



**WARHAMMER**  
40,000



**HEART & SOUL**

**AN ADEPTA SORORITAS SHORT STORY**

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**JAMES SWALLOW**



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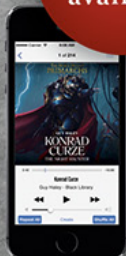
**JAMES SWALLOW**

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# HEART & SOUL

by James Swallow

The last day of the War of Faith on Meseda Quintus had finally come, but in the dawning of it the wounded world found no respite. Even as the orbital guns were silenced and the treads of the Sisterhood's Exorcist tanks ground to a halt, the planet moaned and wept and continued to die.

Meseda Quintus would never recover from the damage wrought across it in the War, its atmosphere polluted by radioactive fallout from the city-killing pogroms, its meagre seas fouled by toxins that had turned the once-emerald waters into brackish lakes of acid. Thousands of years from now, the ruined sphere would still be spinning, still webbed with scars large enough to be visible from far orbit. This was a just and right fate for such a place, for Meseda Quintus had broken that most sacred of human contracts with the Imperium of Mankind – it had turned its back on the God-Emperor.

Not all at once, of course. By the time the cleansing fire of the Adepta Sororitas reached it, this world's populace had lived through their fall from grace. It was a sorry narrative, replayed time and again on outlying colonies where arrogance and distance conspired to make the natives believe they were somehow *special*, in some manner no longer expected to obey the Throne and give Holy Terra its due fealty. Spread like a canker, the corruption found the weak and the venial, the ones who blamed all their ills on others, and it gave them the power to exact revenge. The wretched truth was that none resisted the taint that power brought with it, too blinded by the hate that boiled in their tiny, shuttered minds.

And so the forces of Chaos, may they forever be blighted, took them

whole.

The rising of the Army of the Iconoclast happened on Meseda Quintus as it had on a hundred other worlds, and while the root cause they espoused and the masks its members wore differed each time, the result was the same. Mass graves for those of true faith, the rise of foul idolatry, shrines set afire... And *war*.

Amid the ruins of the last dissident city, Sister Miriya trudged through ankle-deep drifts of grey-black ash and glanced up at the bloody sky above, considering the destruction the Iconoclast had wrought here. She sucked in decontaminated, consecrated air through the metal half-mask breather that covered her mouth and nose, tasting the flavour of the sacramental oil in the mix that was said to hold the corruption of the Archenemy at bay. It did little to hide the flat, sour taste of burned paper and charred bone all around her.

*At least now it is done*, she told herself. *Finally, after years of tracking our quarry across the entire Segmentum, we have the heretic in our sights.* Miriya had expected to feel something uplifting – a furious martial joy, perhaps – at the knowledge that this particular crusade was nearing its end. But there was only fatigue in her. The pursuit of the Iconoclast had taken so much, not just in terms of worlds that had fallen and the deaths in its wake, but on a personal level. In chasing this hellish champion of disorder from world to world, Miriya had almost died twice, once during the escape from the voidship *Sedition's Bane* and again in the battle for Nexus Fifteen-Kappa. The war had given her new scars, without and within.

She remembered poor Pandora and the Sister's terrible, agonising death at the Iconoclast's own hand, only one among many upon the scale of blood cost that the heretic would soon be called to pay.

The weight of it all threatened to crush her. It would have been easy to halt here, and sit upon one of the piles of rubble that were all that remained of the city around her. *To rest*, she thought. *For a while.*

Miriya's jaw hardened and she reached up to push loose threads of her dark sable hair back out of her eyes, briefly irritated by her own moment of vulnerability. Ignoring the steady burn of pain from the lasgun wound across her right thigh, she redoubled her pace and marched on, following the path cleared through the ruins by the advance of a massive Baneblade tank. Such weakness was how the Iconoclast's claws gained purchase, she

reminded herself. The heretic picked at the places where a soul was fragile and pushed at it, promised to erase it... While all along widening the cracks.

‘I have no need of that,’ she said quietly. ‘All that I am, my faith protects and nurtures. All that I will do, is in His name.’ The rote catechism came to the Sororitas warrior without conscious recall, soothing her, strengthening her. She was bruised and bloodied, indeed, and she felt it deep in her bones – but she would not falter. Her duty here was not ended.

Miriya hefted her bolt pistol and ran her gauntleted hand over the sacraments carved in the frame and the holy sigil of the ancient *fleur de lys* upon its grip, the same symbol mirrored in the blood-red tattoo on her cheek and the hilt of the chainsword sheathed upon her back. Like the power armour she wore, the weapons were devotional tools and they cried out to fulfil their purpose.

Ahead of her, a thick wall of black smoke from the distant burning habitat blocks parted and she saw the staging area where her Order’s forces were regrouping. The wind changed direction and brought her the gentle rush of women’s voices raised in a hymn, and she resisted the urge to join with them.

The remains of the Vestal Task Forces that had been deployed to Meseda Quintus were arranged in loose formation at the foot of a shallow hill that stood undamaged among the debris of the dead city. Armoured vehicles, penitent engines and gangs of twitching arco-flagellants lined up alongside combat squads of Retributors and Dominions, waiting for the end to come. All guns and missile batteries were aimed at the crest of the hill, upon which stood a cylindrical tower of glittering ruby light. It resembled a gigantic crystal drinking glass as if seen through a curtain of falling rain, shimmering and moving. Waves of purple lightning washed over the shape, crackling low like dull fire.

Inside the cylinder, through the peculiar light, Miriya could make out the ghostly edges of a building. It had once been a devotional shrine, the most ornate and holy of chapels in the Meseda star system, but that was before the Iconoclast had come. Now the distorted structure was a gruesome parody of its old self, a grotesque agglomeration of bone and meat laid over blood-soaked stone. It was a giant’s gibbet, a cage for death and unleashed horrors. The powerful energy sheath around it contained the

warped cathedral and everything within behind an impenetrable barrier of force, and if the adepts of the Mechanicus were to be believed, nothing could get out – but still Miriya felt her gut twist in disgust as she approached it, as if mere proximity to the place could somehow sicken her.

Her eyes raked over a barely visible symbol that burned black fire across the facing wall of the corrupted shrine – a stylised ‘X’ bisected by horizontal lines – and it repulsed her, making her turn away. *The Mark of Khorne*. She dared not say the words aloud, and made the sign of the Aquila as she whispered a litany of warding.

Miriya’s gaze fell to a cohort of rust-robed Mechanicus adepts, their skitarii and servitors clustering protectively around them as they worked at a great device made of spinning brass rings and lenses of dark volcanic glass. Arcane streams of energy flowed from the machine and out into the cylinder of light, feeding its fires, keeping it alive. The wardens of Mars had made good on their promises to the Adepta Sororitas. Together, the Mechanicus’ Array of the Sixth House of Phobos and the Battle Sisters of the Order of Our Martyred Lady had done what no others could. They had driven the heretic known as the Iconoclast back to their lair and imprisoned it within. Many lives had been spent to spring this trap, but it had been worth it.

At least, that was what Sister Miriya wanted to believe. *It won’t be over until that creature is dead*, she thought. *I swear I will tear off the Iconoclast’s mask and see the heretic’s true face before I deliver the killing blow*. That brought a cold smile to her lips. *It will be fitting. No-one can hide from the God-Emperor’s wrath*.

‘Sister Miriya!’ She turned as she heard the voice calling her name, and found a familiar figure rushing up towards her. ‘You’re safe,’ said Sister Verity, her eyes expressive beneath the brow of the armoured coif that covered her head. ‘When you became separated from the rest of the unit, I feared the worst...’

Miriya shook her head. ‘The Emperor Protects.’ Las-fire from some of the last heretic holdouts had caught the ground speeder she had been riding in, forcing it down in the ruins. Although her pilot had perished in the crash-landing, alone and wounded the Battle Sister had still been able to track down and make short work of the traitor gun crew.

‘You are injured.’ Verity was not a warrior, but a hospitaller of the Order

of Serenity, and her duty was to maintain the wellbeing of her sisters. She came to Miriya's side and examined the dust-caked wound on her leg, clicking her tongue behind her breather mask. 'I'll see to this.'

'It's only a scratch,' Miriya replied. 'I've endured far worse.'

