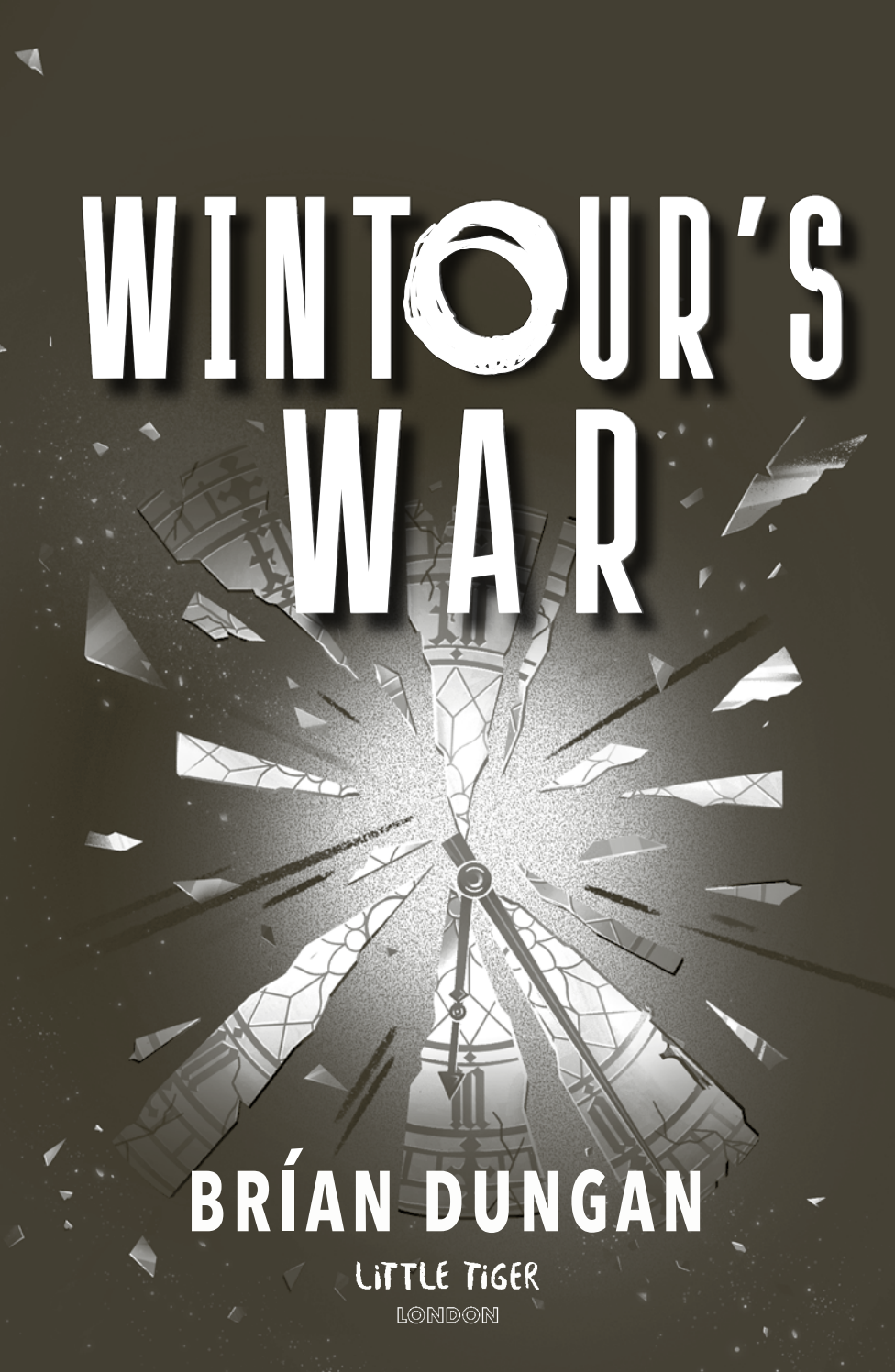


WINTOUR'S WAR



BRÍAN DUNGAN

LITTLE TIGER
LONDON

A collection of various geometric shapes, including triangles, squares, and polygons, scattered across the top half of the page. Some shapes are solid black, while others are white with black outlines. They appear to be floating or falling from the top edge.

