

**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

**DANIE WARE**  
**FORSAKEN**

**AN ADEPTA SORORITAS STORY**

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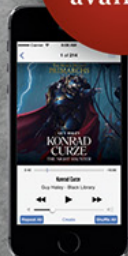
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# **FORSAKEN**

**By Danie Ware**

The great ship groaned.

She hung in the void like a thing dead: a steel shell, gutted and creaking. No life stirred upon her gantries or gunnery decks, no figures knelt within her silent chapel.

Her levels were dark, her lumens exhausted.

And yet, somewhere in her cavernous depths, there glimmered suitlights. Six shifting circles of pale visibility shone out like search beams, glittering from the frost-cold steel of the walls.

A squad of armoured warriors followed a walkway, single file. Though they walked slowly, their steps echoed in metallic ripples from the endless, empty mazes of corridors and conduits.

And with them, there came the faintest glimmer of song.

*Domine, libra nos...*

Holding her place in the centre of the line, both hands on her bolter, Augusta Santorus raised the Litany of Battle alongside her Sisters, their harmonics like tendrils, unfurling through the chill. Ahead of her, Sister Superior Veradis moved at the front of the exploring squad, her bolt pistol in one hand and her auspex, its screen shimmering a dull green, in the other.

*From the lightning and the tempest...*

The litany was familiar, steady. It flowed like shared strength between the six figures, their blood-scarlet armour all ceramite and plasteel, their cloaks black and white. Each one bore the embroidered symbol of the Bloody Rose, the Order Militant of the Adepta Sororitas dispatched to

scout this floating corpse. Their mission, to look for survivors – and to protect the interests of the Ecclesiarchy, to whom this ship belonged.

But, search though they might, the cruiser *Santa Xenia* hung silent, her carcass already rotting.

‘Keep the line tight.’ Veradis’ orders sounded quietly in the squad’s vox-beads. Amid the flow of the litany, the Sister Superior was listening.

*Our Emperor, deliver us...*

Behind Veradis, Augusta continued to sing, her voice weaving in with that of her Sisters. In the chapels and cathedrals of the schola on Ophelia VII, it was easy to perceive Him, standing stern and patient at prayer, or overseeing their combat training as they battled beneath His gaze.

But here–

The thought was unworthy and she silenced it, concentrating on the hymn.

*From plague, temptation and war...*

The litany was absolute: He was everywhere. As the squad moved down another metal stairway, past another layer of hatches and vents, so they raised His name, and His presence walked with them.

*Our Emperor, deliver us...*

Even here, down in the depths of this great, steel sepulchre.

‘I fear the spirit of this vessel is fading,’ Veradis said, her tone still quiet. ‘Yet the retention of her atmosphere and grav-field suggests that she may still be occupied. We will proceed along the lowest gantries, down towards the fusion reactor. If any spark of life remains, I suspect that is where we shall find it.’

‘Aye.’ The squad returned their obedience, and Augusta followed the line as it turned through a T-junction and began to move lower.

*From the scourge of the Kraken...*

But still, she kept the hymn in her heart.

The ambush was loud, and clumsy.

They had descended two more levels, right down to the creaking, filthy access paths of the *Xenia*’s lowest helots. Pict screens set into terminals fizzled with white noise. They cast ghostly illumination on rust-flowering walls, and upon their own half-loose wiring, hanging like exposed nerves.

Augusta’s red boot came down beside a fallen servo-skull. It grinned

eyelessly back at her, mocking.

‘Ware!’

The cry came from ahead, from Sister Leona. Instinctively, Augusta dropped to a combat-crouch, her bolter covering the corridor. In the narrow beams of the suitlights, she had an erratic, confused view of incoming motion: of muscle and steel; of bared, yellow fangs; of the eager, jagged glint of corroding augmetics. A second later, there came the thunderously red muzzle flash of Leona’s heavy bolter, opening to its full suppression. The noise was tremendous.

Over the vox, Veradis gave orders, her tone calm: ‘Leona, lay down covering fire, keep them back.’

‘Aye.’

*Our Emperor, deliver us...*

The bolter hammered its song of war. The shapes stumbled, cursed, bellowed, fell. Voices bawled, coarse and mocking. There was an answering return of fire, and the smashing of melee weapons against metal armour. Explosions chewed up the corridor and ricocheted, sparking, from the walls.

Water and refuse scattered under repeated impacts.

‘Emlyn!’ Veradis snapped. ‘Do you have contact?’

‘Aye!’ At the rear of the squad, Sister Emlyn’s response was drowned out by another burst of bolter-fire – the ambush was converging from both ends. Beside Augusta, Sister Lucienne spat a curse – in the turmoil and the bad light, it was almost impossible to see.

*From the blasphemy of the Fallen...*

The litany spilling from her like determination, Augusta came back upright, trying for a clear line of sight. Somewhere in the darkness, deep, tuneless voices launched into a squalid ditty, then scattered again, laughing.

Orks.

Augusta’s heart thumped in her chest.

