side of the hololith from him now, her angular face cast in hard shadows. The green light from the projection catches the edges of her commissariat uniform, turning the golden braiding to jade and finding the edges of every dent and gouge in the silvered chest-plate she wears. Fel meets Raine's eyes for a moment. They are dark, even in daylight, but in these shadows they could as well be the space between stars.

'What you're looking at is mine-pit designate Iota. It is the deepest mine in Termina, and the oldest.'

The words belong to Juna Keene. The general is sitting at ease on the edge of one of the secondary consoles. Her uniform is that of the regulars, green-and-grey splinter, with wear-worn pale leather gloves and boots. Only the white cuffs on her rolled-back sleeves mark her rank. That, and the easy authority in her voice.

'The pit-mouth is twelve-hundred metres across, side to side,' Keene says. 'Last recorded operating depth was around three thousand metres.'

Keene depresses a heavy key in the hololith's base. It resets to a different view, from above. Mine-pit Iota is a wide-open void in the face of the city,

like a set of jaws for the world. Grooves made for lifters and transitways run around the edge of it, carved into the walls, down into the depths.

'The Sighted have held the pit since the outset of the war,' she says. 'They have abandoned a dozen other key locations, but they refuse to leave Iota. There is something that they want down there. Something we cannot afford for them to find.'

'Iota is located in the western reaches,' Raine says. 'Which makes Karin Sun's Gold Company the closest for capture. Am I to assume that they have failed?'

'They tried,' Keene says. 'But the regulars cannot get close. The Sighted have a witch prowling Iota, and a powerful one at that. Sun chose to fall back, rather than lose his company to madness.'

Fel can't help but feel unease at the word *witch*. It's an old disquiet from home. One he is trained to act in spite of, that can never truly be erased.

'If the regulars cannot move in, the war in the western reaches will grind to a halt. We cannot let that happen.'

'Hunt-to-kill, then, general,' Fel says.

Keene nods. 'And you'll need to make it quick. According to Captain Sun, the witch's power grows stronger with proximity and exposure. It had Sun's troops all dreaming, running, or temporarily mad. Our witches,' Keene pauses, and frowns. 'Our *sanctioned psykers* fared twice as badly. Apparently Pharo clawed his own eyes out rather than get any closer.'

Fel shakes his head. Witch or not, he would never wish Pharo harm.

'If the witch's power grows with proximity, then that's how we'll hunt it,' he says. 'Go straight for the source of the fear.'

The general nods her head. 'Your Valkyrie is on standby. Once your boots hit the scaffolds, you will have six hours. If you miss your extraction, we will count you as lost. Is that clear?'

'As a springtime sky, general,' Fel says. 'Consider it done.'

Keene looks to Raine then.

'You will accompany them, commissar,' she says.

'Yes, general,' Raine says.

Keene doesn't say why, and Fel doesn't have to ask. There is only one reason to send a commissar along for a hunt-to-kill like this one. It will be Raine's duty to make sure that the Duskhounds don't lose themselves in dreams, like Sun's regulars did, and to deal with them if they do, with that

pistol she carries or her sword's keen edge.

Fel catches Raine's dark eyes once more through the hololith. The two of them have fought together countless times since her assignment to the regiment, and Fel has come to know her well, through stories shared and scars earned. He trusts Raine, even if his kinfolk don't, but he has no illusions. Just as Fel is made for the hunt and the kill, Raine is made for judgement, and for the hard choices. If it is necessary, she will not hesitate to pull the trigger. To do anything else would be to break faith.

And that is something that Fel knows Severina Raine will never do.

For the first time in days, Severina Raine cannot hear the sound of the city, because Jova's Valkyrie gunship is howling even more loudly than Termina can.

Raine keeps a steady grip on the handhold built into the Valkyrie's airframe as the pilot banks over the city on the approach to Iota. Cold wind rushes through the troop compartment from the open side doors, carrying with it the smell of fyceline and smoke. The wind stings Raine's eyes and catches at the collar of her buckled short-coat. She is wearing her funerary blacks and heavy, weatherproof gloves. Her silver chest-plate is deliberately dulled to keep it from catching the light. She has strapped extra armour plates over her boots for the drop. The drop for which she needs the jump-mask slung around her neck, and the bulky grav-chute harness on her back.

'It will be quick,' Fel says. 'Straight down into Iota, and onto the eastward landing pad. It is only halfway down, but it's as far as we can go before there's too much strike risk from the scaffolding.'

