

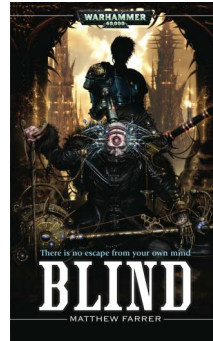
# ***BLIND***

*The third Shira Calpurnia novel*

*By Matt Farrer*

*Matthew Farrer once again brings his dazzling talent to bear on the Shira Calpurnia series. The fast-paced, intelligent action takes place in the great Imperial fortress system of Hydraphur, where Adeptus Arbites officer Shira Calpurnia enforces the law.*

*Now she is investigating the murder of a blind astropath – psychic humans who use their gifts to communicate across the vast reaches of the galaxy – and she fears that the killer will strike again.*



## **About the Author**

Matthew Farrer lives in Australia, and is a member of the Canberra Speculative Fiction Guild. He has been writing since his teens, and has a number of novels and short stories to his name, including the popular Shira Calpurnia novels for the Black Library.

• **IN THE SAME SERIES** •

**CROSSFIRE**

**LEGACY**

The following is an excerpt from *Blind* by Matt Farrer.  
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IN THE SUB-EQUATORIAL deserts of Kleizen Onjere (Shira Calpurnia read from the data-slate), the planet's millennia-old soil conditioning has decayed beyond the inhabitants' ability to restore it. The water table has sunk too low and the earth has broken back down to abrasive orange gravel. At the long day's peak, the desert sweats out pockets of subsurface air, loaded with chemical compounds that sting the eyes and bring rashes to the skin, while bacteria inflame any cut or abrasion. The only refuges are the chains of steep-sided mesas that stand high enough to be clear of the sand-vapour until it cools and sinks away again in the dusk.

The Adeptus arbiters, whose polar training compounds and orbital docks make Kleizen Onjere a nexus point for fleet movements across three sectors, also keep watchtowers across the mesa chains. Moving between them are the convicts, disgraced and sentenced officers of the Adeptus, trekking across the sand barefoot and in coarse prisoners' clothes. They each pull behind them a metal frame that supports a banner-pole, from which hang parchment lists of the convicts' crimes, the dates and particulars of their convictions, the seal of the judge who passed sentence, and the stamps of the chasteners who mete out penal labours or floggings as their particular punishment demands.

The crimes that brought this sentence were light ones, all things considered. Calpurnia was aware of this before the scrolling text pointed it out to her. Low-level incompetence in their duties, perhaps, or a speech that a judge had ruled might lead to sedition. It could be impiety, laziness, freethinking, or any of the myriad ways

of putting the Emperor behind their personal welfare that the penal codes sum up as ‘thoughts of self’.

Whatever the crime, their convictions were judged not to outweigh their ranks, or whatever commendations, ordinations or charters of merit their service might have earned. If there was any question of those weights being equal, the dusty, gasping figure in front of its carriage would be marching into the maw of battle in a Penal Legion uniform, or lying in a red pool in front of an Arbites firing squad. No, the men in the desert were petty criminals.

None of which, Shira Calpurnia decided, was of any real use to her. She rubbed her eyes, and grimaced at the cracking of her jaw when she yawned. As the screen of her slate went black, she slid the data-ark out of its groove, murmured a quick blessing to its anima and returned it to the rack on the cell wall.

Note-sheets lay on the little table in the centre of her cell, neatly stacked and sorted, and covered in annotations and corrections. She had to reposition them every hour or so; the vibration from the dromon’s engines was imperfectly damped and whatever she set on the table had a way of wandering imperceptibly if she left it unsecured. Soon after they had left the Incarcery, she had passed a restless evening before sleep prowling about the cell, all three-by-three metres of it, minus the space that the archive-racks, the sleeping pallet and the table took. She had pressed her hand to one wall and then another, trying to work out which way was the dromon’s stern by where the vibration was strongest. She hadn’t really been able to decide.

She sat down again and looked at the empty paper in front of her without really seeing it, twirling the stylus in her fingers, and wondering whether to write up a summary of the Kleizen Onjere material to look at later. No. It was interesting, certainly, even inspirational in a way: land that had become unusable for anything else becoming, by the Emperor’s grace, useful for a just and moral purpose.