Orks had found the floating ship – scavengers, perhaps. The seethe of muscle and weapon took on form and comprehension, became shapes she recognised. She’d never seen an ork in the flesh, but she’d studied their images on the schola’s data-slates many times... she’d just never realised how *big* they were, how slavering and coarse.

Her voice *sang*, furious and elated.

*Our Emperor, deliver us!*

They were xenos, invaders on an Ecclesiarchy ship.

And they would die.

She took a single shot over Emlyn's shoulder, heard the squall as her carbide fusion matrix round bit into thick, green flesh. She heard Veradis ordering Leona to keep firing, and for the squad to advance, step by step, behind her cover. She heard Emlyn, the litany rising savagely from the rearmost Sister. She saw the whoosh of Sister Pia's flamer, bathing the corridor in its sudden conflagration. She heard howls of pain and rage; she heard explosions, and the guttural derision of the orks' voices.

She heard one of her Sisters hiss with a sudden stab of agony, but she couldn't tell who.

'The corridor's blocked with corpses!' The voice was Leona's. 'We can go no further!'

'Gantry to the left,' Veradis snapped. 'We'll get behind them!'

Augusta obeyed the order and ran. Behind her, Lucienne did the same, her armour gleaming in the firelight's dance. They skidded, their footing slippery with spreading gore. The whole space seemed full of struggles and curses, of the bulk of muscle and metal. A huge, hoary hand grabbed for Augusta's shoulder. She turned and put a round into the leering greenskin, then she was up the steps and out of its reach.

'Throne!' As they reached the gantry, Lucienne cursed again. 'Where did they even come from?'

The last of the firelight flickered from a mess of struggling orks. They were undisciplined and rough, fighting amongst themselves now, all striving to get to the front. The biggest had a huge, notched axe, and it was hacking the smaller ones to pieces as it waded forwards. Even as it reached the steps, Veradis' bolt pistol took it clean in the face, and it went over, bawling and kicking. The smaller ones were on it in a moment, enacting their bloody revenge.

'Keep moving!' The Sister Superior's tone was grim. 'And keep your vigilance, Sisters – there will be more!'

*From the begetting of daemons...*

Red boots bashed along the walkway. The litany continued, fervent, tight with focus and rage. The orks were pausing now, abandoning their burned

and their fallen. They seemed to be retreating, but they gave harsh, guttural snarls.

‘There will be more of them,’ Veradis said. ‘Now, move!’

The squad began to run. Corridor and gantry turned though a bend and became a steel bridge, suspended over a sheer, bottomless drop. Cold yawned at them from below, a dead breath from some vast and empty space, but Augusta paid it little attention – she was watching for more orks.

Which was probably why she missed the gretchin completely.

It was too small, too *fast*.

With a high-pitched gibber, it hurled itself from the darkness, grappling for a hold.

Startled, Augusta sent her shot wide. The thing hit her shoulders and faceplate, knocking her backwards; she grabbed at it with her free hand, striving to prise it free as it chittered and clawed, ramming its nimble fingers into the edges of her visor.

She cursed, pulled, threw–

But it was too late.

Without realising, she’d taken another step back. She felt her heel go, tried to catch herself, made a belated grab for Lucienne’s outstretched hand...

...missed it.

Lucienne cried aloud, ‘*Sister!*’ In a split second of utter disbelief, Augusta realised she was falling, down, down, into the dark.

*Our Emperor, deliver us!*

Lucienne was shouting for Veradis, but the noise was already lost, too far above her to be possible. Incomprehension clamoured loud – she had no idea how she could have done something so foolish – then a steel girder caught her, *slam*, across the base of her spine. She grunted, scrabbled for a handhold, but her momentum turned her head over heels and dropped her, once more, into the depths of some utter, pitch-black nothing.

*By the–!*

She hit the bottom belly first, hard enough to rattle her teeth.

Stunned, she lay there, tasting blood from a bitten tongue. She was half-immersed in the thick soup of the ship’s bilge, but she was alive, thank His

grace and mercy; she was still breathing. Her hips hurt where she'd struck the girder, but her suit diagnostic was still showing full integrity.

*From the curse of the mutant...*

The litany in her heart like a prayer of gratitude, she pushed herself to her hands and knees, and looked round. She had no idea where she was.

*What?*

A spike of nervousness shot through her chest. She could see nothing, just the ripples of the water in an impenetrable cavern of black. The gleam of her suitlight was tiny, swallowed whole by the space around her. There was no light above her, no sign of her Sisters, no hint of the walkway from which she'd fallen. As she sat back on her heels, reaching for her bolter, a savage spasm of pain shot through her back.

There was nothing broken, but she'd lost her weapon.

Sudden adrenaline flashed; her hands searched frantically under the water. One of the schola's earliest combat lessons: you *never* lost your bolter. It was a part of you, part of your faith and ordination. It was always in your hand, or fastened to your suit.

A flicker of disappointment, like she'd let Him – let her squad and her training – down...

But that thought felt like panic. She shoved it aside and tried the vox.