Fel is standing beside her, with one hand on the airframe and his hellgun slung. He is fully kitted for the fight to come, with grenades and charges locked to his belt and the heavy-bladed knife he carries sheathed at his waist. Like Raine, he is wearing a grav-chute, though his is modified to be worn with storm trooper carapace. The tactical display built into Fel's vambrace shows the schematic of Iota rendered in green, and the landing pad as a bright white circle.

'The display in your jump-mask will keep the platform flagged,' he says. 'Once we hit the platform, we will shed the grav-chutes and move down towards Iota's heart. Clear?'

Raine nods. She has completed perhaps a tenth of the combat drops the Duskhounds have, but Raine has enough experience to know how to make it to the landing zone in one piece. The principles for use of a grav-chute are simple. Fire the thrusters as a method of aerobrake in adequate time before literally hitting the landing zone. Do not thrash your limbs. Do not panic. It is a matter of control and discipline under pressure, like many things.

'Completely,' she says. 'Just give the word, captain.'

Fel smiles at that 'Aye, commissar,' he says.

The Valkyrie's internal vox crackles.

'We are close to Iota,' Jova says. *'I'll maintain at five hundred metres above the pit-mouth, but you'll want to make it quick.'*

'Understood,' Fel replies.

He pulls on his Duskhounds mask and locks it in place, the eye-lenses glowing red in the dim combat lighting of the troop compartment. Like the rest of his squad, Fel's mask is painted with a snarling hound's face to represent the creature of Antari folklore that gave the squad their name. Seeing it now, Raine can't help but think of the shape he saw in the leaves, back in the overseer's watch room.

Three loud thumps split the air, then, and the gunship's airframe shudders, rattling all of the way down Raine's arm.

'Well, now. There's no need for that,' Jova says, over the internal vox.

The pilot cuts speed and drops the Valkyrie into a curving dive. Inertia pulls at Raine's bones, and the airframe shakes and groans, but then the turbojets fire and Jova levels out again. Rol, Fel's second-in-command, whoops. The Dusk hound is braced against the frame of one of the Valkyrie's open side doors with his hellgun raised. Rol has his mask in place too, but Raine can guess that he is grinning. 'Honestly, it's as if you wish for death,' Tyl says.

The Duskhounds' sharpshooter is braced in the other door; her rifle pointed out into the clouds and darkness. Tyl's rifle is modified for distance kills, with a variable scope and a longer, accurised barrel that she has scored with kill markings. Her tone is patient and good-natured. Tyl and Rol could be taken for true family. They are both lean and strong, with the same lilting accents. In a fight they are inseparable, each a spare shadow for the other.

'Glory, maybe,' Rol says, with a smile in his voice 'The After can wait.'
Tyl laughs.

'I wish you wouldn't make light of it like that,' Jeth says. 'Death is no cause for laughter.'

Jeth is the only Duskhound built stronger than Fel is. His matt-black carapace is scored with words from hymnals written in the old Antari script, and he wears a loop of luckstones at his belt.

'You know I didn't mean it like that,' Rol says. 'Tell him, Myre.'

'Jeth is right,' Myre says, in her solemn voice. 'Mocking death will only bring it quicker.'

Myre is the youngest of Fel's Duskhounds, but you would not know it from her voice. It always sounds as though she has seen a sector's worth of sadness. Myre sits in one of the Valkyrie's restraint thrones, checking her gear briskly and locking it to her belt and thigh-plates. Raine sees heat-charges and blind grenades, and a loop of krak grenades that Myre passes straight to Jeth without needing to be asked. The Valkyrie thrums and shakes as more detonations light the clouds through the open side doors, and Raine sees the wide, dark mouth of Iota far below through the ashes and smoke.

'Do you all feel that?' Jeth asks. 'It's like knives running over my bones. I think we just crossed into the witch's circle.'

Raine realises then that she does feel it, the very edge of a creeping unease. She tightens her grip on the handhold above her head and takes a breath, pushing the feeling aside.

'We must deny it,' she says, over the roar of the Valkyrie's turbojets. 'It is the only way to defeat a psyker who intends to twist your own mind against you.'

Raine thinks back to Gholl. To the crystal caverns, and how her own mind was twisted against her. How she managed to deny it.

'There is a way to know the falsehoods from reality,' she says. 'There are always details amiss, even when the psyker is powerful. Hold to what you know to be true. Trust your instincts. It is much more difficult to fool the heart than it is the eyes.'

Fel looks to his Duskhounds.

'Listen well to the commissar's words,' he says. 'We hunt, we kill and we get out. All of us. Is that clear?'

'Aye, captain,' the Duskhounds say, as one.

Inertia pulls at Raine again as the Valkyrie cuts speed and holds position above the pit, its vectored engines roaring. Rol and Tyl slam their side doors closed and take position by the ramp with Myre and Jeth.

