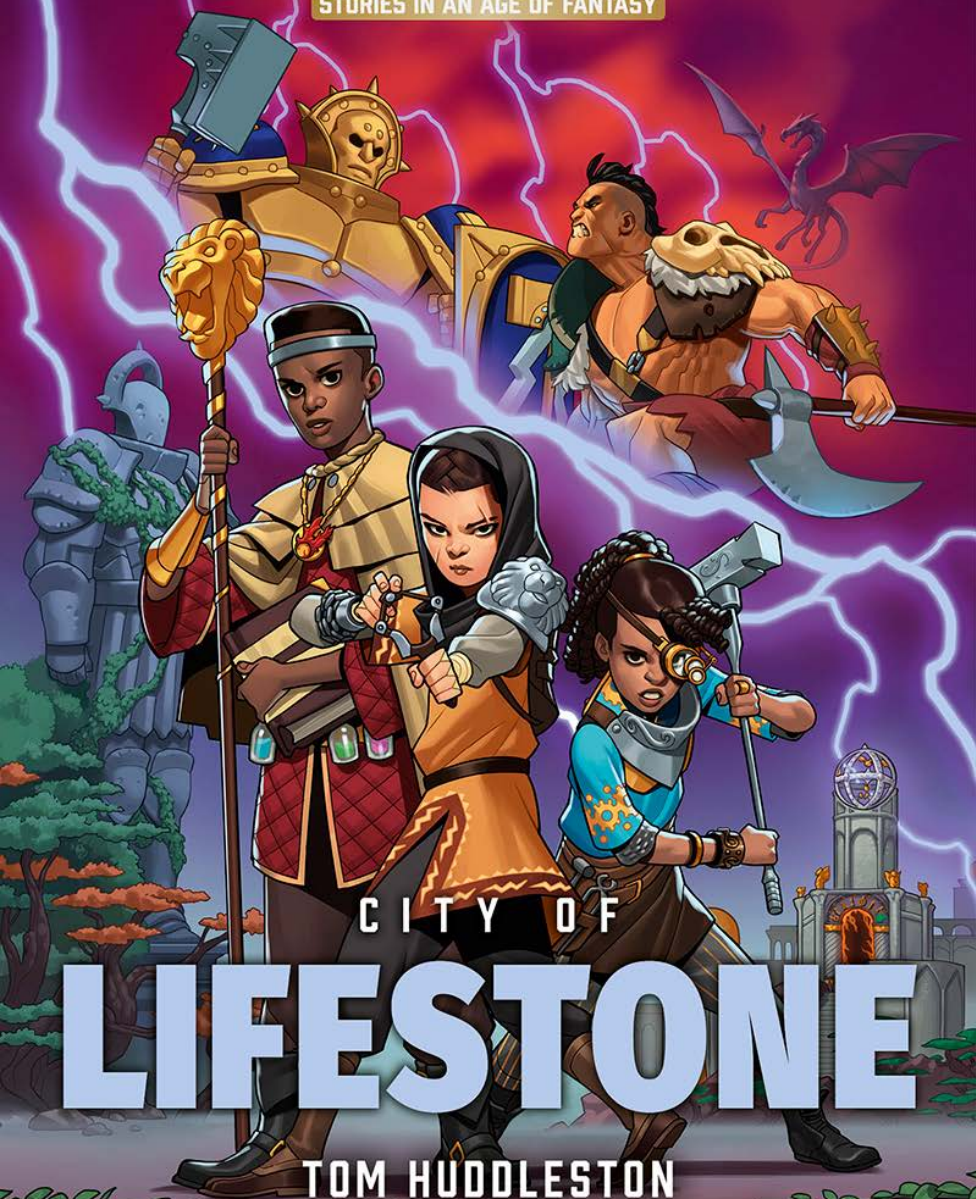


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WARHAMMER ADVENTURES

STORIES IN AN AGE OF FANTASY



CITY OF

LIFESTONE

TOM HUDDLESTON

ILLUSTRATED BY COLE MARCHETTI AND MAGNUS NORÉN

WARHAMMER™
ADVENTURES
STORIES IN AN AGE OF FANTASY



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LIFESTONE

TOM HUDDLESTON

For my cohort Cavan Scott, with immense gratitude.

WARHAMMER ADVENTURES

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PROLOGUE

One year ago...

The great beast soared on tattered wings, riding a current of stifling air. Its cry echoed from the stony slopes as it spotted another fearful runaway, sprinting for the shelter of a ravine. The creature lowered its black beak, long tail lashing with an audible thrum. Then it folded its hooked pinions and dived. Kiri heard a startled shout, then silence.

‘Get moving!’