'Don't tell me my duty,' Verity said firmly, pulling a medicae auspex from her belt. 'And I will not tell you yours. You're far too stoic for your own good.' She ran the device's sensor head over the gouge in the Battle Sister's armour.

This was a dance the two of them had performed more than once. The warrior and the healer. At first glance, their friendship might have appeared at odds to their natures, but the Sisters had a bond forged by adversity, conviction and shared loss. There were few that Miriya would ever trust as much as the slight, winsome hospitaller, and an unspoken communication passed between them. Verity had been with Miriya's squad at the start of their mission against the Iconoclast and she knew full well the import of this day.

'You're eager to end this,' ventured the hospitaller. It was not a question.

'Not eager, Sister,' Miriya corrected gently. '*Dedicated*. I am beyond the point of calling this an act of glory. No, what we will do today is justice. The Iconoclast will finally learn the cost of betraying humankind for the hollow gifts of the Archenemy. The scales will be rebalanced... For a time, at least.'

Verity used an injector to apply a glutinous protective salve to the wound in Miriya's leg and gave a nod, accepting the other woman's words. She turned as a group of war-weary Battle Sisters approached, led by Miriya's squad-mate Cassandra.

'Eloheim,' called the warrior, using the honorific title to address her. 'What are your orders?'

It was a long time since Sister Miriya had gone by that rank, and if truth be told, Cassandra was violating protocol by referring to her in such a manner. But Miriya accepted the term for what it was – a gesture of respect from one Battle Sister to another.

'Nothing has changed,' she said, her gaze taking in the other members of her unit. Silent Isabel, whose pewter augmetic eye glowed like an ember in her scarred face; Ananke, her dark aspect forever locked in a scowl; Danae, peering at her through an unkempt torrent of red hair that was dirty

with mud and war-smoke; and the others, Sisters Marcia, Rubria and Aemilia, the later additions who had joined them at the commencement of this mission.

All were waiting for her to give the word, and Miriya's hand strayed unconsciously to the pouch on her waist where she kept a cracked mnemonic gem in a bag of black velvet. The hololith recorded on that glassy stone was the personal warrant of their order's High Canoness Majoris, charging Miriya's strike team with their singular command: to terminate the Iconoclast in the name of the God-Emperor.

Over the years of the pursuit, she had watched the flickering holo-image again and again as it played through the short loop of its recording, and listened to the Canoness' severe, clipped tones as she delivered the heretic's death sentence. Now it was time to make good on the promise of that edict.

Miriya nodded, steeling herself for what would come next, but before she could speak, a figure in dark red robes came clattering across the cracked rubble towards them, servo-arms and serpentine mechadendrites flapping at the air. 'Honoured Sisters!' shouted a grating, oddly pitched voice. 'Something is coming!'

Questor Nohlan was a fussy, self-absorbed sort, but that in itself was no oddity among the ranks of the Adeptus Mechanicus. A devout follower of the Cult of the Machine-God, he was a loyal subject of Mars and Holy Terra, but his self-control could be lacking at times and at this moment he seemed to have wholly forgotten matters of decorum. His claw-like bionic feet clanked and scraped over the stonework as he virtually threw himself towards the assembled warriors. In the shadows of his hood, Miriya saw his glowing crimson eye implants were wide with near-panic.

'Calm yourself, adept,' she demanded. 'What is wrong?'

'Processing. Processing.' Nohlan skidded to a halt and made an attempt to marshal his thoughts. Miriya had served with the Questor on other missions, and she overlooked his sometimes erratic behaviour because she knew it masked a keen scientific mind. Indeed, had it not been for Nohlan's cadre and their force cage techno-relic, the victory that was within the Sisterhood's grasp would never have been possible. 'Ships, Sister Miriya. I have word from orbit that a wing of cruisers have emerged from behind the second moon of Meseda Quintus.' He pointed at the sky

with the heavy manipulator claw that emerged from his spine. ‘Shuttles are already on their way here!’

‘Imperial ships?’ asked Marcia, and Nohlan’s head bobbed in confirmation.

‘Reinforcements?’ Ananke directed the question at Miriya. ‘If so, then they have come too late to do any good.’

Miriya’s brow furrowed. ‘All craft are engaged on other pilgrimages and missions elsewhere. Our Order had no more ships to send us, Sister.’ She glanced back to Nohlan. ‘What pennants do these vessels show, Questor?’

The adept shifted uncomfortably. ‘They are of the Adepta Sororitas, milady.’

He had more to say, but the sound of thrusters rose on the wind and all eyes turned towards the tormented sky overhead. Isabel’s augmented vision was the first to spot the incoming Thunderhawks and she extended a hand to point. ‘There!’

Two night-black shapes powered down through the clouds and executed a fast, low pass over the assembled task force units, before swinging around to make a raptor’s landing in a clearing at the base of the besieged hill. The dropships were indeed Sororitas craft, with the sainted *fleur de lys* visible in bright bleached white on their wings – but they lacked the crimson trim characteristic to all war machines in service to the Order of Our Martyred Lady.

Still, Miriya knew their colours, for she had seen them many times and fought alongside those who bore them into battle. Shouldering her bolter on its strap, she strode down the incline to meet the craft as their drop ramps yawned open like howling mouths.

Matching her pace, Sister Cassandra spoke quietly so only Miriya would hear her. ‘These are not of our fleet. Look there, the sigil upon the fuselage. The red heart cresting the white Byzant cross...’

‘The Order of The Valorous Heart,’ said Verity, overhearing and offering the name aloud. ‘Why are they here?’

‘We shall see.’ Miriya halted and threw a look at her warriors, ordering them without a word to fall into honour guard formation. But despite their martial order, she could not help but note that all of her Order’s Sisters looked war-weary and battle-tarnished against the flawless black-on-black of the new arrivals, who marched down the ramps in lockstep formation.

The ebon armour and robes of the Sisters of the Valorous Heart were in parade ground condition. Their Sabbat-pattern helmets gleamed in the fading light of the day, expressionless crimson eyes searching the battlefield as if they expected danger to arise at any moment. The only flashes of tint on their wargear came from the white and red of their holy sigil. Theirs were the original colours of the Convent Sanctorum to which Miriya's Order also belonged, from the days before the Age of Apostasy and the splitting of the ranks that had occurred in its aftermath. Although she could not see their faces, Miriya sensed the hauteur in the new arrivals as they took in the state of their kinswomen.

That thought made her lip curl behind her breather mask, and Miriya dismissed it before it could take hold. She stepped forward, finding the other Order's commanding officer by the golden honour-chains and ceremonial chaplet adorning her armour. 'Well met, Sisters. Your arrival was not expected...'

The Celestian's blank helm turned to study Miriya. 'Well met,' she repeated. 'In the name of Saint Lucia, I greet you, Daughters of Saint Katherine.' Her faceplate snapped open to reveal severe green eyes framed by a short fuzz of ash-blond hair. 'You are in charge here?' There was a challenge in the words.

'By the Emperor's Grace, I am.' Something nagged at Miriya, and a sudden flash of recognition struck her. *I know this woman.* She looked closer and saw a familiar identifier in High Gothic, laser-etched into the skull sigil upon the Celestian's breastplate. 'Sister Oleande?'

Her utterance seemed to catch the other Sororitas off-guard. 'Aye. That is my name. You know of me?'

Miriya came closer. 'We have bled for the same ground, Sister. On the Icarus Front, against the predations of the xenos. A decade ago now, do you not recall?' She tapped her chest. 'I am Miriya. I commanded a force of Celestians then.'

'Ah.' Oleande gave a wan nod. 'Of course. Yes. Forgive me, Sister. Much has changed since then.' She seemed to refocus her gaze. 'But you are a Celestian no longer? I see no war-rosary upon you.'

Miriya nodded, not wanting to dwell on her own misfortunes. 'As you say, much has changed. But our duty remains the same.'

Oleande stepped down off the Thunderhawk's ramp and her troops

followed suit. She gestured with her white-lined gauntlet towards the chapel sealed inside the force barrier. ‘We came when we learned of your victory. You are to be commended... But I must demand an answer of you, Sister. Where is the Iconoclast?’