The vox-channel was a crackling wasteland, devoid of life or hope. Just as if it, too, had no idea where she was.

*Our Emperor, deliver us...*

Slowly, holding the fear at bay, Augusta came to her feet. She drew the hidden punch-dagger from the fleur-de-lys on the front of her armour, and took a full ten-second awareness check, turning slowly around.

Nothing. Her mouth was filling with horror; her skin was shivering with chill...

Nothing.

*A morte perpetua...*

Standing there, tiny and lost, she clung to dagger and litany like twin threads of pure hope. She prayed for His guidance, His strength, His Light to bless her in this unknown darkness. She prayed for His forgiveness for her ridiculous blunder.

And she remembered – forgiveness was only offered to those who fought on.

She must focus.

The one thing she knew: the Sisters' muster point, back up at the observer deck. She must find a wall, and then a ladder. Once she was back up in the ship's corridors, she could orient by their layout and numbering.

She picked a direction and began to wade.

The emptiness was vast, and absolute.

Her hands constantly reaching for her bolter and coming back empty, Augusta moved through the ship's belly like some tiny, squeaking thing, her position marked clearly by her suitlight and by the flowing arrowhead of ripples that pointed at her, wherever she went. In the viscous, filthy water, things bumped at her calves, almost as if they sought to harry her along.

She swallowed her nausea, and forged past them.

*That thou wouldst bring them only death...*

She told herself: she *knew* this, knew the drill that came with it. She knew to conserve her water and rations, knew to set the beacon on her suit so her squad could detect the signal.

But, like the orks, this had only ever been theory. A cruiser was a diagram on a data-slate, a tidy cutaway that bristled with clarity and labels. She knew where the observer deck was – it was up at the watch gallery, below the keel sail. But this...?

She could not falter, it was not permitted.

So she waded on, hard shocks of pain in her back with every step. She shone her little light as far as she could, but still, she found nothing; it was as if she'd been swallowed alive. She had no idea, even, if she was going the right way, or if she was just walking in circles. There were no labels down here, no handy descriptions – not as much as a magnetic field for her digi-compass.

*That thou shouldst spare none...*

But... she had no choice. She forced her way forwards through the water, searching with increasing fear for an edge, a way up, for *anything* that would bring the darkness back to a graspable size. And, as she pushed on, and on, and still *on*, and there was still nothing, the desolation of it began to spiral outwards from around her, vast and cold; it made her head spin and her breath catch like spikes in her throat. This could not be a ship; it

was a scraping, groaning, rasping, lightless void, echoing with horror. The creaking was some endless, mournful cry; it crawled with unseen threats. It stretched around her like a thing eternal, like—

Her chrono chimed the hour, and the faint, familiar song of bells echoed outwards over the water.

It brought her back to herself and she stopped, holding her breath to listen.

But still, nothing moved.

Only the cold.

Only the darkness.

And only the things that bumped against her shins...

*By the Light! Where am I? What have I—?*

With a wrench of effort, she ground herself back into motion. She tried to keep praying, but the words were hollowing, now, and slowly, slowly, they bled from her like the dark was full of leeches.

Her hand tightened on her dagger until her gauntleted fingers hurt.

Soon, she began to hear other noises – noises like voices, like echoes of remembered hymns, like splashes in the limitless murk. Once, she thought she heard gunfire, and she almost ran in the direction of the sound, but it faded before she'd gone very far. The things in the water bumped and bumped at her; she had to stop herself shuddering and kicking back at them, shoving them away. Sometimes, her suitlight picked up odd gleams under the surface, as if some eyeless, deep-dwelling creature were baring its hungry teeth...

How could there be no end to this? Surely, even if she were in the very bottom of the ship's hull, there would be...?

And then, she saw something.

It was a support, a mighty, riveted pillar of steel that stretched upwards, high into the dark. It was pitch-black, utterly smooth and completely devoid of ladders, or of identification. It was ice-cold, glittering with frost.

And it bore words.

*What?*

Augusta blinked, wondered if the darkness was playing some trick, but no, she was not seeing things. The words were like shadows in the pale chill; they looked like they'd been made with a finger.

They said, 'Imperatoris meum dereliquit nos'.

*The Emperor has forsaken us.*

Pure, stark cold went down her back.

*Forsaken.*

She turned, put her back to the metal and raised the dagger, but she could see nothing. Beyond her tiny suitlight, the darkness concealed a thousand eyes, a thousand questions. A thousand unseen tentacles uncoiled like Ruin from the water.

*Forsaken.*

What had happened to the ship? They had seen no sign of her crew, no signs of combat, not even bodies. She tried to tell herself that this was surely some lost crew member, scared and alone, but what if it wasn't? What if the words had been written by something else? Something *forsaken*?

She stayed where she was, her heart racing. Slowly, the ripples of her passage flattened and she watched the water, alert for any shine or swell. Again, she tried the vox, but it crackled at her, the noise filling her head and chest with static. Adrenaline screamed at her, told her to move – *move!* – but she could not.

There was something out there.