'You are good to go,' Jova says over the internal vox. *'I'll hold until you are clear.'*

'Understood,' Fel says.

Raine pulls her jump-mask on and secures it. It closes tight to her face. Her own breathing becomes very loud, contained by the mask. The air supply through the breather apparatus is stale and dry. Her visor lights with the simple guidance data that will guide her to the lifter platform and a drop distance counter flickers in the corner of the display. *Distance to target: 2134 metres.*

'Ready?' Fel asks.

'Aye, captain,' the Duskhounds reply, and this time, Raine joins them in their response.

'Let's go make some fates,' Fel says, and he hits the release for the Valkyrie's rear ramp.

The ramp yawns open to reveal Termina's thunderous sky, underlit by the fires of war and the refineries that are still burning. Tyl and Rol go first, straight over into the dark. Then Myre and Jeth. The wind buffets Raine as she steps to the edge alongside Fel. She blinks. Breathes. Glances once more at the drop distance counter in her visor's display.

And then she jumps out into the war-torn sky.

As Raine falls through Termina's sky, towards the open void of Iota, she focuses on what she was taught.

Breathe. Don't stop breathing.

Arms and legs outstretched and stable.

Don't thrash. Don't blink.

Remain calm.

The sky lights with anti-aircraft fire and lightning flashes. The ground grows larger. Darker. Iota yawns wider. The wind tears at Raine's uniform and tugs on her limbs. Her fingers are cold and numb, despite the gloves. The drop distance counter tracks down quickly.

Distance to target: 1711 metres.

Breathe.

Don't stop breathing.

The landing zone in Raine's visor display is a bright white circle. Below, Iota grows wider and wider until there is no ground to see, and then she is below the line of the pit-mouth and falling into the darkness of Iota itself. Scaffolding and lifters blur past, and the counter tracks down. Raine cannot see the others, but then the pit is so dark and the wind is so strong. Her visor beads with water that runs in streaks to the edges.

Distance to target: 1226 metres.

The longer the freefall, the less likely it is you'll be seen. But the longer the freefall, the less control you have. The more likely it is you will hit something.

Don't blink.

Just breathe.

Her eyes sting and ache and Raine thinks for a moment of the shape in the leaves. She glimpses it again in the streaks of water beading on her visor. The Duskhound. Death. Her heart is racing.

'Breathe,' she says to herself.

Raine knows that it is the psyker's influence pushing at the edges of her mind, making her see those things. Making her heart race even more than the fall does. She also knows that to panic is to die, so she keeps breathing deeply from the stale air of her mask and forces her limbs to stay locked as the counter keeps tracking down.

Distance to target: 914 metres.

But then there is a loud crack and Raine is dizzied. Her limbs go slack for an instant before she recovers her senses and realises that something struck her visor. An enemy round, or some kind of debris. She is falling fast, uncontrolled. Iota blurs around her. The wind is deafening. She can't catch her breath. She can't see. Can't stop spinning.

Just.

Breathe.

With the tactical display crazing in front of her eyes and the vox pickup hissing loudly in her ears, Raine fights the wind and the vertigo and the dizziness to right herself, and slow the fall before it kills her. She gets herself level, but she cannot tell if she is off-course. She cannot clearly see the white circle that marks the landing zone. In the corner of the display,

the distance to target flickers and splinters.

It looks as though it says *Distance to target: 94 metres.*

Or is that *34 metres.*

'Throne,' Raine says, through her teeth.

She fires the grav-chute's jets. Inertia pulls hard on her limbs and jolts her spine. Raine's vision dizzies again for a moment, and when it clears she can see the landing zone below. Close. Coming up fast, despite the jets. What she was taught rushes through her mind. Use the fall. Don't lock your limbs. Roll with the speed of it.

Don't close your eyes.

Raine kills the grav-chute jets a moment before she hits the deck of the landing platform and rolls. She doesn't lock her limbs, or close her eyes, which is how she sees that she hit at a poor angle, right by the edge of the platform.

And that she's about to go over it.

Raine twists as her body slides over the platform lip and manages to snag hold of the grating of the floor, though it nearly pulls her arm from its socket and she can't help but cry out. She hits the release for the grav-chute and lets it fall away into the pit below as two figures clad in black carapace drop to their knees and help to drag her back up onto the platform. Fel and Myre.

'Hells,' Fel says. 'That was close.'

Raine gets to her feet and pulls the jump-mask off. Iota's howling is even louder without it. The crystalflex of the jump-mask is crazed with cracks that burst outwards from a hole the size of a trade-coin. Raine becomes aware of her face stinging where she has been cut, and of warm lines of blood painting their way down her cheek. For a moment, she almost sees a shape in the damage to the visor. Teeth and eyes.