She was also struck by the nature of the punishment itself: it resembled one of the heavily symbolic and ritualised retributions of

the Adeptus Ministorum, rather than the stern and pragmatic punishments handed out by the Arbites. Back on Hydraphur, she might have chased that thought down, traced the development of the desert as a place of punishment, and studied how Ecclesiarchal customs had blended with the rigid Arbites penal laws. She could debate it with Nestor Leandro at one of the formal commanders' banquets, or delegate Culann or Umyr to research and declaim on it; the experience would be good for—

That way, bad thoughts lay. She suppressed them. It simply wasn't much use to her now; that was all. It was a curiosity of a penal world almost a whole segmentum away, and nothing more. She had to concentrate.

She had to prepare for her own trial.

SHE JUMPED AT A booming blow to the cell door. It was not the first time she had heard it, not even the hundredth, but of course it was calculated to startle and unnerve her. Her notes were full of blots and accidental pen-strokes where she had been startled, mid-word.

She had a moment to brace herself between the blow and the bell-toll from behind the vox-grilles in the other walls. The deafening voice of a bell brought its own bad memories. By the time the sound had died away, she was kneeling in what little free space there was in the cell's middle, as law dictated.

The door rumbled open, but she kept her eyes ahead, drill-ground steady, as the two men walked in. The master chastener raised his staff, brought its metal foot down on the deck with a crash, and the door slid shut. There was silence for the mandated count of eight seconds, and then the two took up their second positions and the staff crashed into the deck again.

Calpurnia's rank allowed her to watch this. More junior arbitors would have had to fall to both knees with heads bowed, or prostrate themselves on the cold metal with the foot of the staff hitting the deck beside their ears. As arbitor senioris, Calpurnia was permitted to remain on one knee, head erect and shoulders back, and look her chastener in the eye.

Deferring to that same rule, Dast removed his helmet and set it on the table, staring at her over his broken nose and the thick brown beard he had dyed in vertical bands of black to mimic his master chastener's livery. The fingers that gripped his staff were bright steel augmetics.

Calpurnia kept her eyes on Dast's faded blue ones. Preacher Orovene stood on her right side, four paces away. Calpurnia didn't look at him. The garrison preacher wore a gold-embroidered red sash over his Arbites uniform, and looped around his neck, a narrow strand of parchment with the complete text of the First Lawgiver's Psalm written upon it. As usual, the preacher smelled faintly of lho-smoke.

The staff crashed into the floor again. Calpurnia did not flinch.

'Declare to the Arbites your name.'

'Shira Calpurnia Lucina.' She had been through enough self-denunciation sessions that she no longer had to stop herself from reciting her rank. It had been a close thing, those first few times.

The staff crashed.

'Declare to the Arbites the Emperor's accusations against you.'

'The Immortal Emperor does accuse me, through the vigilance and wisdom of His chosen Adeptus, of the crime of failure in my charged and chartered duties.'

*Crash.*

'Declare to the Arbites the nature of your failure.'

'By the just and benevolent will of Him on Earth, I bore the office and the duties of arbitor senioris in the service of the Lex Imperia. My duty and my orders, given to me in the name of the law by my Emperor-chosen superiors, were to preside and judge on the inheritance of an Imperial Charter. The hearing failed.'

She had been through this many times. Her words no longer caught in her throat when she said them. She liked to tell herself that this was because she had come to terms with what she was saying, and not because she had numbed herself to it. She went on:

'The hearing failed. I was overconfident and I was careless. I failed to plan and I failed to enforce. On Selena Secundus, the very

Court of the Arbites broke in bloodshed and mutiny. It succeeded because of my failure. The Battlefleet Pacificus and the Adeptus Ministorum witnessed it, and the law was diminished before them, because of my failure. The Charter was lost and its Emperor-chosen succession ended, because of my failure. Loyal and pious Arbites had their lives ended because of my failure.'

In some of the sessions, she had been required to list their names and ranks, but Dast did not command that of her today. She was glad when she didn't have to name the Arbites who had died at Selena Secundus.

*Crash.*

'Declare to the Arbites the nature of your weakness.' Calpurnia took a breath.

'I declare myself weak in vigilance, weak in resolve and weak in sternness. That I was not vigilant against the treachery and mutiny of the heirs, blinded by the mask of mourning and duty that they wore, shows my weakness in vigilance. That I was dismayed by the disorder and violence that overcame the hearing, and judged rashly and hastily, not allowing the law to speak through me, shows my weakness of resolve. That the lawbreakers and mutineers were brought to heel and stamped out by the Navy, where the fist of the Arbites should have been seen by all to crush them, shows my weakness in sternness.'