Miriya sensed an abrupt rise in tension among the assembled Sisters of the Valorous Heart as Oleande asked her question, and for a moment she was unsure how to react. ‘Trapped,’ she said at length. ‘You have arrived as we regroup for the final act of our mission.’ She nodded towards the imprisoned chapel. ‘I intend to enter with a handpicked strike force and kill the heretic before the next dawn.’

‘Have you come to affirm the execution?’ asked Verity. The hospitaller knew as well as the Battle Sisters that the shrines of the Valorous Heart had suffered in the past from the actions of the Army of the Iconoclast, as much as those of Miriya’s Order.

Oleande seemed visibly relieved, and she shook her head. ‘*Ave Imperator*. The Master of Mankind has heard our prayers and granted them.’ She spoke the words to her cadre before turning back to face Miriya and the others. ‘Sister, take joy in knowing that you have done what no others could. You have captured this traitor and ended a murderous reign of terror across the stars. And now you can rest.’ Oleande cast an eye over their dented and laser-scarred wargear. ‘Your fight is over. You may stand down. We will take things from here. We will do what must be done.’

Oleande’s statement was so unexpected that it briefly robbed Miriya of the power to reply.

Not so with Ananke, however, who blurted out a fierce snarl of denial and shook her head. ‘What say you?’ she snapped. ‘After we have spent years fighting this crusade, you come from out of nowhere when the killing blow is to be struck and ask us to *step aside*?’

‘This is unacceptable,’ Miriya said, finding her voice. ‘Oleande, you must see that. How can you ask such a thing of us?’

The Celestian’s eyes narrowed and her voice grew cold. ‘I did not ask you for anything, Sister. I am telling you.’

Miriya bristled at the other woman’s tone, and she sensed the same rush of anger wash over her cohorts. She was keenly aware of the difference in rank between herself and Oleande, even if the two of them were equal in veteran status and battlefield experience, but still it was hard to keep her

tone level. ‘You demand this?’ She reached for the pouch on her belt. ‘I have here a warrant from the High Canoness, supreme commander of my Order—’

‘As do I.’ Oleande cut her off, as one of her warriors stepped forward to show a sheet of photic parchment bearing the mark of the Ophelia VII convent and the sigil of the mistress of the Valorous Heart.

Without hesitation, Sister Verity imposed herself between the two groups of warriors, raising her hands in a gesture of conciliation. ‘Can this act of justice not be... shared?’

‘Never!’ Oleande snapped. ‘While the Valorous Heart has nothing but respect for the Sisterhood of the Martyred Lady and all they have given to expedite this mission, it must be affirmed that *our* Order has prior claim on the life of the heretic known as the Iconoclast. The heinous crimes of desecration committed against our most holy shrines by this criminal are monstrous in scope! Whole star systems burned in sacrifice to the Ruinous Powers. Sacred relics defiled and obliterated! Sisters and laypeople murdered in the most abhorrent of manners...’ She lost momentum for a brief instant, her eyes briefly clouding with tears at the thought of such things. Then Oleande pushed on, snarling like a firebrand. ‘All that matters is that this aberration dies screaming! Do you not agree, that by the hand of my Order or yours, the end result is the same? The galaxy will be cleansed of the Iconoclast’s existence and be better for it!’

‘You cannot come here after all the blood that has been shed and all the battles we have fought are done.’ Isabel’s words were icy and hard. From the corner of her eye, Miriya saw that her Sister was gripping her bolt rifle tightly, in a battle-ready stance. ‘After our Order has taken the burden of this mission for so long, we will not allow another to steal the glory of the final kill out from under us!’

A deathly silence fell across the hillside, broken only by the low hum of the force wall and the ticking of the Thunderhawk’s cooling engines. The Sisters of the Martyred Lady were fatigued, that was undeniable – but they were still burning with rage enough to see their enemy ended. And if Oleande’s warriors tried to stand in the way of that righteous vengeance, there would be violence.

Miriya’s martial mind parsed the situation in a heartbeat. The remains of the Vestal Task Forces outnumbered the squads from the Thunderhawks,

but if this became an open conflict, the death toll would be great, and there was no way to know how many more Valorous Hearts were on the ships up in orbit.

Then she caught up to her own thoughts and felt sick inside. *Sister fighting Sister?* It was unconscionable. They were not the Adeptus Astartes, whose fractious past had often set their Chapters into battle with one another; the Adepta Sororitas were supposed to be incorruptible and above such things, unified and forever whole through their true faith in the God-Emperor.

‘This is not about glory!’ Oleande admonished Isabel. ‘The right to strike the executioner’s blow is ours and ours alone!’ She glared at Miriya. ‘Will you force me to exercise my superiority over you, Sister? I shall make it a direct order if I must. Are you prepared to defy the will of the Covent Sanctorum?’

Miriya struggled to hold her tone in check. ‘You ask too much.’

‘I do not *ask*,’ Oleande repeated.

A mechanical cough sounded behind her, and Miriya turned as Questor Nohlan stepped forward. ‘If it pleases my Honoured Sisters, may I speak?’ She nodded to him before Oleande could say otherwise and the adept went on. ‘It would appear you both possess warrants of authority from your respective High Canoness, each of which is the mistress of an Order Majoris. By the letter of Imperial law and the edicts of the Ecclesiarchy, each warrant is equally valid. One cannot countermand the other, regardless of the rank of the Sister who holds it.’

‘This is so,’ added Verity. ‘Only the Abbess Sanctorum of Ophelia can hold sway over such an impasse. Her word on the matter would be binding and final.’

Miriya put her hand on Isabel’s forearm and the meaning of the gesture was clear. *Put up your weapons*. She met Oleande’s gaze and held it. ‘I will accept the edict of the Abbess on this matter, Sister. Will you do the same?’ The rest of the sentence was unspoken, but everyone on the hillside heard the echo of it. *Or will we be forced to draw blood over this?*

‘What do you propose?’ spat the Celestian. ‘That we send a message to Ophelia VII for the Abbess to rule on who has primacy here? That could take months to expedite!’ She jutted her chin towards the force barrier. ‘And while we sit here, the traitor has time to plan and prepare for us...

Perhaps even escape that confinement!’

‘Not so,’ noted the Mechanicus adept. ‘The ethereal envelope projected by the relic is not only a wall for mass and energy, but also a membrane against *time*. The enclosure was erected several hours ago, but for those trapped inside time will pass at a far slower rate.’ A smug tone entered Nohlan’s words. ‘I can assure you all that the Iconoclast is going nowhere.’

‘But we can move through the barrier from outside with the aid of the Cult Mechanicus whenever we wish,’ said Verity, ‘is that not so?’

Miriya nodded, still holding Oleande’s gaze. ‘So we hold off entering the chapel until a higher authority decides which of us will have the honour of killing the Iconoclast. Unless you see another way to move forward, Sister Celestian?’

Oleande was silent for a long moment, then she reached up and slammed shut her visor. ‘Send your message,’ she snapped, and turned on her heel to march back up the ramp into her dropship. Her troops did the same, turning their back on Miriya and the others.

‘How dare they!’ Ananke could not hold her silence a moment more, and spat out the words as the Battle Sisters drew back from the clearing. ‘Bad enough that they might demand to join us at the last moment, but to order us off a fight that is ours alone to prosecute—’

‘It is no lie that they have fair cause to hate the Iconoclast as much as anyone,’ said Verity. ‘The heretic has cost them much.’

‘No doubt,’ said Marcia, ‘but what coin have Oleande’s Sisters spent in order to find the criminal? They did not fight with us, and we have paid with our dearest blood.’

Pandora’s face, slack in death, rose and fell in Miriya’s thoughts. ‘*Truth. Truth on all sides. But we must be clear-eyed on this. Our mission here is not just to take revenge for those we have lost. We were sent after the Iconoclast to serve the Emperor’s will and enforce His edicts. Suffer not the traitor to live.*’

‘*Suffer not the traitor to live,*’ intoned the others in unison.

Miriya glanced up at the sky. The crimson sun of Meseda Quintus was setting below the ruined horizon, and the constellation of bright stars revealed above were Sororitas warships in low orbit. ‘Questor Nohlan. Contact the astropathic choir aboard our vessel and order them to

commune with their kindred across the void. Have them reach out to the Ophelia system. You know what question must be asked.'

The adept bowed. '*Ave Imperator*. It will be done.'

'And what would you have us do, Eloheim?' said Cassandra.