Raine shakes her head to clear it and drops the damaged jump-mask on the deck. Fel meets her eyes for a moment.

'Ready?' he asks her.

Raine nods and draws her bolt pistol from the mag-secured holster at her belt. The cold weight of Penance is comforting.

'Let's go,' she says.

Andren Fel was taught many things at the Schola Antari. He was taught

how to lead others. How to memorise and strategise. He was taught how to survive with very little, and how to fight and kill with even less, but Fel's scholam training also granted him another skill.

Something that the masters would call *resilience*.

Those days are distant now, but Fel remembers them as clearly as any other. He remembers being bound and blindfolded. He remembers shocks and lashes, knives and blood, and the masters asking him the same question over and over again and expecting him to break.

Do you want it to stop?

Every cadet finds a different way to endure the resilience trials, and to keep themselves from answering *yes* to that question. The method is always secret, and personal, so that it cannot be broken. Fel's is a simple thing. An old evensong that his mother used to sing when he was a child.

*Beware the darkling hours, my son,
For that is when the duskhounds come.
Keep within the light as the fire burns,
Until the morning sun returns.*

Andren Fel thinks of those words again now as he follows the wide, rocky slope down into Iota. Down into the darkness. The words help to keep the witch's work at bay. The unease, as if he is being followed. The shadows, coiling and twisting and making shapes at the edges of his sight.

The glint of watchful eyes in the darkness.

The path down into Iota is wide and set with scuffed steel rails for excavation trains. Line of sight is fouled by large piles of rubble and the still, silent drilling machines that creak in the ceaseless wind. Iota's howling is louder the deeper they go. More than loud enough to cover any sound Fel might make as he gets shadow-close to the two Sighted scouts patrolling the path ahead. The two of them are wearing fully enclosed reflective helmets and dull blue flak armour marked with that sigil they all wear. The spiral, with the eye at the centre.

Not unlike the spiral of Iota, seen from above.

The shards of mirrored glass hanging from cords on the Sighted's flak armour knock together as Fel grabs hold of the scout and breaks his neck with a twist of his hands. Beside him, Rol quiets the other with the edge of his combat blade, then the two of them drag the bodies to where they will be hidden by the darkness and debris, before moving further down the

slope.

Fel drops into the shadow of a mining machine, and Rol does the same. Ahead, the slope leads down onto a rubble-strewn plateau that is lit by oil lanterns strung between poles driven into the stone. The dim lights dance like faerie fires in the wind, painting long, restless shadows on the ground. A tunnel yawns in Iota's wall that wasn't on Keene's schematics. It has been cut jagged, leaving shards of rock pointing inwards. Outside it, an excavation trolley sits empty on the tracks. Iota's howling is much louder here. Twinned, almost.

'Well, that looks the sort of place you might hide a witch. Don't you think, captain?' Rol's voice is without a smile, for once.

'I'd say so,' Fel says.

It's not just the look of the tunnel. Fel can see his Duskhounds' vitals in the corner of his display. Their heart rates are all reading as elevated, the price of resisting the witch. Fel feels it just as much as they do, unease welling up inside him like blood from a bad wound.

Beware the darkling hours, my son, says his mother's voice.

Fel shakes his head, hard. It's getting worse, which is proof that they are on the right track.

He sends a burst of vox, and the rest of his Duskhounds approach with Raine. She drops into cover beside him with her sabre drawn. Raine has dulled Evenfall's blade to stop it catching the light. In the darkness, the blood drying on her face looks black.

'We've got movement, captain,' Rol says.

Fel looks back around the cover to see a group of Sighted come up and out of the tunnel. A dozen of them, wearing those reflective masks, just like the others. Fel marks the leader by the mirrored cloak he wears, and the finely made sword at his hip. Eight of the Sighted are working together to carry a heavy, sealed casket over to the excavation trolley, where they set it down with a dull thud.

'We cannot let whatever that is reach the surface,' Raine says.

Fel shakes his head.

'Pattern?' Rol asks.

Fel watches as two of the Sighted stay behind to guard the trolley, and the rest turn back for the tunnel. 'Hangman's noose,' he says.

The first Antari story that Andren Fel ever told Raine was that of the duskhounds. The story goes that the hounds come to take the souls of those fated to die and drag them to the After for judgement. He told her that duskhounds can appear in the slimmest of shadows, even that of those they are sent to take.

In the moment that the hangman's noose closes, Raine believes every word of the old Antari story.