Something that knew exactly where she was.

A thought came at her as if it were not her own, a tiny sliver of doubt in her adamantine faith.

What if...

What if He really *had* abandoned her? Punished her for her foolishness? She had no Sisters to guard her back, no bolter to slay her foe.

*Imperatoris meum dereliquit nos.*

Another splash, now closer, the noise unmistakable...

There really *was* something down here!

Her blood thumped hard in her ears. She strained to hear past it. She was sure that, this time, the sound had been real, not the yammering of her doubts, not these monsters internal that threatened to undermine and betray her. She held the blade like a talisman, praying for His light, for His forgiveness. For His wisdom in the dark.

Her every nerve shivered with–

*There!*

And another splash. The faintest of ripples, like a windless whisper

across the black water's surface. They teased at the very limits of her sunlight's range.

*That thou shouldst pardon none...*

The litany came back to her in a flood, the words almost frantic. Her mind filled with the white fuzz of tension, her tongue seemed cleaved to the roof of her mouth. Doubts hammered at her heart like weapons... she struggled to force them down.

She had fallen, disgraced herself. She had lost her bolter, an unthinkable sin. *Forsaken*. There was uncertainty in her heart and mind and chest, where there should be only strength and courage...

*Splash!*

Again.

The noises were somewhere to her right. The sounds were too light for the heavy-booted orks, too slow for the gretchin. Her dread crystallised, shattered.

*I am Adepta Sororitas, and I fear nothing, not xenos, not heretic, not creature of Ruin...*

She closed her hand on the tiny blade, and forced herself to move.

Her hips still spasmed with pain, but she followed the sounds. As she moved, the darkness seemed to shift about her like unheard laughter; it blew through her, mocking her weakness, and she strove to shut it out. She focused her mind on searching for markings or discrepancies, for anything that would tell her where she was.

She had not gone much further before she found a second, colossal support and a second finger-mark, this one jagged with anger and pain, and much shorter.

It said only, 'Salva nos'.

*Save us.*

From *what?*

Again, she turned, putting her back to the metal. The darkness howled back to its full strength, invading her thoughts like a plague. What *had* taken place upon this empty ship? Slain her crew and left her to drift, alone and abandoned? Striving for calm, she reviewed her orders and the information that Veradis had given them, but there were no answers.

Only... only that they'd found no bodies.

At least, not in the ship itself.

Because... because they were all down here?

Her nausea rose again, bitter in the back of her throat. A image of eyeless, rotting, bumping things came flooding into her mind, all bared bone and trailing wires and rancid, bloating flesh—

Again, that splash, closer this time; she could see the ripples as they spread, hear them as they lapped gently against the column's cold steel. Whatever it was, it was near.

That nearness honed her fears down to a single, hard target – *there!* She moved towards the sound, her blade ready.

And then, at last, she saw the faintest glimmering of the light.

It came from above, from some walkway, impossibly high above her head, but it did not shine upon the bilge-water. There was something in the way.

Something *big*.

At first, she couldn't make it out – it seemed like some huge, lumpish blur – but as she grew closer, she realised what it was.

It was a pile, pointing roughly upwards at that glimmer of illumination. It was—

She stopped, her mouth full of revulsion, her suitlight illuminating something grotesque: corpses, bloated, blank-faced and rotting. Hundreds of them.

Even as she looked, craning up and up towards the light above, something fell and tumbled slowly down the side of the pile. It hit the water.

*Splash.*

Augusta stood there, transfixed. She could see the rotting insignias of the *Xenia's* crew, and her mind struggled to find a prayer – for them, for herself – but her words were lost.

*Splash.*

She stepped closer, dagger still in hand. Where her suitlight shone, she could see pieces of faces almost intact – a young officer, barely more than a boy; a man in the rank remains of Ecclesiarchy robes; a servitor, rusted and still.

*Forsaken.*

By the rot of their remaining flesh, they'd all been dead some time.

Then a deep growl of laughter made her turn.

It was an ork.

Just the one, and at first, Augusta struggled to believe what she was seeing. It was far bigger than she was, armour and all, a hulking, muscled monstrosity with a wide and toothy grin.

But this one bore no metal – no augmetics or ornamentation of any kind, not a single shiny or reflective surface. And it was not green. In her suitlight, it looked... it looked *purple*.

Seeing her raise her little dagger, it gave an audible snort and grinned wider. Shreds of flesh and fabric were still caught between its fangs.

*Forsaken.*

The fate of the *Xenia's* crew... some of them must have been still alive, thrown down here in despair and desolation, knowing they had no escape, and waiting for the orks to...

Her nerves spiked with revulsion. With fury.

And *this*, she understood.

She lunged and struck, her feet hampered by the water. Her blade struck the hollow of the beast's throat, but the ork wore thick, grox-leather armour. Its grin broadened further.

Her doubts, her fears, shattered.

*We beseech Thee, destroy them!*

Red-hot rage went through her – cleansing like fire. She raised her voice, sang the litany straight at the ork, heard the words ring back from the darkness as if the *Xenia* sang with her, finding its own faith and courage.