'Be mindful,' Miriya admonished, striding away towards their temporary encampment amid the rings of tanks. 'And be ready.'

As was usual with any battlefield mission of the Adepta Sororitas, one of the Rhino armoured carriers in the deployment had been designated as the operation's mobile chantry, and the tracked vehicle's interior had been adorned with candles made of Ophelian tallow and portable icons of Saint Katherine and the God-Emperor.

Estelle, one of the Novices Constantia whose duties were to maintain the sanctity of the shrineworks, bowed respectfully to Miriya as she entered. 'Milady. Do you desire solitude?'

'For the moment, aye.'

'As you wish.' The younger woman bowed and left her alone to pray for guidance.

The servos in her power armour stuttered as she knelt before the icons and made the sign of the holy Aquila. Miriya bowed her head and spoke the litany that had been the marker for every action she had taken in her life. '*A spiritu dominatus. Domine, libra nos. A morte perpetua. Domine, libra nos. Ave, Imperator. Domine, libra nos.*'

Only the wind answered her, a low moan through the Rhino's open hatch. Outside, the hymns she had heard before had ceased. Word had spread quickly through the encampment of Oleande's demands and Miriya's Sisters were ill at ease. None of them wanted to raise their voices in celebration, not if their prize was about to be stolen away from them.

She looked up into the eyes of her Order's founder. 'Holy Katherine, grant me wisdom this night. Give me strength.'

*Does it matter whose hand is on the blade? A quiet voice in her thoughts dared the question. As long as the traitor dies, does it matter?*

For a moment, Katherine's face blurred and briefly became that of Pandora – then Lethe, then Portia, Iona and Decima – and all the other lost Sisters Miriya had known, who fought and perished to uphold the ideals of the Order. What had they died for, if not for these victories?

*How can it be anything but an insult to them if we are denied our retribution?*

Someone entered the chapel-compartment behind her and Miriya turned to see Sister Verity make the stations of obeisance before the God-Emperor's icon. The hospitaller met her gaze with a nod. 'Forgive my intrusion. I thought I would find you here.'

'Have you come to convince me to let Oleande have her way?' Miriya eyed her. While Verity was trained to fight if the need arose, she was as much a woman of peace as the 41st millennium could allow one to be. She constantly sought that path through the thicket of dangers that the galaxy threw at her, and it was a testament to her strength of character that she remained resilient in her beliefs after all this time.

'I would never do such a thing,' Verity replied. 'She asks for that which she has not earned, even if the wounds of the Celestian's kindred make her deserving. If Oleande had only shown some humility in her words, made a request instead of a demand...'

Miriya gave a humourless chuckle. 'Ah, Sister. You show how little you know of the Valorous Heart. Humility is not their strongest suit. And Sister Celestian Oleande has never been one to court it.'

'You fought with her against the Eldar, yes?'

She nodded. 'Aye. The aliens were preying upon pilgrim ships and our Orders merged some of their forces for a time, in order to show the xenos the error of their ways.' Miriya remembered the bloody business clearly, and as the night drew on and the candles burned low, she told Verity a few stories of the battles that had been fought.

'Oleande is a warrior of great repute,' she concluded. 'But a woman of tempestuous temperament, not one of moderation. She has always shown the greatest, most ruthless zeal.'

'I've seen the like,' said the hospitaller grimly. 'Those who do not shy away from the taste of blood.'

Miriya nodded once again. 'Truth in that. Although I will say that she does not seem like the woman I remember from those days. Time has altered her... Made her harsher, if that could be possible.'

'Perhaps that is why she is so intractable,' offered Verity. 'We cannot know what trials she has faced since those days. But based on what you *do* know of her, answer me this... If the word of the Abbess Sanctorum goes

against Oleande, what do you think she will do?’

‘Obey,’ said Miriya. But part of her was not as certain of that as she wished to be, and she felt compelled to illuminate her friend. ‘You must understand, Verity, that the Sisters of the Valorous Heart carry a heavy burden. When the Reign of Blood was at its height, the apostate Goge Vandire duped our Blessed Katherine and the other mother-founders of our Orders into fighting *against* the Throne of Terra. It was only when they were brought to face the God-Emperor himself that they learned the truth and turned upon the heretic.’

Verity bowed her head. She, like Miriya and every other living Sister, knew this shameful chapter of their shared history only too well.

Miriya went on, recalling the lessons she had learned by rote as an orphan child in the Schola Progenum. ‘In that act of redemption, the Adepta Sororitas was born. Saint Katherine created my Order, just as her cohort Saint Lucia created Oleande’s.’ Two of the original six Sisters of Battle, Katherine and Lucia were close confidantes and that strength was reflected in the names of their Orders – the Valorous Heart and the Fiery Heart. It was only much later, when Saint Katherine was betrayed and murdered by the Witch-Cult of Mnestteus, that her Order changed its name to reflect their terrible loss.

But while the Order of Our Martyred Lady embraced the edicts of righteous faith and cleansing fire that their mistress had embodied, Oleande’s Order walked a different path.

‘They believe they must atone for the mistakes of the past in all that they do. Their drive for penitence is unbounded, Sister, and they are inflexible in their crusade to redress a balance that can never be resolved.’ Miriya tapped the Aquila symbol etched into the floor of the Rhino, in a gesture of fealty. ‘This is why they press so hard to take the Iconoclast’s punishment from us. To deny it to them will seem like a defeat. An insult.’

‘I appreciate the clarity,’ said the hospitaller. ‘But knowing it does nothing to defuse the tension here. The other Sisters...’ Verity paused, framing her words. ‘Some of them speak of Oleande’s cadre with far less charity than you do.’

‘It has been a long campaign,’ Miriya allowed. ‘But we cannot allow lassitude to erode our correctness. And I—’

The distant, unmistakable crack of a bolt-round sounded outside the

Rhino and both women froze. A heartbeat later, more shots rang out, and Miriya was already sprinting through the open hatch, pulling up her breather mask against the tainted air. Verity came scrambling after her, eyes wild as she cast around for the source of the sound.

Now that night had fallen, the hellish liquid light cast from the towering force wall gave everything around them a shifting, infernal cast. Other Battle Sisters were already climbing atop the hulls of parked tanks, scanning the landscape for threats.

Miriya could not stop herself from casting a look in the direction of the two silent Thunderhawks down in the clearing, a worrying possibility gnawing at her thoughts. Both craft were black shadows against the ground, silent and unmoving.

Bolter fire sounded again and this time she saw the twinkle of muzzle flashes up atop the crest of the hill, close to where the Mechanicus adepts had secured the giant tech-relic.

Miriya tapped a key on the side of her mask and snarled into her vox pickup. ‘Report! Who is firing?’

Questor Nohlan’s reply was instant, crackling through the audial bead in Miriya’s ear. ‘*We are under attack! The Celestians are here—!*’

The signal suddenly cut out and Miriya saw another flurry of gun-flashes, the crackle of the shots reaching her an instant later.

‘Did we miss some of the cultists?’ Cassandra called out the question as she raced across the camp to Miriya’s side. ‘I swear we eradicated every last one! Those Throne-forsaken fools don’t know when to lie down and die...’

‘I fear it isn’t our enemies,’ said Verity, the thoughts mirroring those of Miriya, ‘but our allies.’

‘To arms!’ shouted Miriya, and she broke into a run towards the crest of the hill.

Isabel was there before them, her face like thunder. Nearby, Rubria bent over the corpses of half a dozen skitarii and gun-servitors, examining them dispassionately. The impact marks on the chests of the Mechanicus soldier-servants were unmistakably the grisly entry wounds of bolt-rounds from a Godwyn-De’az pattern weapon, the standard long arm of the Adepta Sororitas.

Other adepts stood around in disarray, many of them keening to one another in binaric cant as they clambered over the structure of the technorelic, desperately checking its functions and the integrity of the force wall.

‘Did you see it happen?’ Miriya asked her Sister.

Isabel shook her head, anger and sorrow warring across her scarred face. ‘I was close... But not close enough. I heard their voices, the gunfire... But by the time I got up here, they were through. *Gone.*’

Miriya’s gaze shifted to a tall oval of brass that lay pressed against the undulating surface of the force barrier. It was the only place in the membrane of energy where an object could pass through from outside and back again, and the power field swirled and crackled within its bounds. Her jaw set as she tried to make sense of what had transpired.