The scar-faced barbarian raised his whip and Kiri stumbled forwards, the black boulder balanced between her shoulder blades. Ahead of her a line

of shuffling, bent-backed figures went winding up the mountainside, dusty brown rags clinging to their scrawny, sweating bodies. The sun was a dull copper coin wreathed in black cloud, and the air was sulphur-scented and sweltering. Here in Aqshy it was always hot. They didn't call it the Realm of Fire for nothing.

Huge fortifications loomed over her, half-built ramparts and shield walls topped with leering stone beast-heads and twisted mystic symbols that hurt Kiri's eyes just to look at. The walls clung to the mountain's peak, a vast black fortress constructed to protect... what? No one in the slave camp was entirely sure. Some said it was an ancient artefact, a mystical weapon that could turn the tide of this centuries-long war. Others claimed that the mountain was the resting place of some dormant creature, a fire-drake of impossible size that the Darkoath Barbarians planned to unleash against

their enemies. But the wisest suspected that behind those ramparts was a Realmgate – a doorway between the worlds, and a strategic gift to whichever side managed to claim it. This last idea appealed most to Kiri. The thought that just behind that hulking pile of hewn rock might lie a way out of this nightmare... well, that was just too good to be true. Meaning, of course, that it probably wasn't.

The last push up the scree-slope was always the worst, the ground shifting and sliding and threatening to topple her. But Kiri managed to scramble to the top, unloading her burden onto a pile of misshapen stones in the shadow of the outer wall. Straightening, she allowed herself a moment to appreciate the sudden weightlessness in her limbs before it was time to go back for another load. Her eyes stung, her body was riddled with scrapes and bruises and her limbs were ready to collapse. But – for those few seconds – she felt

almost human.

On the slopes below the slave camp she could make out the Darkoath horde, wedged defensively between the arms of the mountain. From up here they looked like a nest of vermin, clad in boiled leather and dull armour, black-furred warhounds straining at the leash. When the citadel was completed they would occupy it, but until then they were exposed, out here in the open. That's why they keep telling us to work faster, Kiri thought. They're afraid of what might be coming.

A hand touched her sleeve and Kiri jerked round, ready to tell the master how sorry she was for slacking. But she found herself looking into the windswept face of a young man, his red-rimmed eyes filled with sympathy. Kiri knew right away what that meant.

'Kellan,' she said. 'It's time?'

Kellan nodded quickly. 'Go. I'll distract him.'

He took a step towards the scarred

slavemaster, falling to his knees and begging for water. The barbarian sneered, kicking Kellan down with one booted foot. Kiri took her chance and bolted, scurrying back down the slope and through a shallow ravine, emerging into the maze of canvas structures and smouldering ash-heaps that had been her home these past months. Or had it been longer? She could barely recall her life before the Darkoaths took them.

She reached the tent, preparing to duck inside. Then for a moment she thought she saw a shadow on the horizon, shifting and rising. Coming closer? It was hard to tell; the Cindercaust Mountains were coloured entirely in shades of black and grey. But this was a different kind of darkness, a fog covering the far peaks one by one as it rolled in. For a moment she thought she felt a cool breeze on her face.

Then her mother called out and Kiri pushed into the tent. Chetan lay

wrapped in a thin sheet on a patch of smooth ground that Kiri had cleared for her. Her eyes twitched open and she smiled through cracked lips. Kiri knelt, and Chetan struggled up to embrace her. Her skin was like dry paper, the bones of her hands almost weightless. But Kiri could still feel the pulse of life inside.

Chetan pulled her daughter close. 'It's time... to leave,' she whispered, holding Kiri's gaze.



Kiri feigned surprise. ‘But mum, I only just got here.’

Chetan laughed despite herself, but it soon turned to coughing. ‘No jokes,’ she said. Then her hand squeezed a little tighter, her voice growing stronger. ‘We talked about this, Kiri. We’ve looked after each other this long, but there’s nothing you can do for me now. I won’t let you die a slave. Find a way out, take any risk you have to take, but *go home*.’

‘To Lifestone,’ Kiri said. She’d heard so many stories of her birth city that she almost felt she knew the place. Chetan had been born there, had spent her youth among its gardens and orchards. She’d fallen in love, been married, and twelve years ago she’d given birth to a daughter. Then some cataclysm had forced them to leave, to wander the wilds, to fall into the hands of slavers. Kiri wasn’t sure why her mother had abandoned the city she loved so much. Chetan didn’t seem to know herself, it

had just... happened.

‘Lifestone,’ Chetan said, savouring the word. She turned Kiri’s arm over, exposing the black birthmark on the inside of her wrist, a smooth circle with an arrow projecting from it. ‘Find the city. Make a better life. Promise me.’

Kiri nodded. ‘I’ll try.’

Chetan shook her head. ‘Don’t try.’ Her words were little more than a hoarse gasp. ‘Promise.’