Raine is moving from cover to cover across the plateau with Fel when Myre and Jeth resolve from the shadows around the Sighted guarding the trolley. The Duskhounds grab hold of the two scouts and drag them from their feet into the darkness before reappearing moments later, without a sound. Myre drops to one knee and sets to work attaching her burn-charges to the trolley. The rest of the Sighted do not turn back. They just keep moving towards the tunnel mouth, as good as deafened by Iota's howling.

Fel sends a single burst of vox, then. The signal that means *close the noose*.

Near-silent flashes of hellgun fire lance from the darkness as Raine breaks cover alongside Fel. Three of the Sighted fell in rapid succession, masks shattered and coiling smoke from Cassia Tyl's pin-accurate kill shots. The rest of the Sighted turn and shout and scatter and raise their own weapons to fire back, only to find that death is already much too close.

Raine draws her blade through the first of them. Evenfell sings, cutting through the Sighted's blue-grey flak armour with ease. Black blood mists Raine's face as the woman spills over backwards without a sound. Raine lets her momentum carry her forward as the Duskhounds engage around her. Rol shoots one of the Sighted, centre-mass, before burying his combat blade in another. The Sighted staggers backwards but refuses to die. He raises his shotgun to fire on Rol, point-blank. Before he can pull the trigger, another whisper of hellgun fire cuts the space between the two of them and sends the Sighted spinning to the ground.

'Good eyes, Cass,' Rol says, over the vox.

'It's like you said,' she replies, from her sharpshooter's position. *'The After can wait.'*

Raine sees one of the Sighted go for Fel with a jagged, hooked blade. He lets his rifle swing by the strap so that he can catch the Sighted's arm and

break it. Fel twists the scout off his feet, before taking up his hellgun again for the kill shot in one swift movement.

'You will see.'

The words come from the Sighted's leader, as he charges Raine with his sword raised. Her reflection grows larger in his mirrored mask. The Sighted is quick, the shards of glass on his cloak catching the lumen light as he ducks and parries and swings for her. Raine catches the Sighted's blade on her own and turns it aside before plunging Evenfall into his chest.

'You will see the truth,' the Sighted rasps, from behind his mask. 'All of your fears.'

'Fear means nothing when you have faith,' Raine snarls, pulling her sabre free.

The Sighted falls to his knees.

'You will see,' he gurgles. 'You are beheld.'

Then the Sighted collapses and dies, black blood spreading around him on the stone like outstretched wings. With the remaining Sighted dead, Myre and Jeth approach and the Duskhounds gather around Raine, their armour scored and gouged by blades.

'Beheld,' Rol says. 'That cannot be good.'

And then another sound overtakes even Iota's ceaseless howling.

Laughter.

The sound echoes from every surface, mad and cruel and almost songlike. The Duskhounds point their rifles into the darkness and Raine raises her sabre; but there is nothing to fight. Nothing to kill. The laughter grows louder and the shadows seem to draw closer, spilling over the stone like oil. Jeth mutters the Antari word for *ghosts* with horror in his voice and Raine catches a glimpse of a figure amongst the shadows. Her ghost is clad in commissariat black with her arm outstretched, as if to take Raine's hand. The timepiece in Raine's pocket thunders like a second heart.

Severina, says the ghost.

Raine shakes her head.

Breathe, she thinks, just as she did during the fall, *just keep breathing*.

'We have to move,' she says, through her teeth.

'I hear you,' Fel says. 'Myre, burn their prize.'

Myre nods and keys the bracer on her wrist. The Sighted's casket lights with heat-charges, silently burning. The laughter becomes strangled and

angry and the ghosts turn away. 'Everyone into the tunnel.' Fel says. 'Now.'

The tunnel is cut steeply and jaggedly, as if it was made by claws, or frantic hands. Oil lanterns hang from ropes overhead and a thick, iridescent fog drifts along the tunnel, coiling around Andren Fel's feet as he follows the path. Contact risk down here is high. Field of fire is restricted, and line of sight is limited by the steep grade and the curve of the tunnel as it loops downwards. Hollows have been blasted and cut into the walls all around Fel and new tunnels splinter off left and right. Eyes burn in the shadows, only to vanish when Fel draws sight on them. Claws click against the stone. *You are beheld.*

'Watch careful,' Fel says. 'Don't stray, or separate.'

His Duskhounds vox affirmatives as they move swiftly at a ragged spread, their targeting lasers glancing off the fog. Raine keeps pace with Fel easily, her pistol drawn in steady hands. Her breathing mists the air. Fel checks the readout on his monition's display. The ambient temperature in the tunnel reads as near-freezing.

'It shouldn't be this cold down here,' he says. 'Not so far underground.'