Limping, dragging a damaged machine-leg behind him, Questor Nohlan came out of the shadows and gave her a weak, brittle smile. The expression seemed grotesque on his hybridised face of metal and flesh. ‘It would seem that the Honoured Celestian Oleande did not wish to wait for a higher ruling.’ Oil and watery processing fluids were dripping from beneath his cloak, but he paid them no mind. ‘She was quite insistent.’ He nodded towards the dead bodies. ‘We were taken by surprise, you understand. Our protocols for such an attack are incomplete...’

‘You did not expect an act of aggression from an ally,’ concluded Cassandra. ‘Curse them for this! What do they hope to achieve here?’ She turned on Miriya, as if the other woman could give her the answer she could not find. ‘Why in the Emperor’s name would they do such a thing? Oleande must know she will be punished for it!’

‘Perhaps she does not care,’ said Verity without looking up, as she scanned the torn-open corpses with her auspex. ‘She may believe she is atoning.’

‘It is *impossible* for a Sister of Battle to turn against the Imperium,’ said Rubria, rising to her feet, ignoring the hospitaller. ‘Our faith is unbounded! There must be an explanation for this act!’

No one wanted to voice what lurked in everyone’s thoughts, and so the words hung in the cold night unspoken and threatening. *Treachery. Betrayal. Disloyalty.* Miriya felt her heart shrink in her chest when she considered them.

*No Sororitas has ever fallen.* That was what a novice was taught from the

very first days of training. In every convent, in every Order, it was the bedrock upon which their unbreakable conviction was built. To even dare to suggest otherwise was to court censure of the greatest severity.

And yet Miriya found she could not meet Rubria's searching, imploring gaze. Instead she cast around, taking in the rest of her squad. They stood around her in loose formation, their uncertainty clear in their manner. Slowly, her old, keen battle-rage began to rise. Familiar and empowering, the Sister let it fill her. There was only one thing that could be done.

'Questor.' She shot a look at Nohlan. 'Do you function well enough to stand with us?'

'Processing. Processing.' The adept made a clicking sound and reached under his robes, staunching the flow of fluids. 'I do, Honoured Sister. If you wish it.'

'I wish it.' She nodded and drew herself up before barking out an order 'Strike formation!' The call had the desired effect, and Isabel, Cassandra and the others snapped to attention, presenting their weapons ready. 'We go in after them.'

'Are you sure that is wise?' Verity said quietly. 'If Oleande and her troops are in there...' She faltered. 'We don't know what her intentions are.'

'Yes we do,' Miriya corrected. 'We know full well.'

At length, Verity gave a nod. 'I suppose so.' She gathered herself up and made a show of checking over her medicae gauntlet. 'I will attend you.'

Rubria looked askance at the slight hospitaller and it was clear that she considered Verity's offer to be foolish; but Miriya had served too long with the Sister of Serenity alongside her squad to doubt Verity's capability in even the harshest of war zones. To suggest she wait outside the force barrier would be a slur on her character, as marked as the affront Miriya had felt when Oleande demanded the same of her.

'Take your place, Sister,' she commanded.

Nohlan led the way to the brass gateway and pushed aside the fussing adepts minoris working at the humming power grids that surrounded it. 'The transition will be very unpleasant for unmodified humans,' he warned. 'Prepare yourselves.'

He stepped across, vanishing into the shimmering field matrix as if passing through a wall of captured lightning.

Miriya voiced an invocation under her breath and went after him.

The Questor's estimate was conservative at best.

Once, Sister Miriya had been hit by a witchkin's psychic shock-blast that lit up her nerves with white fire, searing her body with an agony that seemed to last an eternity. This was worse.

Although the energy membrane was as thin as a sheet of gossamer, it felt as if she had fallen into an inferno. The pain was unbelievable. Every atom of her seemed to be alight and burning, tearing itself apart with the murderous violence of the transition. For a moment, all she wanted was to die and have the agony end. But that flash of weakness was smothered even as it formed by something greater, something unbreakable. The knowledge that her duty was yet to be done.

This was but another trial, another moment of pain and hardship along the path that was destiny to every Adepta Sororitas that had ever lived.

*Adversity is a test, her mentors had taught her. Never fail it.*

And then she was through, pulling down her breather and fighting the urge to heave and bring up bile. Nohlan stood before her, twitching and giving off a peculiar ululation as he bled away the static charge that had built up in his cyborg body through the crossover.

The stale air inside the force wall cordon was still and rich with the metallic tang of spilled blood. Miriya looked behind her, for the first time seeing the world outside the force wall from the perspective of those trapped inside it. Frozen, smoky shapes that might have been human figures hovered out there. They looked like wraiths.

The other Sisters came through one at a time, each of them sweaty and twitching from the experience. Ananke and Isabel first, then Danae and Verity before Cassandra brought up the rear with Marcia, Rubria and Aemilia. Each of them shook off the effect of the transition in their own way. All of the Sisters knew it was only the precursor to the horrors that awaited them.

With quick, cutting gestures she silently ordered them into a staggered battle formation and shot Nohlan a look. By now he had gathered himself, and one of the mechadendrites emerging from beneath his cloak rose up to eye level like an angry serpent.

The tip snapped open to reveal a detector fan, and it moved this way and that, tasting the air. After a moment, he pointed. 'Processing. Readings are in conflict and... Unsettling. Processing.'

Miriya drew her bolt pistol and chainsword. ‘Our mandate is a simple one,’ she told the others. ‘If you lay your gaze upon anything that is not loyal... Kill it.’

They advanced on what had become of the chapel. Miriya had seen pictis of the building on mission briefing slates, images of the holy site in days before the agents of Chaos had come to Meseda Quintus. Once, it had been a monument to the glory of the Imperium, a series of towering spires arranged like the Emperor’s crown rising up on the highest point of the city surrounding it.

Now those pinnacles were covered in blasphemous banners sewn together from human skins, tanned flesh branded with sigil of the Blood God, endlessly dripping with ichor. Heaps of skulls lay in drifts around the sides of the stone walls, and the pathways towards the holes blown through the shrine’s sides were uneven roads of broken bone fragments ground into the dirt.

At her side, Sister Aemilia smothered a noise in her throat – half-choke, half-sob – as they approached a line of X-shaped crucifixes. Each of the frames were made of girders, and hung upon them were the brutalised bodies of their Battle Sisters, lost months before in earlier attacks on the city. Their armour punctured by sword blows and shots, their lifeblood staining the sanctified ceramite and the ground beneath them, they were a tragic sight to behold. It was no death for one as noble as a Sororitas.

Verity detached herself from the group, openly weeping but still standing tall, and from her belt she pulled a small, jewelled bottle filled with water from the Font of Memory on Ophelia. She whispered a prayer for the souls of the lost and flicked a measure of the sacred fluid at the feet of each of the dead.

They paid their respects with a final bow, and moved on towards the ruined chapel. ‘The Emperor knows their names,’ said Cassandra, throwing a final, grim-faced look over her shoulder.

*And will He know ours before the day is out?* The question pricked at Miriya’s thoughts and she forced it away.

The stagnant air seemed to resonate, and her moment of distraction faded as the crackle of las-fire and bolter shots reached her ears.

‘Inside–?’ The question was still forming on Isabel’s lips when a cloud of

bone-dust billowed out of the closest hole in the wall, and from within it came a screaming, howling mass of people.

The Army of the Iconoclast were nightmare figures. A ragged mix of commoners, civilians, enforcers and guardsmen from every reach of the planet, all of them fallen to the blood-soaked madness of the Mark of Khorne. Their eyes were wide, lost to unreason and death-lust. Their clothing was coated in a slurry of congealed blood, organ meat and other body matter; some wore conical hoods made from the skins of those they had killed, some in crude armour fashioned from lashed-together human femur bones. They carried weapons of all kinds, from war-swords and makeshift stone clubs to lascarbines and autostubbers.

Their chants were a cacophony of dissonant shrieking, but one phrase repeated itself over and over as they boiled across the rubble towards the Battle Sisters. *'Blood for the Blood God! Skulls for the Skull Throne!'*

Miriya took careful aim at a chattering, flabby-faced man at the front of the group and fired a shot that turned his head into crimson mist. It was the signal for the rest of the squad to open fire, and as hostile rounds sparked off their armour, the Battle Sisters advanced and slaughtered their way through the enemy defenders.