1

WELCOME TO YOUR FUTURE

With the truck rattling noisily around her, it was hard for Alex to concentrate.

The Flow had never felt further away, and no matter how she circled her wrists or pulled at her ankles, the bonds around them refused to yield, and all she succeeded in doing was scoring deep red welts on her skin.

The last few hours had been a blur. The fight at Galloway Labs. Christine Mercer revealing herself as not only Alex's mother but also the High Priest; the architect of every misfortune that had recently befallen Alex and the Temporal world. And her 'friend' Cole's bitter betrayal, which had landed Alex in her current predicament.

But at least she wasn't alone in her misery. Although, given the company she was currently keeping, perhaps she would have been better off that way.

Across the narrow aisle, their knees practically touching, the Acolyte from Mexico City she knew only as Tia sat stoic and stony-faced, her eyes boring a hole in the wall, reminding Alex so much of Tia's brother Tana that she

almost smiled. Almost.

Next to Tia, Abdi and Diribe Al-Mahdi, the twin brother and sister Acolytes from Khartoum, exchanged silent, searching glances, wordlessly communicating with a subtle nod or a raised eyebrow.

Further along the same bench Alex occupied was nine-year-old Irena Andreyevna, from the Moscow Temple. The young girl had folded in on herself, looking for all the world like a catatonic war child, abandoned and lost. But Alex resisted any urge towards pity. She knew what the kid was capable of.

Every other available space in the rear of the vehicle was taken up by Deicidium soldiers. Black clad, blank masked and armed to the teeth, they sat like coiled cobras, watchful and wary, fingers hovering over their triggers, just waiting for the excuse to engage.

More worrying than all of this, however, more worrying than the bonds around Alex's limbs, more worrying than the fingers resting on triggers, more worrying than the barely contained loathing in the eyes of the Acolytes when they glanced towards her, were the collars around each of their necks.

Two dull chrome bands lined with stunningly ineffective cushioning were hinged at the back and connected at the front, a small screen displaying a number and a green light.

It was these bands, Alex supposed, that were cutting them off from the Flow, in the same way the cuffs she'd seen Abdi and Diribe using had done. But there was something so much more dehumanising in being collared like an animal than having your wrists bound.

The truck rattled again and dipped downward, but Alex's

bonds fastened her magnetically to the wall behind her, so as the soldiers around them swayed, she and her fellow inmates remained fixed rigidly to the hull.

Where they were being taken remained a mystery, and Alex silently scolded herself for not trying to look further ahead on her last trip into the Volume. Her entire future had been laid out before her in the vast expanse but, as was so often the case, only what lay dead ahead of her had held any immediate interest, and so only that had got her attention.

The words of Colman Reece bubbled back up, popping bitterly in her mind.

“At least think about your next step before you go cartwheeling blindly into it like you do everything else,” he’d said, and unwilling though she was to give the treacherous snake any credit, if she’d heeded his advice, he would never have got the drop on her, and she wouldn’t be here now.

The irony wasn’t lost on her that having trusted no one for years, it was only by shedding her armour and allowing herself to hope, that she’d made herself vulnerable.

It was an error of judgement she would not be repeating.

A metallic clang rang throughout the truck as the massive tyres rolled over a grate, and there was a palpable shift in their armed escort. Clearly they were nearing the end of their journey. In the anticipatory hush, Alex rolled her jaw, feeling the air pressure pop in her ears as she did so.

We’re underground, she thought. *Deep* underground.

Glancing round at the others in fellowship, she was met with averted eyes. If she’d been entertaining some notion that they were all Temporals in this together, she was left in no doubt that she was very much on her own.

Fine, she decided with a mental shrug, that's just the way she liked it.

The truck shuddered, rolling to a whining stop, and the back doors were flung open from outside, where two more heavily equipped soldiers were waiting for them. Alex felt the magnetic connection to her bonds disengage as she was hauled to her feet and corralled, shuffling against her bound ankles towards the back of the truck, a harsh, penal light bathing the occupants of its murky innards.

"Whoa, wait a second," she said to the faceless guard behind her. "This isn't the day spa."