Raine shakes her head. 'It is the psyker's doing,' she says. 'We must be getting close.'

Fel nods. Iota's howling sounds almost joyful now, and much closer. He catches the smell of coalfires.

'Captain, we've got Sighted dead.'

The voice is Tyl's. She is a short distance ahead with Rol, crouching down in the fog. She straightens up as Fel approaches and shakes her head.

'Looks as though they kept digging until they died,' she says with disgust.

The Sighted at their feet is lying curled on his side. He wears one of their masks, but no armour, just worker's coveralls painted with their spiral mark. The Sighted's bare arms are cut with fate-marks in jagged whorls. As the fog stirs with Jeth and Myre approaching, Fel sees that the Sighted's hand is closed tightly around something that glitters, blood-red and iridescent like the fog. Fel has seen the like before, given to the Sighted's witches and commanders in place of their eyes.

'They are digging for crystals,' Fel says. 'For seeing stones.' Jeth snarls a curse and takes a step back from the Sighted's body.

'That's what we burned,' Myre says softly. 'Seeing stones.'

Raine nods. The look in her dark eyes is midwinter cold. 'That must be how the psyker can reach so far and hurt so many,' she says. 'The crystals are acting as a psychic amplifier.'

+Such clever puppets.+

The voice echoes from every wall of the tunnel, and inside of Fel's head, too. It makes his vision run at the edges. He tastes blood.

'Go,' he says to his squad and to Raine.

The witch starts to laugh again as they move down the steep tunnel at pace. The walls seem to billow and swell like sails, studded with jagged chunks of that same crystal, burning red.

'The psyker will try to turn your senses against you. To trick and unnerve you with falsehoods and fears, but you must deny it,' Raine says, her voice ringing clear, even with the laughter and all of Iota's howling. 'Hold to what you know to be true.'

Fel does as she says. He takes a slow breath and holds to his truths. To the words of the evensong, and the cold weight of his hellgun, braced against his shoulder. The swift, quiet tread of his Duskhounds all around him.

And to Severina Raine, and the depths of her dark eyes. Fel keeps his footing despite the scree and the steepness and the psyker's laughing, and rounds a sharp turn in the tunnel with the others beside him, stepping into a vaulted cavern filled with crates and barrels. Fuel, for the lanterns. A single figure stands in the middle of it, clad in a mirrored mask and holding something in an outstretched hand. A flare.

'You are beheld,' the Sighted says with glee. 'You will burn.'

Fel fires his hellgun, hitting the Sighted's mask dead centre and shattering it, but it is too late.

The flare is already lit.

'*Shit,*' Jeth says as the flare drops and the cavern lights, and everything is lost to fire and smoke.

Fel is staggered by it. Momentarily blinded. Even with his respirator kit he finds he can't breathe. Over the roar of the flames, Raine's voice echoes in his head.

Hold to what you know to be true.

Fel realises that there is smoke and fire, but no heat. No pain. The fire isn't real. He squeezes his eyes closed and takes another slow breath. When he opens his eyes again the cavern is empty. There are no barrels.

No crates. Just a shadowed space where jagged crystals jut from every surface.

'Are you with me, captain?'

Fel looks at Raine. She is breathing hard, and blood is running from her nose, but her dark eyes are clear.

'I'm with you,' Fel says, with the taste of blood in his mouth.

Around him, his Duskhounds are reeling. Fel helps Tyl pull Rol back to his feet. He is murmuring something about fire.

+Such well-made puppets.+

Fel snaps his rifle up and trains it on the source of the voice. He doesn't know how he couldn't see it before. The nest of shattered crystal on the far side of the cavern, arranged in a glittering spiral, and the Sighted witch, sitting in the centre of it. It is a pale thing, clad in blood-spattered silks, with crimson seeing stone eyes.

Fel fires on the witch in a heartbeat and his Duskhounds do the same Raine's bolt pistol bellows. Crystal dust and smoke fouls the air, but when it clears, the witch is nowhere to be seen.

+Fierce too,+ the witch says. +Much more so than your kin who came before.+

The voice comes from everywhere now. Fel can't find the source of it. He backs into formation with his Duskhounds on instinct as the witch's laughter echoes from the seeing stones set into the walls. Fel loses the nest again, as if it has passed out of sight. All that he can see now is the witch, reflected in the facets of the crystals, distorted and fractured and grinning with blackened, blunted teeth.

+Such strong cords you were given to move your limbs,+ the witch says. +Your minds cut and shaped for killing.+ The reflections shift and change and a flock of identical ghosts take shape around them. The witch, repeated a hundred times over. He is as thin as springtime ice; with feathers threaded into his skin by the quills. Like the other Sighted, he has cut dozens of times and dates into his face and throat. Fate-marks. They bleed afresh as he smiles.