The Iconoclast's devotees were so tightly packed together that some of the mass-reactive rounds over-penetrated their targets and ended more than one of them with a single shot. The following ranks hurdled the still-warm bodies of their dead brethren without pause, and as the slide on Miriya's bolt pistol locked open, she went to her buzzing chainsword. Revving the spinning tungsten teeth of the blade, she cursed the enemy and waded into their ranks with savage sweeps of the weapon, her face twisting in fury.

She killed a dozen in the span of a few heartbeats, opening torsos to the air, spilling out ropes of intestine and wet gushes of blood across the ground. A brutal kind of joy washed over Miriya as she briefly lost herself in the action. She felt herself being pulled towards the same berserker rage that her targets showed. Jetting streamers of red spattered over her armour and through the stale air, glistening brightly, daring her to wallow in the act of killing.

It lasted only a moment, but the feeling shamed Miriya and the Battle Sister expunged it brutally, mouthing a sacrament of protection to herself

as she ended the lives of a group bearing heavy energy pikes. They were the last of the defenders at the entrance and they fell screaming, the echoes of their foul prayers fading away.

Miriya's heart pounded against the inside of her ribcage and she stilled her bloodlust with an effort of will. 'The power of the daemon Khorne is strong in this place,' she said aloud, her voice rough and cracked.

Rubria spat on the ground and made a sign of warding. 'I feel it. The beast does not care who wins in the wars that it creates, only that blood continues to be shed for eternity. Ours, or the traitor-kin's, it matters not.'

'Guard yourselves, my Sisters,' said Miriya, moving into the shadows of the ruined wall as she reloaded her bolt pistol. 'This will test us all...'

The horrors grew worse within.

Inside the chapel's devastated atrium, they came upon a heap of butchered bodies dangling from hooked chains, each of them milk-pale where they had been exsanguinated into troughs. The churn of thick, glutinous blood sloshed heavily along crude, jury-rigged channels into pipes along the walls, pumped upwards by chugging machines to then cascade down once more in a vast red waterfall. The curtain of hissing liquid acted like a shimmering partition to the vestibule beyond, and through it Miriya glimpsed more bodies – but these were lithe, armoured figures.

'The Celestians!' cried Verity, and she started forward, before baulking at the notion of pushing through the blood-fall. Danae and Ananke took the initiative and fired rounds into the mechanism of the horrific device, blasting the pumps into fragments. In moments, the rain of red became a trickle, and the scene within the vestibule was made clear.

The fallen Sisters of the Valorous Heart lay in a cluster. Miriya knew the circumstances of their fate immediately – the way most of them lay back to back, their guns all aimed outwards in a wheel of death, the cascades of spent bolt-shells scattered about their boots. When the end had come for them, they had been firing in every direction, and as she mentally tracked the lines of attack, Miriya's hard gaze found heaps of heretic bodies. A ring of dead enemies lay around the Battle Sisters, all of them carrying heavy man-portable autocannons of a type more suited to blasting through tank hulls than power armour.

‘This.... This was butchery,’ growled Marcia.

‘This was an *ambush*,’ corrected Danae, kicking at the headless corpse of a heretic fighter to turn it over. ‘And curse Oleande, but she walked her squads right into it!’

Miriya nodded bleakly. The Celestians had fallen victim to a ploy that the Sisters of Our Martyred Lady had encountered on more than one occasion during this campaign. Her judgement was confirmed when she stooped and grabbed a fistful of heavy, slick material fashioned into a cover; a camo-cloak. The cloak shimmered as she tightened her grip, the colours of the material shifting and blurring, breaking up.

‘Survivors here!’ Rubria shouted from among the ranks of the fallen Sororitas.

Miriya tossed the ruined cloak away and ran to her side. She stood over an olive-skinned Celestian whose eyes were bloodshot and unfocused. At her side, a few others of her cadre were still alive, although their wounds were grave. ‘Can you speak?’ she asked.

The Celestian nodded, coughing up pink foam in a rattling wheeze. ‘We... were undone by our own... arrogance.’

Miriya looked around, imagining how it had played out. The heretics, silently waiting in the shadows around the edge of the wide vestibule, concealed beneath the sensor-opaque cloth that mimicked exactly the shade of the blood-stained stonework around them.

‘Oleande led us in...’ the Celestian continued. ‘The Iconoclast set a trap...’

‘Eloheim,’ Rubria said quietly. ‘Sister Oleande... She is not here.’

The injured Celestian heard her and managed an agonised nod. ‘My commander broke through while we... We held. Even now, she searches to find the Iconoclast and end... the mission.’

‘Such a waste...’ muttered Cassandra, standing nearby. ‘If only they had waited! We would have known to watch for this tactic—’

Miriya held up a hand to silence her. ‘No matter now. We must finish what was started here.’ She beckoned to Danae and the Questor. ‘Sister. Take Marcia and Aemilia, get the wounded back to the entrance. Nohlan, go with them.’

‘What will you do?’ said the adept. ‘Without me to scry the way—’

‘We will manage,’ insisted Verity.

Miriya nodded at the hospitaller's words and turned away. 'Ananke. Cassandra. Rubria. Take the southern aisle across the way and search towards the reliquary. Signal via vox if you find anything.' The three women nodded as one and set off into the shadows. She turned to Isabel and Verity. 'You will come with me. We'll push forward down the nave towards the far side of the chapel.'

Verity frowned. 'You believe Oleande is still alive in this charnel house?'

Miriya nodded, checking her weapons as they moved off. 'I have seen her fight, Sister. She will not sell her life cheaply.'

Her words proved prophetic.

Crossing what had once been the ornate space of the main transept, skirting pyres made of bodies and desecrated artefacts, the clatter of blades and the skirl of weapons fire echoed off the high ceiling overhead.

Miriya broke into a run and Isabel kept pace with her. Verity was close behind, clasping a small-gauge holdout bolt pistol in her hands. She hid her hesitance well, considered the Battle Sister. Any other hospitaller might have asked to join the evacuation of the wounded, but not Verity. Her dedication remained exemplary.

They passed the low archway leading into the great chancel, and at last, the object of their mission presented itself.

The Iconoclast was in full flow of combat, fighting among a troop of traitor soldiers in debased Auxilia carapace armour festooned with spikes and kill-cult runes. Sister Oleande and a pair of her Celestians were giving them no quarter, but it was immediately clear that the enemy had them on the defensive. They were being toyed with, cut and bled with each surge of attack but not killed outright. The servants of the Blood God wanted to extend and savour the agony of their eventual defeat.

Miriya had never been this close to the arch-heretic before. Clad from head to foot in close-fitting wargear of porous white material that glistened like porcelain, the Iconoclast was rendered into a blank, indefinable human shape. She thought of a denuded mannequin or an artist's figure model; the Iconoclast had nothing to define it, no hint of identity or self. The only characteristics that broke the uniformity were the two weapons in the heretic's gauntleted hands – ancient *khopesh*-fashion sickle swords, wicked silver curves that flashed in the dull illumination

filtering through chapel's stained glassaic windows. The ends of the hilts had concealed bolter magazines inside them, allowing the wielder to attack from range if needed. Miriya had witnessed the after-effects of those weapons up close, months before in a burning hive tower when they had arrived too late to prevent the heretic's escape. They were the grisly tools of a killer who revelled in bloodletting. A killer who could not be allowed to escape again.

'Attack!' shouted Miriya and she sprinted up over a pile of fallen masonry, leading with her bolt pistol. The Battle Sister killed three of the traitor soldiers with three shots from the weapon, and she saw Oleande react with shock at her arrival.

Still, her unexpected intervention was not enough to slow the Iconoclast's murderous assault. The white-clad figure leapt into the air and came down on one of the Celestians as the Valorous Sister scrambled to reload her bolter. The tips of the sickle swords went into the flex-metal mesh beneath her chin and around her throat, and into the point where her breastplate met her thorax. The weapons were aimed perfectly into the weaker spots of the Sororitas battle armour, and they went right through, bursting out the Celestian's back in a welter of red. Miriya could do nothing but watch as the Iconoclast tore the sickle swords away in opposite directions, opening up the Battle Sister, tearing her into rags.