She punched it, dagger between her fingers, full in the face.

One eye popped and ran down its hide.

Snarling, it pounced forwards.

As the punches came in, she threw up her arms, blocking them as she had been taught. She was fast enough, but by the Light, the thing was immensely strong. It hammered at her with fists the size of rams, battering at her head and shoulders. One connected and her ears rang; the force of it snapped her neck over with a painful wrench. The hurt in her hips was climbing her spine like a live thing, all claws and spikes; she could feel something twanging, but she could not stop. Seeing a gap, she struck out with the dagger. It hit, but she might as well have been stabbing a training dummy.

The ork snarled, pressing her back, into the pile of bodies behind her. If

they fell...

How many had died, thrown down here? Lost to the Light, and to their own faith? Watching as the orks ate their shipmates? Knowing they would be next? The thought fuelled her rage, and she surged forwards.

She missed a block and the thing pummelled her faceplate. Missed another and one huge fist connected with her chest, sending her backwards with a crunch of crumpled armour. She kicked down at its knee, hard enough to break the bone. It growled and stumbled.

Then it came back upright, and hit her with a full-charge body slam, its shoulder to her gut.

They both went over, into the pile of dead. Her back wrenched, she gritted her teeth against a cry of pain. The corpses were a sliding cascade, a splashing avalanche of bodies that smothered her and the ork both. She struggled and rolled, found herself on her belly with the ork on top of her; she could see nothing but corpses, and the soup-thick mess of the bilge.

The ork was upright first; it drove a knee into her back, hard. Pain exploded across her vision. It had a hand on her wrist, was trying to wrench her armoured shoulder around and back. She struggled, almost crying aloud as her spine crunched with every motion. The thing was so powerful – how could it *be* so powerful?

‘Sister.’ The word was a hiss, laden with hate. ‘You – not so strong.’

This was not the ribald scorn of the foot-troops upstairs. This beast was something completely else, something dark and sharp and sinister.

It said, ‘He – is not here. You die – hopeless.’

She got one arm under her, tried to push herself up. She reached for a prayer, for His courage and Light to fill her body, for the battle-rage that came with the song of His name, but there was no squad, and no harmony.

She was alone. Bereft. No Sisters to sing His praises, no weapons to thunder His name...

*He – is not here.*

*You die – hopeless.*

*Forsaken.*

The ork drove its weight downwards, knee first. It was still wrenching at her arm. Impossibly, she heard the crack as her armour started to crumple. She must get back to her feet, stop this beast from killing and eating her...

*Salva nos!*

Her backplate cracked further. There was a whoosh as the seal gave, and the first freezing touch of the toxic water. She struggled furiously, but could not move.

The ork paused, relishing the moment. She could almost hear it grin. Any second now, it would stamp down with its full weight and crush her back like a wet stick.

And then...

‘There are times...’ her tutor’s words came back to her, ghosts in the dark, ‘...when He will test you. Pain, dread, death – all of these things are His blessing. And you will face them, Sisters, though they drag barbed hooks through the darkest corners of your soul. When you are at your lowest ebb, facing the very worst of your terrors... *that* is when He will be watching you.’

Was He here, now, closer than ever, down in these deep, dark depths?

The thought was electric, a crackle of terror and energy. She remembered the lesson fully: that courage, like fear, comes from within.

With a roar like pure, focused faith, she pushed with her free arm and went over sideways, rolling the ork beneath her armoured weight and shoving it under the water. Ignoring the pain, she flipped herself over and came down on its chest with both knees, whooshing the air from its lungs in a trail of exploding bubbles. It thrashed frantically, but she had it now, and the full weight of her body was keeping it under the water.

With a prayer as sharp as the edge of the blade, she brought her punch-dagger down in the thing’s other eye. It spasmed, blood and fluid flowing through the water, but still it struggled on.

She rammed the dagger in under its chin, driving it down with all the force she could muster and through the layer of armour.

*In nomine Eius!*

And – in His name – the thing, finally, went still.

‘You have faced quite the ordeal, Sister.’ Back on the observer’s deck, Veradis stood with folded arms and a severe expression. ‘For any Sororitas to fight alone in close quarters against an ork – truly, you have faced foe, fear and darkness, and you have been blessed by His strength.’ She raised an eyebrow. ‘However.’

The word had a knell of finality to it, and Augusta inhaled, making her

back spike with pain. She said, ‘Sister Superior?’

The Sister Superior said nothing. Her armour, like Augusta’s, bore warmarks – clear signs that the squad had fought their way through to the muster point. At the Ritual of Cleansing, these would be beaten and polished, cleaned until the armour shone once more. In the field, they were badges of honour.

Veradis continued, her tone flat. ‘You abandoned your squad, and returned without your weapon.’ Her lean, lined face did not change. ‘Such carelessness is unworthy of an Adepta Sororitas.’