Tia, walking one step ahead of her, rounded on Alex, her eyes flashing dangerously despite their bonds. "Do all of us a favour, *chica*. Keep your big mouth *shut*!"

Message received, Alex clamped her jaw tight and followed the others mutely out of the truck into the dank subterranean air.

Emptied out into a loading bay of dull, dripping concrete and glaring phosphorescent lights, Alex and the Acolytes were herded, blinking and in single file. They were buzzed through a security gate, then led between high, razor-wire, chain-link fences towards a disconcertingly large steel door.

As they approached, a klaxon sounded and a red warning light spun ominously above it, the door peeling open with a disconcerting *ssssssuuuuuuccckk*, as if breaking an airtight seal. A ruby-red ray of light spilt out at their feet before bathing their faces, casting everything that came after in a hellish glow.

Alex would soon learn why.

The door closed shut behind them, followed by a snakelike hiss as it sealed itself, and they were led through

a narrow tunnel by their faceless Deicidium escort.

Just up ahead, Alex could see the passage's slim exit burning a bright, malignant red. Instinct told her to turn and run, that nothing good lay that way, and that once she'd been ejected into whatever world awaited her there, there would be no going back.

Finally emerging out of the tunnel only confirmed her worst fears.

The space they were led into was vast and unlike anything Alex had ever seen. But there was absolutely no doubt it was a prison.

With the same infernal red glow bathing every surface of dull grey concrete, it was cylindrical in shape, fifty metres wide and perhaps a hundred metres in height. The enormous tube towered over them, terminating in a massive, embedded propellor that rotated, impossibly out of reach, in the ceiling above.

The fan's steady thrum provided some small comfort, but its rhythm would be of little use to her, she thought, tugging at the collar around her neck.

The arched, barred doorways of cells leered out into the chamber's open core, leaving their occupants at the mercy of whatever conditions existed outside, and fully on display at all times. With a dozen floors and twenty cells to a floor, the grinning archways ringed the walls all the way up, a criss-cross network of gantries, railings and stairways allowing access between them.

Many of the stairways and balconies were currently occupied by jumpsuited prisoners that shambled quietly, hopelessly along them. And it was easy to see why hope might be in short supply.

In the centre of the ground floor a communal collection of circular tables and stools were fixed rigidly to the floor, and Alex and the Acolytes were led towards them, forced to sit after their hands and ankles were cut loose. Their payload delivered, the guards simply trooped away, leaving the new inmates sitting alone, unattended and in awkward silence at a small table each. Only Abdi and Diribe remained in each other's company.

Taking in what was apparently to be their new home, no one broke the hush, and Alex knew they were all doing the same thing she was; mutely appraising it for weaknesses. On the surface at least, there didn't appear to be any, but something would show up eventually. It always did.

Until then, there were some questions that needed answering.

"OK, I'll go first," she said finally. "Where the hell are w—"

"Ah, *perra*, I told you shut up, *güey!*" snapped Tia, rounding on her once more before nodding sharply at the balcony above them.

Alex bristled but glanced upward before responding. At first, she thought Tia was gesturing towards the guards patrolling the level above, and she was about to scoff that they were well out of earshot, when she spotted what she was really pointing out: cameras.

They were everywhere.

And if they could be seen, she figured as Tia clearly had, then they could be heard. So, clamping her mouth shut again, Alex descended into a dutifully sullen silence along with the rest of them.

Stripped of any way of telling the time, it was impossible

to know how long they sat there, watching the other inmates prowling along the walkways high above as if circling a drain. Alex wondered who they were. The likely answer came quickly: the Disappeared.

Temporals had been vanishing without a trace for months. Most had feared them lost forever, and watching their dejected shuffling, Alex thought they just might be.

But where were they? And why were they being held here?

Cole had believed that the Temple was behind the disappearances, when in fact it was something far more insidious. If you wished to defeat an enemy, it helped to understand it, and Alex shuddered, eying those cameras again, suddenly feeling like she'd been slid under a microscope for inspection.

The sound of clipped boot heels striding towards them drew her attention and she turned to find a familiar form approaching out of the shadows. Lieutenant Myles Guider materialised, wearing the determinedly smug expression of a man who knew he'd already won the war.