A great liquid mass of the Celestian's blood seemed to rise up and engulf the Iconoclast in a wave, drenching the white armour until it was crimson. But then, to Miriya's horror, the porous surface of the wargear *drank in* the murdered woman's blood, soaking it away.

The heretic caught sight of the new arrivals and screamed out a command. One of the Iconoclast's surviving soldier-slaves turned a lascarbine on the Battle Sisters and opened fire, spitting shrieking bolts of yellow energy across the rubble-choked chancel. The shots went high, sizzling through the air over Miriya's head and she bobbed as she moved.

'Sister, beware!' Isabel shouted a warning and too late Miriya realised that the las-bolts had found a different target. Above them, a great brass ceremonial censer hung from a thick, dust-caked chain; in better times, it would have been filled with perfumed oils heated into vapour, to be breathed over the heads of the faithful penitents who visited the chapel to worship the God-Emperor.

Drained and dead, the censer was an empty vestige of the holy shrine's previous existence, and now the beam-shots severed the chain, bringing it down in a clattering rush. The brass orb, as big as a Land Raider, crashed into the mosaic floor and broke apart, the wreckage of it blocking the archway Miriya and the others had entered through.

The Battle Sister heard Isabel cry out and fall in the wake of the collapse. She spun, daring to disengage from the fight just long enough to find her scarred Sister lying a short distance away. A piece of bronze pipe thrown from the censer's interior had speared her in the back, her armour's artificial muscles sparking and jerking.

Verity sprinted to Isabel's side, waving Miriya away. 'I have her, Sister! Go!' Despite the energy bolts crackling around her, the hospitaller went to Isabel's aid, ignoring everything else.

Miriya shot her a nod and regathered her momentum, picking out and killing the cultist with the lascarbine before he could marshal himself for another salvo of fire. The few remaining members of the Iconoclast's retinue of killers were more focused on destroying Oleande's squad, and she saw another of the Valorous Heart ended in a flurry of sword strikes.

'Come at me, heretic!' bellowed Sister Oleande, drawing her own power sword and brandishing it at the enemy. She was now the last of her Order still standing inside the ruined shrine.

The Iconoclast's faceless visage inclined towards her, as if amused, and then the white-clad figure vaulted towards the Battle Sister with incredible speed. Blades clashed as they went into single combat.

Miriya moved quickly, trying to close the distance, but the other heretic soldiers anticipated her tactics and the three of them went at her at once, stub-guns and spiked power-mauls turned upon her.

Without the time to reload her bolt pistol, Miriya used the butt of the massive handgun to cave in the face of the first attacker to reach her, smashing through the bridge of a polymer visor and splintering bone, meat and cartilage.

Without losing a moment of potential, she let her chainsword extend and swing down, the blade's fanged teeth a blur of bloody metal as they cut into the thigh of the next attacker. The weapon sparked through dented armour and turned flesh into gobbets of red, opening up the man's femoral artery and setting him to gush his lifeblood into the dust.

The third attacker fired a stubber gun point-blank into her chestplate and the raw kinetic impact slammed her off-balance and into a stumble, the shock knocking the empty bolt pistol from her hand. Heat shunted from the impact site bloomed across her breast and throat, but she ignored it, thrusting herself back to her feet.

From the corner of her eye, she saw blades flashing as Oleande and the Iconoclast duelled back and forth, but she dared not shift her gaze from the shooter for even a moment. He threw back his head and laughed. *‘Blood for the Blood God!’*

As he spoke the words, Miriya smelled the blood in her nostrils. The dark, heavy scent of it, lingering and potent. She could suddenly feel every single tiny droplet of spilled vitae that had spattered over her face as she made the chainsword kill moments earlier. The urge to lick her lips was so strong it took an effort of will to resist. ‘Get out of my soul,’ she growled. ‘There is no place for your daemon king there!’

*‘Skulls for the Skull—!’* The gunman’s chant was cut dead when the dagger hidden in the Battle Sister’s chaplet flew from her outstretched hand and arrowed through his jawbone, locking his mouth shut. He staggered back, trying to laugh, frothing and gurgling as his own vital fluids fountained out of a new, ragged wound in his face.

Miriya stepped to him in a single motion and grabbed him by the throat. She pulled the man to her, as if about to embrace him, but instead his body met the buzzing tip of her chainsword and she dragged him on to it. He jerked and screamed as the weapon made short work of his armour and the soft, yielding matter beneath it. When he was dead, the Battle Sister shoved him away and recovered her chaplet. She stalked back to where her pistol had fallen, shaking tainted liquid off the snap-dagger. Everything around her stank of stale, sour gore.

She blinked away ruby droplets from her eyelashes and events slowed around her. Miriya felt the tremor of unchained ferocity singing in her nerves, the thunderous pounding of her heartbeat. The raw need to do violence pushed at her psyche.

She stooped to grab her gun and froze. A few metres away, Oleande lay pinned to the ground with one of the sickle swords through her belly and her own blade lying out of reach. The Iconoclast stood over her, twirling the first weapon’s twin, the spatters of red on her white armour trickling

upwards against gravity into crevices across the torso and throat.

The blank doll-face turned to face Miriya and up came a hand to waggle a finger in her direction, like a parent giving a child a playful warning not to misbehave.

Miriya was too far away to attack with the chainsword, her bolt pistol was out of reach and empty, and she guessed that her tactic with the chaplet-dagger would be a waste, given that the Iconoclast would be able to kill Oleande in the second she drew back her hand to throw it.

But Oleande's life was worth the death of the heretic, and they both knew it. Miriya shifted slightly, readying herself to explode into motion.

Before she could commit to the act, soft, feminine laughter issued out from beneath the Iconoclast's mask. The porcelain sheath parted into quarters and retreated back off the face beneath.

*I swear I will tear off the Iconoclast's mask and see the heretic's true face before I deliver the killing blow.* Miriya's vow echoed in her memory; but here the traitor was revealing itself of its own accord.

It was a human face beneath the white covering, a woman's face. Scarred and florid with the rush of blood, but an aspect that Miriya *knew*. Severe green eyes. Ash-blond hair. It was Oleande's face.

'What trick is this?' spat Miriya. 'Your mockery is meaningless, traitor! Whatever face you hide behind, you will still die!'

'I'm not hiding, Miriya,' said the Iconoclast. 'And it is no trick. Is it?' She looked down at the Battle Sister pinned to the ground. 'The only falsehood here is *her*.'

'Lies,' coughed the Sister of the Valorous Heart. 'Avert... your eyes. The daemons take on many forms...'

'No trick,' repeated the Iconoclast, becoming angry. 'I am no daemon, not yet.' She reached for the hilt of the other sickle sword and gave it a twist, causing the woman on the ground to cry out. '*I am Oleande*. I always have been. This one gave up her name to steal mine. So that none would know. So that *the lie* could never be seen.'

'No Sororitas has ever fallen.' Miriya said the words before she could stop herself. *Could it be true?* The possibility sickened her on a level she thought impossible to contain. 'I knew Sister Oleande! She would never give herself to the Ruinous Powers!'

'Fool,' said the Iconoclast. 'Liar.' She tapped her head. 'Think, Miriya.'

Didn't you wonder how it was my army could stay one step ahead of you for so long? Didn't you ask yourself how I could know the tactics of the Sororitas so well?' She let out a sigh. 'Remember the woman you fought with at the Icarus Front. You saw me. Even if you never wished to admit it, you saw how much I loved the cut and the kill.' She made a deep, purring growl. 'And after a while, the faith and fire our rancid corpse-emperor gave me wasn't enough. I wanted *more*. I wanted blood and skulls.' She leered at Miriya, her violent desire leaking into every word. 'Khorne answered my need...'

Miriya watched her lick the congealing blood off her sword and all doubt melted away. 'Is it so?' She asked the question of the wounded woman on the ground. When she didn't answer, Miriya went on. 'Tell me the name of the Repentia who perished on the twenty-seventh day at Icarus,' she demanded, her voice rising. She felt betrayed. 'The one who saved the rest of us from a krak grenade. Oleande was there! She lit a candle in the name of the honoured dead that night!'

'I do... not recall!' spat the Battle Sister.