The other members of the squad had closed around them, Lucienne with a brief smile for her friend. They were all ork-battered and sweating, but after Augusta’s ordeal, her feeling of being so lost and alone, she was thankful for every one of them – for their strength and faith, for their closeness and for how much she trusted them.

Augusta lifted her chin. ‘Yes, Sister Superior.’

‘Recite for me,’ Veradis said, ‘the third stanza of the fourth book of the *War Treatise of Saint Mina*.’

Augusta knew the words, they were etched upon her mind and heart. She said, ‘We are Sisters beneath His Light. We obey our orders without question. We do not falter. We do not fear. We do not err.’

‘We do not err,’ Veradis repeated, making the point. ‘There is no excuse for such a lack of vigilance, Sister. We are a family, we work as Sisters should, and our trust in one another must be absolute. If you cannot uphold that trust, you betray yourself, your squad, your commander and your faith. I comprehend that you have faced horrors to return to us – climbing the pile of the dead to reach the light – but to betray the squad’s unity is to leave a hole in our defences. This cannot be borne.’

Augusta could respond only, ‘Yes, Sister Superior.’

Veradis nodded at her contrition. ‘You will undertake the remainder of this mission with your dagger alone. I have no bolter for you, and the combat discipline will serve as a timely reminder – to sharpen your senses, Sister. And to uphold your faith.’

‘Yes, Sister Superior.’ Augusta felt her face flush, but it was the only reply she could give.

Veradis nodded again, her expression softening. ‘Yet, I comprehend what you have faced to return to us. In His name, and in the name of Saint Mina

herself, Augusta, I am glad that you are back. I would hate to have lost your strong arm in this most forsaken of places.' A flicker of a smile crossed her face. 'See to your armour, Sister, and fear not the lumbering greenskin. We have a mission to complete.'

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Danie Ware** is the author of the critically acclaimed Ecko series, as well as numerous short stories. She lives in Carshalton, south London, with her son and two cats and has long-held interests in role-playing, re-enactment, vinyl art toys and personal fitness. These days, she juggles raising her son and writing books with working for Forbidden Planet (London) Ltd., where she runs their events calendar and social media profile. *Mercy* is her first short story for Black Library.

An extract from *Sisters of Battle: The Omnibus*.



From his high vantage point, the Emperor of Mankind looked down upon Miriya where she knelt. His unchanging gaze took in all of her, the woman's bowed form shrouded in blood-coloured robes. In places, armour dark as obsidian emerged from the folds of the crimson cloth. It framed her against the tan stonework of the chapel floor. She was defined by the light that reflected upon her from the Emperor's eternal visage; all that she was, she was only by His decree.

Miriya's lips moved in whispers. The Litany of Divine Guidance spilled from her in a cascading hush. The words were such a part of her that they came as quickly and effortlessly as breathing. As the climax of the declaration came, she felt a warm core of righteousness establish itself in her heart, as it always did, as it always had since the day she had discarded her noviciate cloak and taken the oath.

She allowed herself to look up at Him. Miriya granted herself this small gesture as a reward. Her gaze travelled up the altar, drinking in the majesty of the towering golden idol. The Emperor watched her over folded arms, across the inverted hilt of a great burning sword. At His left shoulder stood Saint Celestine, her hands cupped to hold two stone doves as if she were offering them up. At His right was Saint Katherine, the Daughter of the Emperor who had founded the order that Miriya now served.

She lingered on Katherine's face for a moment: the statue's hair fell down over her temple and across the fleur-de-lys carved beneath her left eye. Miriya unconsciously brushed her black tresses back over her ear, revealing her own fleur tattoo in dark red ink.

The armour the stone saint wore differed from Miriya's in form but not

function. Katherine was clad in an ancient type of wargear, and she bore the symbol of a burning heart where Miriya wore a holy cross crested with a skull. When the saint had been mistress of her sect, they had been known as the Order of the Fiery Heart – but that had been decades before Katherine’s brutal ending on Mnestteus. Since that date, for over two millennia they had called themselves the Order of Our Martyred Lady. It was part of a legacy of duty to the Emperor that Sister Miriya of the Adepta Sororitas had been fortunate to continue.

With that thought, she looked upon the effigy of Him. She met the stone eyes and imagined that on far distant Terra, the Lord of Humanity was granting her some infinitely small fraction of His divine attention, willing her to carry out her latest mission with His blessing. Miriya’s hands came to her chest and crossed one another, making the sign of the Imperial-aquila.

‘In Your name,’ she said aloud. ‘In service to Your Light, grant me guidance and strength. Let me know the witch and the heretic, show them to me.’ She bowed once again. ‘Let me do Your bidding and rid the galaxy of man’s foe.’

Miriya drew herself up from where she knelt and moved to the font servitor, presenting the slave-thing with her ornate plasma pistol. The hybrid produced a brass cup apparatus in place of a hand and let a brief mist of holy water sprinkle over the weapon. Tapes of sanctified parchment stuttered from its lipless mouth with metallic ticks of sound.