The careful formality of her words was her own choice; Dast had not ordered her to adopt any particular structure or phrasing when her imprisonment had begun. During her career, Calpurnia had attended many self-denunciation sessions, and had presided over more than a few. She had watched cold-eyed as many of the accused had slid into hysterics, into broken weeping at their own failure and disgrace, or into screamed denials that they had done wrong at all. 'None can truly know one's criminality, but for that criminal and Him on Earth,' Chastener Nkirre had told her once on Don-Croix. 'And so for criminals, self-denunciation before the law may be the one service their nature has left them fit to perform.' Calpurnia was proud of the dignity with which she performed that service. She

liked to tell herself that her pride had nothing to do with not letting Dast see her break down.

‘My weakness caused my failure. My failure is my crime before the law of the Imperium, and in the sight of the Immortal Emperor.’  
*Crash.*

‘Declare to the Arbiters what punishment you will accept for the crime of failure, and for the sin of incompetence.’

‘I will accept the verdict and the punishment brought forth from the magisterium of the Lex Imperia, and the judgement of the Adeptus Arbiters,’ Calpurnia replied. ‘It is not my appointed place to accept anything else.’

That last line was one that she had not used before, but it had come to her earlier that day while she was reading trial histories from the *Clementia Pacification*. She was pleased she had thought of it. She liked to tell herself that it had nothing to do with being a step ahead of Dast in the details of her punishments and self-denunciations.

She remained on one knee with her head high, carefully keeping defiance out of her face – this was for her own good, after all. Dast and Orovene stood over her, impassive as statues, for twenty silent breaths. Then Dast lifted his staff, held it across his body and turned to the door. The lock clanked as the junior chastener watching them through the internal opticon array worked his controls, and then both men were gone in a clamour of boots on metal decking and a last lingering whiff of lho-ash. Calpurnia met the black-visored gaze of the arbitrator stationed across from her cell entrance, shotgun at arms, for the few seconds more until the door swung shut and locked.

She remained on one knee for a few more moments: leaping straight up and getting back to work would, she thought, show disrespect for the self-denunciation and its objectives. Sometimes, when the sessions came close together, she was barely starting to get up when Dast and Orovene came marching straight back in. Sometimes, when they sprang a session on her in the middle of the sleep shift, she found she stayed kneeling for many minutes longer,

floating back into drowsiness, before she could stir herself to lie back down on her pallet. When she had been surprised with a session in the middle of one of her exercise bouts, she could feel her body shaking with the strain of holding the position so soon after she had worked it close to exhaustion.

There was an art to timing self-denunciations, spacing them out over days or packing many of them into half an hour, never letting the accused know how long they must wait before they were forced to survey their crimes again, nor how long each denunciation would last. The techniques had been developed and honed by hundreds of generations of chasteners, and Calpurnia didn't waste any effort on trying to second-guess Dast's schedule. She stood up, bowed briefly to the aquila on the wall over her pallet, sat down at her table and went back to work.

THERE HAD BEEN many times, in the little spaceborne Incarcerary on the Hydraphur's very outer fringes, that Calpurnia had almost forgotten that she was a prisoner at all. She was on her way back into the heart of the system in the dromon system-runner that held her current cell, and it was harder to forget. Her trial was a matter of weeks away, and the thought of it bearing down on her had sharpened her mind and brought a constant tension to her emotions that she was reluctant to admit to herself.

On good days, she could still lose herself in the reams of data-arks and legal codices, the miniature library that she had been entitled to bring from the Incarcerary to prepare herself. Hours would pass when she sat alone over the table, oblivious to the tiny sounds of her breathing and her stylus, and to the distant rumble of the ship's machinery.

Those times helped the memories of Selena Secundus to slip from her mind, and the shadowy dread of her own coming trial lifted a little. She might have been back at the senior inductees' barracks at Machiun, scratching away at one of the rote-tests that every recruit had to pass. She might have been back in one of the great Adeptus libraries on Ephaeda, Ephaeda with its sober, courtly



ordinates and priests, and its city-spanning archive banks stocked with the finest wisdom and thoughts in three Segmentae.