+Made never to question,+ the witch says. +Only to blindly obey.+

The shadows around the witch's reflections coil and unspool, lengthening and reaching for Fel and the others like hooked claws. The seeing stones in the walls burn even brighter. Fel's nose starts bleeding.

'The stones,' he manages to say. 'Break the stones.'

His Duskhounds fire, and the cavern fills with light and crystal dust and angry shadows. The witch hisses and snarls, like an animal.

+You might have been cut and shaped and strung with cord, but you are still mortal.+

Fel's vision smears.

+You are still human.+

The smell of coalfires is overwhelming, despite Fel's respirator kit.

+And just like the crystals,+ the witch hisses, +finding the fear in you is just a matter of digging.+

The shadows boil towards Severina Raine like an angry tide, nearly knocking her from her feet. A whole host of fears snag at her, aiming to find purchase in her soul. Fire roars, scorching her skin. The thunder of guns echoes in her ears. Raine smells the stink of the dead. She glimpses teeth and claws glinting in the half-dark. Tastes blood. Around her, the Duskhounds stagger.

'Deny it,' Raine manages to say. 'Hold to what you know to be true.'

+Fool.+

The word hits Raine hard, pinning her in place. The cavern and the crystals and the psyker's many images smear through her pistol's sights.

+Fear cannot be banished by the truth,+ the psyker says. +Fear is truth.+

Raine fires her pistol on the closest image of the psyker, but it just blows away like smoke. The others all smile.

'Fear means nothing when you have faith,' Raine says.

The psyker laughs and it sounds like breaking glass.

+We will see about that.+

The cavern falls completely dark. Fel's optics don't touch it. He can hear his Duskhounds shouting for him, but he can't see them.

'Hold your ground,' Fel says. 'Remember it isn't real.' Several sets of coalfire eyes bloom around Fel and he hears a snarl that sounds like logs breaking as they burn. Fel keeps his rifle braced as his mother's words echo around him, spoken in the witch's sing-song, mocking voice.

Beware the darkling hours, my son,

For that is when the duskhounds come.

'I am not afraid of death,' Andren Fel says, as the shadowed hounds circle closer, baring their teeth.

+Perhaps not your own,+ the witch says.

And the hounds lunge past him.

Fel tries to turn and draw sight on them, but something in the shadows snags him and holds him still. His rifle hisses and locks when he tries to fire it. His Duskhounds are shouting again. Cursing. Screaming. Fel catches sight of them by flashes of las-fire and the glow of coals.

Tyl is caught in the jaws of one of the hounds.

+Do you want it to stop?+

Rol is a ragged mess, trying to drag himself to help Tyl.

+Do you want it to stop?+

Myre is crawling, leaving a painted line of blood along the stone.

+Do you want it to stop?+

Jeth is lying still and silent, his carapace torn open.

+Do you want it to stop?+

Fel hears Raine cry out. The last of the hounds has her by the throat, worrying and tearing. There is so much blood. Fel tries to get to her, but the shadows refuse to let go, pulling him to his knees.

'Severina,' he says.

* * *

Raine sees Andren Fel go to his knees with a crash of armour plates. Over the howling of Iota, she hears him say her name, an agonised rasp. Raine blinks and tries to move towards him, but her limbs are frozen. She can do nothing but watch the Duskhounds suffer. Watch Fel suffer. The Sighted psyker laughs and his many reflections clap their hands together. It sounds like thunder rolling.

+See,+ he says. +Fear is truth.+

He smiles widely.

+But you already know that, don't you, Severina Raine? That is why you have locked away your fears, deep inside.+ Raine blinks, and on the backs of her eyelids, she sees a cell door, closed and bolted. A heavy quiet falls and Raine can no longer hear the Duskhounds suffering, or even the howling of Iota.

All that remains is the ticking of the timepiece in her pocket.

It grows louder as a figure steps from between the psyker's repeated images and approaches Raine. No, not a figure. A ghost. One clad in commissariat black with her hand outstretched. She is tawny-skinned and scarred, with eyes as dark as ocean stones. It is like looking into a mirror.

But then, it always was, when Raine looked at her sister.

Try as he might, Fel can't find the words of the evensong. He can't distance himself from the stink of blood and the screams. From his Duskhounds breathing their last, and Raine, bleeding out on the stone.

+Do you want it to stop?+

Fel fights and struggles but the shadows twist tighter and his heart is beating out of time. The words are a roar that surround him.

+Do you want it to stop?+

'You are not my sister,' Raine says. 'Lucia is dead.'