She turned away, and there in the shadows was Sister Iona. Silent, morose Iona, the patterned hood of her red robe forever deepening the hollows of her eyes. Some of the Battle Sisters disliked the woman. Iona rarely showed emotion, never allowed herself to cry out in pain when combat brought her wounds, never raised her voice in joyous elation during the daily hymnals. Many considered her flawed, her mind so cold that it was little more than the demi-machine inside the skull of the servitor at the font. Miriya had once sent two novice girls to chastisement for daring to voice such thoughts aloud. But those who said these things did not know Iona’s true worth. She was as devout a Sororitas as any other, and if her manner made some Sister Superiors reluctant to have her in their units, then so be it. Their loss was Miriya’s gain.

‘Iona,’ she said, approaching. ‘Speak to me.’

‘It is time, Sister,’ said the other woman, her milk-pale face set in a frown. ‘The witch ship comes.’

In spite of herself, Miriya’s hand tensed around the grip of her plasma pistol. She nodded. ‘I am prepared.’

Iona returned the gesture. ‘As are we all.’ The Sister clasped a small fetish in her gloved grip, a silver icon of the Convent Sanctorum’s Hallowed Spire on Ophelia VII. The small tell was enough to let Miriya know the woman was concerned.

‘I am as troubled as you,’ she admitted as they crossed the chancel back towards the steel hatch in the chapel wall.

Iona opened it and they stepped through, emerging into the echoing corridor beyond. Where the stone of the church ended, the iron bones of the starship around it began. Once, the chapel had been earthbound, built into a hill on a world in the Vitus system, now it existed as a strange transplanted organ inside the metal body of the Imperial Naval frigate *Mercutio*.

‘This vexes me, Sister Superior,’ said Iona, her frown deepening beneath her hood. ‘What is our cause if not to take the psyker to task for his witchery, to show the Emperor’s displeasure?’ She looked as if she wanted to spit. ‘That we are called upon to... to *associate* with this mutant is enough to make my stomach turn. There is a part of me that wants to contact the captain and order him to take that abomination from the Emperor’s sky.’

Miriya gave her a sharp look. ‘Have a care, Sister. You and I may detest these creatures, but in their wisdom, the servants of the Throne see fit to use these pitiful wretches in His name. As much as that may sicken us, we cannot refuse a command that comes from the highest levels of the Ecclesiarchy.’

The answer was not nearly enough to satisfy Iona’s disquiet. ‘How can such things go on, I ask you? The psyker is our mortal enemy—’

Iona’s commander silenced her with a raised hand. ‘The *witch* is our enemy, Sister. The psyker is a *tool*. Only the untrained and the wild are a threat to the Imperium.’ Miriya’s eyes narrowed. ‘You have never served as I have, Iona. For two full years I was a warden aboard one of those blighted vessels. On the darkest nights, the things I saw there still haunt me so...’ She forced the memories away. ‘This is how the God-Emperor

tests the faithful, Sister. He shows us our greatest fears and has us overcome them.'

They walked in silence for a few moments before Iona spoke again. 'We are taught in the earliest days of our indoctrination that those cursed with the psychic mark in their blood are living gateways to Chaos. All of them, Sister Superior, not just the ones who eschew the worship of the Golden Throne. One single slip and even the most devout will fall, and open the way to the warp!'

Miriya raised an eyebrow. It was perhaps the most passion she had ever seen the dour woman display. 'That is why we are here. Since the Age of Apostasy, we and all our Sister Sororitas have stood at the gates to hell and barred the witchkin. As the mutant falls, so does the traitor, so does the witch.' She placed a hand on Iona's shoulder. 'Ask yourself this, Sister. Who else could be called forth to accomplish what we shall do today?' Miriya's face split in a wry smile. 'The men of the Imperial Navy or the Guard? They would be dead in moments from the shock. The Adeptus Astartes? Those inhuman brutes willingly welcome psykers into their own ranks.' She shook her head ruefully. 'No, Iona, only we, the Sisters of Battle, can stand sentinel here.' The woman patted her pistol holster. 'And mark me well, if but one of those misbegotten wretches steps out of line, then we will show them the burning purity of our censure.'

The sound of her voice drew the attention of Miriya's squad as she approached. They did not exchange the curt bows or salutes that were mandatory in other Sororitas units. Sister Miriya kept a relaxed hand on her warriors, preferring to keep them sharp in matters of battle prowess rather than parade ground niceties.

'Report,' she demanded.

Her second-in-command Sister Lethe cleared her throat. 'We are ready, Sister Superior, as per your command.'

'Good,' Miriya snapped, forestalling any questions about their orders before they could be uttered. 'This will be a simple matter of boarding the ship and securing the prisoner.'

Lethe threw a look at the other members of the Celestian squad. Usually deployed for front line combat operations, the Celestians were known as the elite troops of the Adepta Sororitas and such a simple duty as a prisoner escort could easily be considered beneath them. Celestians were

used to fighting at the heart of heretic confrontations and mutant uprisings, not acting like mere line officer enforcers.