Kiri turned away as the tears came. ‘I promise.’

Chetan slumped, her chest rising and falling, rising and falling, each time a little slower. Kiri hung her head. It was the way of things, she knew that. And wherever her mother was going, it had to be better than this. But still, her heart ached. Finally, Chetan’s hand slipped from her grasp, and she lay still.

‘Lazy little wretch,’ a voice snarled and a hand reached into the tent, dragging Kiri out. The barbarian

leered, swollen lips drawing back over foul yellow teeth. 'I'll teach you to go slinking off for a nap.'

Kiri twisted away and his whip glanced off her shoulder. 'No,' she protested. 'My mother... She's...'

'She's what?' the slaver asked. 'Dead? She won't be the only one if you don't get moving.'

He reached out with a leathery fist, pulling Kiri towards him. She felt the grief and horror rising up inside, threatening to overwhelm her. *No*. There'd be time for that later. She smelled the slaver's putrid stench, tasted ash in her mouth and heard her mother's voice one last time.

Promise me.

Kiri twisted, swinging her fist as hard as she could.

Her blow caught the slaver on the jaw and he cried out in surprise, losing his balance and landing hard on his backside. Kiri's home-made catapult was strapped to her waist, beneath her

rags. She snapped it loose, slipping in a lump of shot from the secret pouch sewn into her cloak. But before she could take aim, everything changed.

Lightning struck the slopes below, jagged forks of electricity slicing down through the still air. She recalled that shadow on the horizon; somehow it had overtaken them, a churning storm front circling overhead. The lightning bolts descended from it, and where they struck Kiri saw a flash of gold, like a beacon in the darkness.

Horns blared and drums boomed as the Darkoath horde sprang into action. Swords and axes were hastily drawn, and she heard a mighty roar and groan as a hideous troll-like troggoth was unleashed from its cage, lumbering into the fray. Lightning struck again, and again, and she heard the clash of swords.

The scar-faced barbarian picked himself up, rubbing his jaw. Two of his fellows came lumbering in, gripping

steel clubs. Kiri raised her catapult, watching keenly as they circled closer.

Then a voice rang out in the valley, louder than any voice she'd ever heard or imagined. It was deep and resonant, shaking the very stones beneath her feet. Far down the slope a figure stood alone, gleaming gold in the darkness.

'In the name of Sigmar,' it proclaimed, and she saw the barbarians clutching their ears and staggering as though the sound itself was excruciating. 'Prepare to be destroyed.'

The slavers fell to their knees, wailing. Kiri drew herself up, the voice from the valley filling her with a kind of wild hope. She gritted her teeth and ran.

She headed back uphill, realising she had no idea where she was going. All around she could see her fellow slaves gazing in awe down the mountainside, their work forgotten.

Kellan ran towards her. His eyes were shining. 'The Army of Sigmar,' he said.

‘They’ve come to save us!’

But Kiri wasn’t sure it was that simple. Yes, Sigmar’s soldiers fought to restore order – her mother had told her all about the mighty king in his celestial realm of Azyr. His forces might break the barbarian lines; they might batter down these unfinished fortifications and claim whatever was inside. But the battle would be fierce, and anyone caught in the middle could expect no mercy.

‘We can’t stay here,’ she told Kellan. ‘My mother’s gone, she’s... We have to run, while there’s still time.’

But Kellan shook his head, crouching to pick up a large rock. ‘No, Kiri,’ he said. ‘We have to fight.’ He raised his fist defiantly, and looking around Kiri saw others doing the same.

‘For Sigmar!’ they shouted. ‘For Azyr!’

Kellan charged up the hillside, other slaves rallying to his call. Above them loomed the half-built keep, those hideous stone faces shifting in every

flash of lightning. Kiri started after him, then stopped herself. *Wait*, she thought, *I should be running away*. But somehow, her feet didn't want to.

Hearing shouts, she saw the three slavers moving to cut her off, their boots gripping the scree. She ducked under the wooden scaffold at the base of the wall, where a heap of loose boulders lay waiting to be lifted into position. Crouching, she tugged out the wooden pikes that held the rock pile in place, giving the uppermost boulder a hard shove. The rocks rolled free and tumbled down the slope, the barbarians scrambling desperately out of the way.

Then she heard a crash, and a loud creak. One of the rocks had slammed into the base of the scaffold, jarring it. Slaves peered over the edge. The scaffold groaned as another boulder struck it.

'Jump!' Kiri shouted, crouching in the shelter of a huge flat stone as the scaffold began to fall. She saw men

leaping to safety as the entire structure collapsed, the outer wall slumping as its support weakened. The stone beast-heads toppled, snarling mouths biting sand as they hit the ground and rolled, the great fortification sliding in pieces down the mountainside.