+She is, isn't she?+

A bloodstain blooms on Lucia's tunic, then, spreading slowly from her heart outwards. Lucia's dark eyes turn glassy and blank, but she still walks closer. Her footsteps sound like gunshots.

+And tell me Severina Raine why is that?+

Raine's heart burns. Blood trickles down the back of her throat. Lucia is almost close enough to touch her. Close enough for the barrel of Raine's pistol to press against her chest, right at the heart of that dark circle of blood.

+What was it that killed your sister?+

Fel can only watch Raine struggle in the hound's jaws and the pool of blood growing around her, black as a starless sky.

+Do you want it to stop?+

He takes a breath, and the word takes shape. The answer that will end the trial.

But then he catches Raine's eyes.

Fel knows the depths and darkness of those eyes. In these shadows, they should be like the spaces between stars.

'This isn't real,' Fel slurs.

The timepiece in Raine's pocket is deafening.

+Say it.+

Raine can't see anything, save for Lucia's face.

+SAY. IT.+

'My sister is dead because she failed,' Raine says.

+And that is what you fear the most, isn't it, Severina Raine? Failure. You are afraid of sharing your sister's fate.+ Raine's pistol shakes in her hands.

+But it is unavoidable,+ the psyker says. +You will fail, just as she did. Your faith will break. Your fate is written into your blood. That is the truth. Your truth.+

Raine's mind is alight. Her vision failing. There is blood in her mouth and a tremor on her limbs.

+You should end it,+ the psyker says. +For yourself and your puppet hounds. It would be a mercy.+

'End it,' Raine says, through chattering teeth. 'Yes, I will end it.' And her fingers curl tight around her pistol's trigger. Penance bucks in her hands. Blood hits her face. Lucia's blood, that might as well be her own. It is as cold as ocean spray. Her sister's image blows away like fog, and the psyker screams in rage, one hundred times over.

The shadows release Andren Fel, and he manages to get back to his feet. His Duskhounds are down, but alive. The witch's fractal reflections have become an angry storm, billowing around Raine like a flock of carrion birds.

'The nest,' Raine says, with effort.

Fel remembers the last words of the evensong.

Keep within the light as the fire burns,

Until the morning sun returns.

He has to make a fire. He has to burn it.

But he can't see it from where he is standing. Fel remembers the way it vanished, as if passing out of sight. Hidden, like the knotwood homes of the fae in the old stories. They said you could only find them if you knew how to look. If you knew where to stand. With his vision dazzling, and blood running from his nose, Fel staggers forwards through the witch's shrieking reflections until he reaches the place where he was standing before; and the shape of the cavern seems to change, revealing the nest. A

heap of crystals, slick with witch's blood. Fel takes a charge from his belt, primes it and throws it into the crystal nest. It detonates with a blazing red light and a scream. Fel is thrown against the cavern wall hard enough to crack his armour. The witch's reflections shatter like glass until only one remains. A pale thing, clad in blood-spattered silks. And then Raine's pistol bellows.

The Sighted psyker puts one pale, thin hand to the bloodstain spreading across his chest. Feathers fall to the ground, snapped at the quills.

+Fool,+ he says again, but weaker this time. +You will see. You will fail. Your faith will break.+

'No. I refuse your so-called truth. I will not fail.' Raine fires again, and the psyker staggers backwards and falls, landing in the dust that's left of his nest of crystals. 'My faith cannot be broken.'

+You will see,+ the psyker says, in a weak, blood-clotted voice. +A shadow grows, even in the firelight. You will not survive it. Death follows close by.+

'Not mine,' Raine says between breaths. 'Yours.'

And she fires the last round in her pistol's magazine.

Severina Raine stands on the landing platform, looking up, as Jova's Valkyrie descends through the darkness and the smoke. It casts a long shadow that grows to swallow them up. Only the Duskhounds' red eye-lenses light the gloom. The storm troopers are silent. There have been few words exchanged save for orders and answers since leaving the witch's cavern. The Valkyrie touches down on the landing platform, turbojets roaring and the ramp lowers to the deck with a sound like a tolling bell. Dust kicks into the air in spirals. It billows in the push and pull of the mine-pit's breathing and for a moment, Raine catches something like a shape in the dust.

Teeth, and eyes.

'Ready?'

She looks away from the falling dust at the sound of Fel's voice. He is standing at the foot of the Valkyrie's ramp, his black armour turned blood-red by the combat lighting.

'Let's go,' Raine says.

And she follows him up the ramp, with Iota's howling echoing after her.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rachel Harrison is the author of the Warhammer 40,000 novel *Honourbound*, and the 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'*.

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