Miriya saw these thoughts in the eyes of Lethe and the other Sisters. She knew the misgivings well, as they had been her own after the orders had first been delivered by astropathic transfer from Canoness Galatea's adjutant. 'Any duty in the Emperor's name is glorious,' she told them, a stern edge to her words, 'and we would do well to remember that.'

'Of course,' said Lethe, her expression contrite. 'We obey.'

'I share your concern.' Miriya admitted, her voice lowered. 'Our squad has never been the most favoured of units—' and with that the other women shared a moment of grim amusement, '—but we will do as we must.'

'There,' Sister Cassandra called, observing through one of the crystalline portholes in the corridor wall. 'I see it!'

Miriya drew closer and peered through the thick lens. For a moment, she thought her Battle Sister had been mistaken, but then she realised that the darkness she saw beyond the hull of the *Mercutio* was not the void of interstellar space at all, but the flank of another craft. It gave off no light, showed no signals or pennants. Only the faint glow of the frigate's own portholes and beacons illuminated it – and then, not the whole vessel but only thin slivers of it caught in the radiance.

'A Black Ship,' breathed Iona. 'Emperor protect us.'

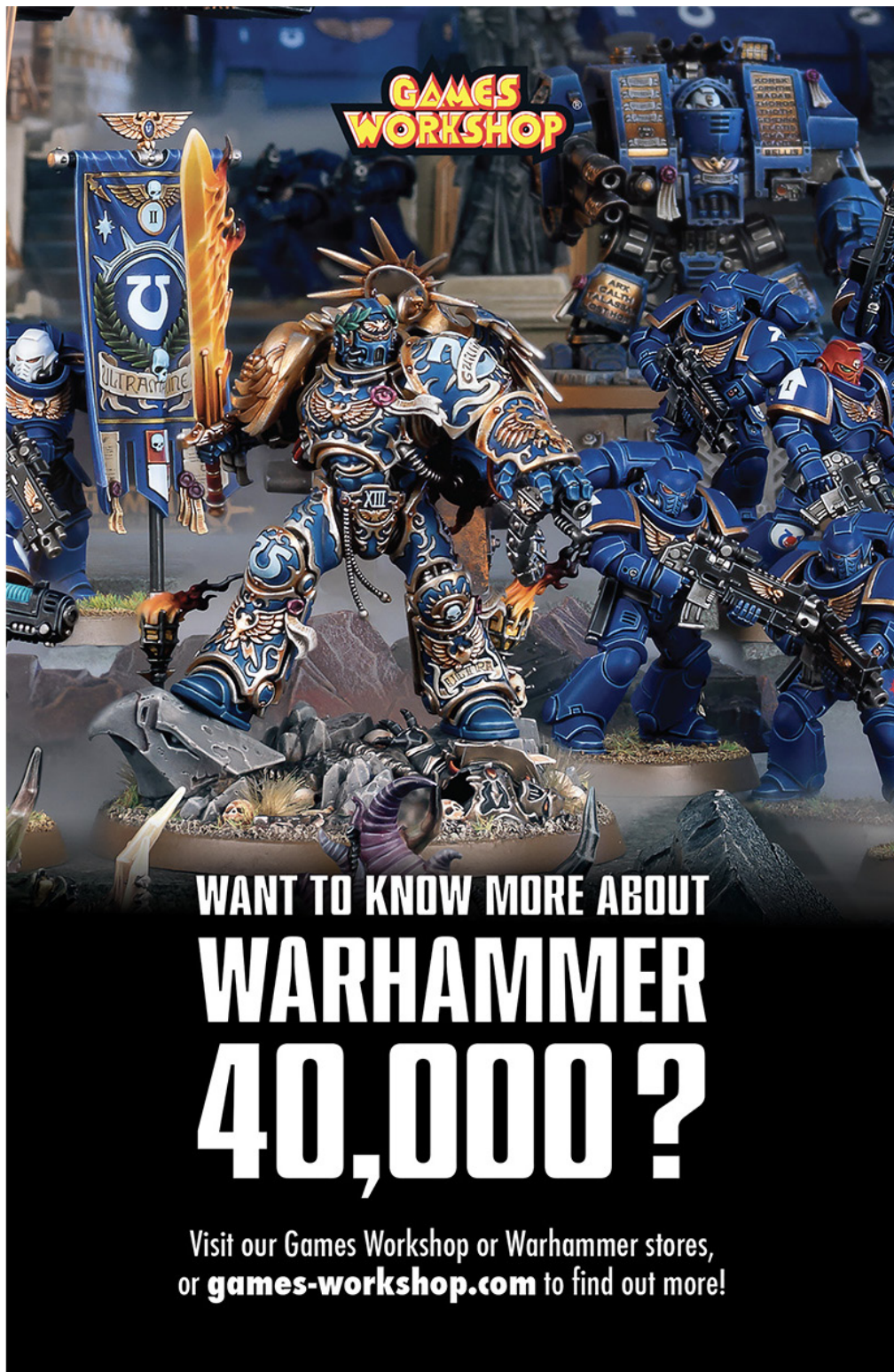
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