"Ladies. Gentlemen. Brats," he said with a humourless smile. "Welcome to Hell."



2

HELL'S DENIZENS

Despite their lack of constraints, Guiders strode into their midst without even the slightest trace of apprehension.

Easy to be fearless, Alex thought, glancing at the balcony above them, with a dozen guns trained on those around you.

Standing at ease, or as at ease as his strict military bearing would allow, Guider surveyed his new arrivals, and seeing him up close for the first time, Alex surveyed him right back.

He was army through and through. Clearly a lifer. His jet-black fatigues were neatly pressed, sleeves rolled sharply to the elbows, his boots gleamed and his moustache and fair hair were trimmed almost into non-existence. Everything about him, she imagined, was rigidly compartmentalised. Shipshape and neatly stowed, everything had a place. And hers and that of her fellow Temporals was in a box stamped 'Enemy Combatants'.

Men, women, children. She could see in Guider's eyes that he made no differentiation between them.

The Temporal world would bring chaos and disorder into his own, and that was something that the lieutenant simply could not allow.

But she'd heard him on that call the day before, when she and Cole had been hiding from him at the Bygone. He didn't think much of his superiors. And any chink in the armour of someone like Guider would be worth prying open.

"You are now guests of His Majesty the King," Guider said at last, his hand clasped firmly behind his back, his sharp eyes roving from one fresh inmate to the next. "And you will remain so at his pleasure. Unfortunately for you, he has no idea you are here. So I suggest you get comfortable."

Whether this was meant to be a joke Alex couldn't be sure, as Guider's smile had vanished.

"In point of fact," he continued, "no one knows where you are. And fewer care. The Geneva Convention holds no sway in Hell, so as of this moment, you have no rights to speak of. You. Are. *Mine*."

While he let that sink in, Guider scanned the faces of the gathered Acolytes, and Alex didn't need to look to know what he was finding there. She could feel it in her own hardening expression: resistance.

He smirked.

"I know what you're all thinking," Guider went on. "This place can't hold *me*. You're among the most powerful Temporals in the world! Wolves among sheep. Gods among men. Well, I have news for you: down here you have no power. The Deicidium has been watching you for some time now, and this facility is the first, though

I daresay not the last, of its kind in the world. A custom-built Temporal prison. It was designed with one purpose in mind: to contain people. Just. Like. You.”

Alex caught Tia’s eye and though the Acolyte quickly averted her gaze, she glimpsed something in it that she hadn’t seen there before: uncertainty.

“Time,” explained Guider, warming to his theme, “your little plaything, does not exist here. There is no day. There is no night. There is no routine. No ticking clocks for Oracles to latch on to. No tethers to surf the Flow. No lights on. No lights out. And everything from guard rotation to mealtimes will be completely at random.”

“The collars you are wearing,” he said, pulling hard at Diribe’s until she growled at him and he let go with a callous smirk, “act as location trackers as well as Temporal Inhibitors, so that you can be located anywhere inside or outside the facility. Not that you’ll be going outside again. Ever.”

Keeping his hands clasped behind him, Guider moved casually between them, and with her wrists and ankles unbound, Alex thought about jumping him and wiping that bloody smirk off his face. But there were a dozen reasons aimed at their heads not to, so, like the others, she had to simply grin and bear Guider’s peacocking power play.

“In the unlikely event of a breach,” he said, “we have contingencies in place. And believe me when I say that to question their efficiency would be ... foolish. So, it’s rather in everyone’s interest to dissuade any notions of flight. Not only is your failure guaranteed, but the price of that failure will be paid by *all*. Do I make myself clear?”

Alex didn’t imagine Guider expected a response and he was not disappointed.

“For those Oracles among you who are trying to project to see how long this nightmare will last, let me save you the trouble. This is it. Welcome to your future. We didn’t call this place Hell for nothing. Hell was good enough to hold Satan. And believe me when I say it can hold you.”

Alex had had enough of this, and she raised her hand, aware that all eyes were suddenly upon her rather than Guider. A fact not lost on the lieutenant who bristled momentarily before clearing his throat.

“Yes, Ms Wintour? You have something to add?”