A cheer went up, and as the dust cleared Kiri saw men and women grabbing stones and wooden stakes. More slavers charged in but their captives fought back, overwhelming the barbarians through sheer force of numbers. Whips cracked and fists flew, and any sense of order disintegrated.

Kiri scrambled over the wreckage of the outer wall, moving deeper into the half-built stronghold. She had no idea where she was going. Or did she? It was as though a voice were calling to her; she couldn't hear it but she knew what it was saying. She'd never felt anything so strange.

She dropped into what would've been the courtyard, an open space between

the outer wall and the keep itself. An archway opened ahead of her, a black mouth leading deeper into the fortress. Around the entrance foul signs and symbols had been carved, seeming to shift and writhe beneath her gaze. She shuddered. But that was where the voice, or the feeling, was telling her to go.

Shouts erupted as groups of slaves came bounding over the wall, running to join their fellows inside the courtyard. She saw Kellan among them, handing out pikes and swords taken from fallen slavers. Then the ground began to shake, a deep drumming emerging from the tunnel. One by one they turned to the archway.

The barbarians charged into the courtyard three abreast, their faces leering in the dusty light. Their swords were notched, their armour clattering with skulls and sigils. Their warhounds sprang forwards, attacking without mercy, driving the slaves back. Kiri saw

blood on the stones. The battle would be a short one.

She looked up at the dark doorway. The way was blocked with tumbling bodies, but the urge to enter was somehow stronger than her fear. She started forwards.

The first barbarian who came at her went down easily – one catapult shot between the eyes and he dropped, shouting. The next took her by surprise, but she spun and pushed him into a group of armed slaves, who swiftly overwhelmed him. The archway was close now. She was going to make it.

Then five more figures emerged from the darkness and her heart sank. Kiri raised her catapult but there were too many, their whips and blades lashing closer. She dodged back and their lunges missed; she ducked and their whips snapped overhead. But she was surrounded on all sides – there was no way out.

There was a roar of thunder. The

ground shook. Her attackers froze, staring up into the sky.

The eye of the storm was directly overhead, the darkness whirling as the wind raged. Stones rattled from the high walls of the keep, slamming into the courtyard. The very air felt charged.

Lightning struck the courtyard, a bolt of pure white shattering the flagstones. Kiri rubbed her eyes, the flash imprinted on her lids. When she looked again a figure stood there, face masked, golden armour rippling in the light. It



was a man; his sword was drawn, his blue cloak whipping in the wind.

Kiri gasped. A Stormcast Eternal. She'd heard tales of their bravery all her life, but never expected to come face-to-face with one. Sigmar's fiercest warriors rode the lightning into the heart of battle, wherever their strength was needed most. Their helms were spiked with a golden crown and their shields bore the symbol of Ghal Maraz, the fabled hammer of King Sigmar himself. Kiri grinned. These barbarians wouldn't stand a chance.

Lightning struck again, and again. Two more figures appeared in the courtyard, then two more, and two more. Slaves and masters alike stared in wonder as Sigmar's warriors took their battle stance, marching in lockstep across the bloody courtyard. The barbarians roared and charged. Kiri couldn't tear her eyes away.

Then she felt a sudden pain and grabbed her wrist. Her birthmark was

on fire, as though her skin had been branded. And in that moment she knew: this was the source of the voice inside her. The mark had been guiding her, leading her on, and it couldn't stand to wait.

She fled through the archway into a broad, unlit tunnel, trying not to look at the twisted inhuman figures hewn into the walls on either side. The cries of slavers rang in her ears as she ran, entering a large round room of bare rock, the roof open to the sky. Ahead of her was a perfect circle of polished stone, around ten times her height. Looking into that dark frame she could see nothing but the far wall; it was just an empty ring, with pale runes carved upon it. Could this be what all these people had been trying, and dying, to protect?

She took a step closer. There, near the base of the circle, was a rune she recognised. It was the same symbol she bore, her birthmark tingling as she

approached. Energy crackled and inside the circle of black stone she could make out a faint red glow, a threaded web sewn into the empty air. She'd never seen a Realmgate before; at least, not that she could remember. But somehow she knew this was one. A portal into another world, awake and calling to her.

For a moment, she paused. What would await her when she stepped through? The gate could lead anywhere – to the Realm of Shadows, or Light, or Death or... yes, it might lead to Ghyran, the Realm of Life, where the city of Lifestone waited to welcome her home.

The stones of the citadel echoed with the din of battle. Lightning arced overhead, again and again, as more Stormcast Eternals joined the fray. Soon they would claim their prize; the Realmgate would be theirs, and she'd never know what lay on the other side. Balling her fists, she stepped closer.

Wisps of red energy darted towards her, and she felt the hairs on her skin stand upright.

Kiri took a breath. What was she waiting for?

She stepped into the circle, and vanished.

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