Those moods were wonderful when they came, and that was why she worked to resist them, and felt a sharp steel pride in her gut when she did so. She might never be recorded as one of the great Arbites of Hydraphur, her rulings quoted and her wars of enforcement studied by other young recruits from here to the segmentum borders. She might never (and this was a bitter thought to her, more bitter than the first) enter her family annals at Ultramar, her likeness put up in the hearth-house on Iax as an example for future women of the Calpurnii in how to uphold the proud family name.

She was damned, however, if she was going to consider her duty over, simply because her career might be. Duty is not a word coined in idleness, she had written down the margin of her notes, deep in one particularly sleepless night, duty being the first grace the Emperor extends to the newborn, and the last connection with Him to comfort the dying, and so the forsaking of it is damnation in evident form. Her duty had been to be a strong child of the Calpurnii, and she had upheld it. Then it had been to be a stern and loyal arbitor of the Adeptus, and she had upheld that... until she could uphold it no longer and failure caught up with her.

If she must be a prisoner and a convict, then she would do her duty, as it was expected of a prisoner and a convict. She would not allow herself to forget why she was here. She would meet every demand of the chasteners, answer strongly and clearly through every self-denunciation, be it a session of a few minutes or twelve hours. She would not seek favours or forgiveness from the law, and she would bow her head to the justice of Imperial punishment. If it were her fate to be a prisoner, then she would bring every scrap of her determination onto this goal: she would be a lesson, an example to the Arbites.

Arbites scholars would write, and instructors would declaim, that if any arbitor should find themselves wanting and face the charge of failure, that if they must bear the punishment of their order in their

own turn, then they should look to Shira Calpurnia Lucina, the former arbitor senioris of the High Precinct of Hydraphur. Calpurnia who saw her duty through, whose service to the law did not flinch even as she saw the judgement of law served upon herself, even as she—

She did not weep. She had promised herself that she would not weep. The ink dried unnoticed on her notes, her breath hissed, the stylus shook in her fist and began to crack between her fingers, but her expression did not change and she did not weep.

SHE HAD NO way of measuring time, but she guessed it would be hours before the next staff-blow sounded against the cell door. She had forced herself through the remainder of the treatise on the punishment of erring Adeptus, forced herself through a set of exercises, and prayed before the aquila; that done, she had finally managed to start drifting towards sleep. Then the noise came. Adrenaline snapped her awake with a physical start that the strike on the door had not produced, and she sprang off her pallet and knelt in the middle of the floor without stumbling.

She tensed herself and narrowed her eyes ready for the bell-toll, secretly pleased that she had beaten it to her position even from being half-asleep, and it took her whole seconds to realise that the bell was not sounding. She blinked, her shoulders, already sore from her exercises, twinged as she tensed them. The same tension boiled her gut: was it concluded? She had not expected a summary execution, but she was an arbitrator, not a judge, there could so easily be a provision she was ignorant of that would allow it, and if Dvorov had decided to try her in absentia then—

Then she would meet her fate properly, she told herself, and willed her body to co-operate.

The door clanked open. As always, it was Dast and Orovene — but this time they were different. Dast still carried his staff, but he wore an austere duty uniform and was helmetless. Orovene was in plain uniform, a preacher's red-trimmed white collar, epaulette and

shawl over arbitrator black. He was twirling an unlit lho-stick in his fingers.

‘Calpurnia,’ Dast said without ceremony. He picked up the chair from behind her little table, clattered it to the deck in front of her, and straddled it, facing her. He gave a tilt of his chin, pointing behind her.

Calpurnia remained on one knee, looking up expressionlessly. They stared at one another for a few moments.

‘She’s waiting for an order, Dast. You’re going to have to face up to talking to her sooner or later.’ The garrison preacher’s voice was smooth and trained, showing only the faintest of rough edges from the lho-smoke.

‘Hm.’ Dast let the grunt stand as his reply for a few moments more, and then pointed his staff over Calpurnia’s shoulder. ‘Sit, Calpurnia. This isn’t a denunciation. It’s not part of any kind of regular procedure.’ The distaste in that last sentence dripped from his voice.

Slowly, carefully, Calpurnia rose, backed up to her pallet, and sat down. Dast was staring over at the neat arrangement of her note-sheets on the table. She had the impression that he was enjoying the effort of reading her writing upside-down more than he was enjoying having to talk to her.