“Nice speech,” she said. “But I don’t buy it. Come on, who’d you piss off to get buried down here with us, *Myles*?”

She heard the low moans from the others, but ignored them as Guider stopped right in front of her, and Alex tilted her chin to meet her captor’s simmering glower with cool detachment.

“Oh, make no mistake,” he sneered, “I *requested* this detail, and I am very much in charge. The Deicidium is *my* unit. You are in *my* facility. And it will be my absolute pleasure to bring about an end to people like *you*.”

Leaning in close until they were eyeball to eyeball, Guider made sure he had Alex’s undivided attention.

“We don’t call ourselves Godkillers for nothing, *Chronolith*.”



Guider wasn’t joking. Led to an individual cell on the third floor, Alex quickly discovered why they’d named the place the way they had.

Furnished with cool blue prison pyjamas and inflexible,

thick-soled shoes, she had barely sat down inside her new home before she was ushered back out through the arched grille of her cell door and ordered to troop along the stairs and gantries with the other detainees.

What she hadn't appreciated from below was that the helix of criss-crossing metalwork was actually a peripheral loop, and once you started upon it, it was easy to quickly lose all track of where and perhaps more importantly *when* you were.

The purpose of this endless traipsing wasn't apparent to Alex until the end of her first shift. She had no idea how long she'd been at it, but upon being plucked apparently at random from the line and ordered back to her cell, she collapsed on her bunk, falling instantly into an inky, dreamless sleep.

When a klaxon sounded to rouse her again, she had no notion of whether she'd slept for minutes or hours. But it didn't matter to her jailers, who had her back on her feet and returned to the endless circuit before she could wipe the sleep out of her eyes.

None of the other inmates spoke to Alex. At first, she assumed that word of the Chronolith's presence had somehow got out. Over time, however, or whatever passed for time in this godawful place, she noticed that interaction of any kind was shunned among the general population. That creeping feeling of being held under a microscope returned, and she remembered that not only were they prisoners here, they were test subjects as well. Every word spoken, every gesture or signal exchanged was being monitored and pored over, anything to give the Deicidium a greater understanding of their prey.

If this was all they'd been doing since they got here, it was easy to see why everyone was so dejected. Who needed guards when your prisoners were so exhausted and bored that they could barely raise a finger, let alone a fist?

After only two episodes of hiking the prison's walls, Alex was nearly ready to throw in the towel herself.

The only respite in this gruelling regimen came at mealtimes, which were taken, at the sound of a gong, in the communal area on the ground floor where Guider had given his welcome speech.

All prisoners were required to attend, and despite the self-imposed rule about not talking, it was the one time when the babble rose to a level where it could at least be heard over the tidal shushing of their endlessly shuffling feet.

When Alex had first arrived, and it was already impossible to gauge when that might have been, the numbers at mealtimes were fifty-six. She'd counted them gathered together on that first day, and while it was perhaps grasping at straws, she'd tried to keep her brain active by continuing to assess their growing number every time they were collected in one place.

Even in the reasonably short space of time she reckoned she'd been an inmate in Hell, their numbers had grown at a worrying rate, almost doubling to one hundred and four. Proof, if it were needed, that Guider's campaign against the Temporal world was continuing at a pace on the outside.

Alex spent most of these communal mealtimes alone. Despite hunting the throng for a friendly or even familiar face, it was with a mixture of relief and growing loneliness that the only ones she recognised were those of the Acolytes,

who largely kept to themselves. And though space was at a premium and six could sit comfortably around one of the circular tables, Alex would often see others standing rather than sit next to her, as if she was contagious.

On the rare occasions when someone did, the No Interaction rule was strictly enforced, and beyond an eviscerating glance or the occasional growl, Alex was left to her own devices by inmates and guards alike.

Before now, it would not have taken Alex long to turn an oversight like that to her advantage. This place, however, was already getting its mind-numbing hooks into her and each time she returned alone to her cell after another solitary meal break, or a monotonous tread along the prison's infrastructure, all she wanted to do was sleep.

As her eyes closed though, even dreams of escape were pushed further and further away and she felt helplessness creeping in.

Alex didn't want to admit it, but maybe there really was no way out of the Hell she'd found herself in.