Orovene broke the ice.

‘How far are you through preparing a defence, Calpurnia?’ Dast liked to glare and scowl, but Orovene’s face never betrayed much at all.

‘With another ten hours’ total time,’ she answered with a confidence she wasn’t sure she felt, ‘I should have integrated all the basic precepts into my case. The overall shape of my argument hasn’t changed much from my initial premises, but there are rulings and precedents from courts in this segmentum that I’ve had to familiarise myself with.’ She went over Orovene’s words again. ‘My case will be a true witness against myself, presenting my failures as seen through the eyes of the law, so that both my strengths and weaknesses can be found wanting. The voice of accusation is the

voice of the Emperor made concrete through law. It is not for me to “defend” anything.’

‘Good.’ Orovene nodded. ‘Pious, and sound at law. Thank you.’ He glanced at Dast again, but the chastener stayed silent.

‘You will not be prevented from completing your studies before your trial,’ Orovene went on. ‘So don’t concern yourself with being denied what you’re owed by process. You will be interrupted, however. We have an—’ he thought for a moment, ‘an irregularity. Better you hear it from the master chastener.’

Dast scowled at the table for a moment longer, glanced at Orovene, and finally swung his head around to Calpurnia, lips tight.

‘We’re not going to Hydraphur,’ he said, and caught himself. ‘We’re not going directly to Hydraphur. Your trial has been deferred. We’ve all got a duty to attend to before we go any further in-system.’

She sat and waited for his next words. The silence was long enough for her to notice, and wonder. Once she would have been impatient to know more, and would have tried to begin a conversation about the news.

Had all the time in the cell rusted her grip on any words apart from self-denunciation? She knew enough about chastener work to know that that was often the point of it.

‘This isn’t about you, Calpurnia, so don’t think it is. You’re useful, that’s all, and so I’m putting you to use as we all do our duty.’ Dast stopped to think then snorted and kicked the table leg. One note-sheet skated off the edge and slid back and forth through the air until it rested on the floor.

‘You’ll have your rank back, Calpurnia, but don’t get too attached to it. It’s not permanent. This is a brevet, nothing more. It’s not a complete one, either, so don’t start giving me orders.’

Something inside her clicked and lit up, and suddenly it was an effort to keep control of her expression.

‘We’re being diverted,’ Dast went on. ‘The orders came from the Wall, and the Incarcerary pilots have passed on a course correction to

us. I've given orders for adjustment and burn. We'll be on our new heading in half a day.'

'I know the basic principles of law at work here, master chastener,' Calpurnia said, 'but I don't yet know the reason. If we're being diverted from a course bound into the system then it means that we're staying out on the fringes, and that means shipboard action or Navy installations. I'm trying to think of an example of either that would cause trouble enough for an Ar- for an accused to have their trial postponed because only they could properly do an arbitor's duty there. Are we on our way to a mutiny, a xenos quarantine...?' She tailed her voice off deferentially, but a little late. The old command was creeping back into it, and there had been a shift in balance, small, but a shift between the three of them nevertheless.

Dast and Orovene had both picked up on it too. Orovene was eyeing Dast, waiting for his reaction.

Dast's reaction was to stand and kick the chair over. It hit the table and, one of Calpurnia's books thudded to the deck, a slew of note-sheets falling after it like a shower of petals.

'Not Navy,' he told her. 'Adeptus Astra Telepathica. Were being diverted into the path of the Witchroost, and we'll dock with it when we rendezvous in three days' time. There will be more personnel on the way, but we'll be arriving there for the moment with nothing, and no more than the personnel on this craft, including you, Calpurnia. You're there as a figurehead. You've got until rendezvous minus four hours to get yourself ready and prepare your uniform. One of the arbitrators will escort you to the cargo racks. I'm sure you can get yourself cleaned up without assistance.'

'I'm sure I can. Master chastener, why are we docking at the Bastion Psykana?' Mindful of his talk of rank, she carefully avoided belabouring her use of the correct name.

Dast was already banging his staff on the door. Over the noise of the locks and the opening mechanisms, Orovene told her, 'A crime against the Adeptus, Calpurnia. It is a matter of law. Someone has

murdered the Master of the Bastion Psykana. We're going to go aboard and find someone who can tell us who it was.'

*Blind* can be purchased in all better bookstores, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, or direct from this website and GW mail order.

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