'Her name was *Adessa*,' said the Iconoclast, and part of Miriya's spirit died to hear the truth spoken by the heretic. 'Your Sister died in agony, but fear not. The Lord of Rage embraces such endings.' She pointed at Miriya. 'You wept for her, I remember. So soft then. But not so now. I think you hear the same clarion that I did. The rage, coming close to the surface.'

'No.' Miriya shook her head, turning inwards, concentrating on the Emperor's Light, grasping for it. '*No*.'

'You think I am the only one to fall?' The figure in white laughed and the harsh sound cascaded off the broken walls. 'The only one who *willingly* burned her oath for greater power? You know better than that, Sister Miriya. After all, it is *your* Order that carries the stain of being the first to give up a daughter to the Eightfold Path!'

'Do not... speak the name!' The wounded Battle Sister coughed up blood as she shouted out the words.

'Sister Superior Miriael Sabathiel!' shouted the Iconoclast. 'She of the Order of Our Martyred Lady! Given unto the embrace of the Lord of Dark Delights, and such a waste too...' She shook her head sadly, mockingly. 'As callow novices we were taught that no Sister ever falls, but Sabathiel is known. She is the cautionary tale. How do you square that circle,

Miriya? *None fall, yet one fell?* How does it feel to know you are lied to?’

She reached for an answer and could not find one. The Iconoclast – *Oleande* – saw it in her eyes and smiled.

‘Sabathiel was only the first. She built her own war band out of pious Sisters she enslaved herself from Order of the Argent Shroud, much to their shame... And then there were the others, quietly killed and cut out of history... Or *replaced*. Like me.’ *Oleande* strode back to her wounded double and glared at her. ‘All to protect the great lie of the Adepta Sororitas, to shield its brittle heart and soul from the shattering truth of Chaos!’ She drew back and spat in her own face. ‘You see before you the blood-soaked shame of the Valorous Heart. So humiliated they were by my defection to the true gods that they made this lie. Took a Sister and gave her my aspect, so that none would know. And they’ve been following your crusade ever since, Miriya. Waiting for this moment to come and end me. To seal the secret forever and burn out the indignity that is the heretic *Oleande*. The Iconoclast who dared to disown them.’

And now the veil fell. Now it was all clear; the instinct that something was amiss about the woman Miriya had met at the head of the Sisters of the Valorous Heart; their insistence on executing the heretic and doing so alone; their inexplicable attack on Nohlan’s adepts rather than waiting for the word of the Abbess. *They could not take the chance that the Abbess would rule against them*, she thought. *Their disgrace is too great for others to know of it.*

‘You see the lie,’ said *Oleande*, nodding towards her double. ‘Cut it open, Miriya. And you will be reborn as I was—’

The heavy triple-report of a bolter on burst-fire setting cut through the stagnant air of the chancel and *Oleande* was slammed away into the dust and debris. The flat bang of the mass-reactive shells dragged Miriya back from the edge of reverie and into the moment once more. She spun and saw Verity standing a short distance away, holding on to Isabel’s bolt rifle and shaking with adrenaline.

‘I... I grew tired of listening to her pontificate,’ she blurted out.

Miriya took a step towards the hospitaller, intending to take the rifle from her, but a high-pitched scream drew her back to the fray.

*Oleande* rose from the ashes, a bruise-purple impact crater in her chest where one of Verity’s shots had hit home. Something unholy and

monstrous was living in there, inside the heretic's chest cavity where her heart had once beat. She dragged herself up, advancing on the wounded Battle Sister who even now tried in vain to unpin herself from the ground.

Miriya broke into a run, and came in swinging her chainsword in a growling figure of eight, as Oleande screamed wordlessly at her twin. The bitter champion of Khorne brought down her curved blade in an executioner's blow towards the neck of the woman on the ground, intent on beheading her with a single strike.

The chainsword blocked the fall before the blade could bite, as Miriya closed the distance to her enemy. The sickle edge skipped off the churning teeth of the bigger weapon and a torrent of white sparks sprayed into the air.

Miriya put her weight into the parry and forced Oleande back and away from the injured Battle Sister. 'Your foul master will not take her,' she spat.

'Do not defy the will of the Blood God!' Oleande bellowed back. Her *khopesh* was slim and light, quicker to wield than the bulky engine of Miriya's chainsword, and she struck back hard and swift, trying to find a weak point in the Sister's defences. For her part, Miriya blocked each strike and kept up the pressure, forcing Oleande to back away in the face of the whirling blade-edge.

Their weapons met again and again, corrupted steel clashing with tungsten fangs, each blow ringing a bell-tone across the echoing space of the shrine's ruined chancel. A lucky swipe sang off Miriya's shoulder-guard but did little more than scratch the black ceramite. In return the Battle Sister jabbed at her attacker and almost connected with Oleande's chest, much to her incandescent fury.

As Oleande fought back, a sickly nest of pallid tendrils wavered out of the entry wound in her chest, each of them ending in a lamprey-maw that danced in the air in search of blood and meat. The sight revolted Miriya and she attacked again, chipping off a piece of her enemy's sickle sword with a particularly violent downswing – but every strike she threw at her target was blocked, every feint transparent to her. The fallen Sister knew her ways of war too well, just as she had boasted. Oleande had been trained by the same warrior-mentors in the same doctrines, and now she matched Miriya pace for pace in lethal deadlock.

Oleande gave a hollow, monstrous bark of laughter. ‘You can’t kill me. I have died a thousand times and the Blood God’s gift always resurrects me...’ She reached up to stroke the squirming mass of tentacle-things emerging from the hole in her chest. ‘I will give him your bones as tribute!’

She reeled back, and Miriya saw the flood of motion before it came. Her foe was going to attack with all she had, and hold back nothing. The Battle Sister braced herself—

—And in the next second Miriya heard the *other* Oleande cry out in pain. The sound dragged the gaze of her corrupted namesake towards her and Miriya saw the Chaos champion’s mouth open in hunger and avarice.

The woman lying on the ground had finally, agonisingly, pulled the second sickle sword from her side and tossed it aside. The sudden uprush of blood from her wound spilled over her armour and the scent of the fresh vitae drew Oleande’s desire like a magnet. The Blood God’s servant could not stop herself from licking her lips.

That split-second of inattention was all the opportunity Miriya needed. She roared as she brought the chainsword down in a snarling arc that severed Oleande’s sword-arm above the elbow, cutting noisily through splintering porcelain armour, meat and bone with a grinding howl. Her foe was staggered, but to Miriya’s disgust, the detached arm disgorged a bulk of pale tendrils at its severed end, which began to propel it across the ground towards her, like a fat maggot questing for carrion to consume. Without hesitation, she stepped forward and stamped the severed limb into a pulpy mess, grinding it into the broken tiles beneath until it stopped moving.

Oleande — *the other Oleande* — was on her feet now, ignoring the blood streaming down her belly and leg. Her power sword was in her hand once more, sizzling as its energy halo burned off the caked dust and fluids that coated its surface. Each step she took was torture to her, but she did not falter. ‘This ends now,’ she declared, aiming her blade at the fallen one.

The traitor whose face she shared opened her mouth wide and shrieked, vomiting unhallowed words into the air that curdled the blood in Miriya’s veins. Tendrils grew out past her lips, from her nostrils, ears and through the orbs of her eyes. The shrieking came from hundreds of the tiny lamprey maws and the profane clamour made the air vibrate. Desecrated

glassaic cracked and broke, dust and loose stones fell from the damaged ceiling above.

Miriya and the Sister of the Valorous Heart shared a look and they attacked the heretic as one. Blows from their swords rained down on the traitorous Sororitas, chopping off divots of armour, slashing away pieces of quivering flesh. But even as Oleande fell to her knees, she was still screeching, still kept alive by whatever daemonic parasite her blasphemous god had implanted in her.

‘You are already His,’ she brayed, her mouth choked with convulsing cilia. ‘It is inevitable. The Sisters of Battle are drenched in blood! Your faith is a lie! You all walk the Skull Road!’

Miriya raised her chainsword and glanced at the other warrior. ‘Together, then?’

The Battle Sister gave a weary nod. ‘Together, aye.’

In a single united motion, both of them plunged their blades deep into Oleande’s chest cavity and silenced her.

The heretic’s body collapsed in on itself to become a mess of offal and warped bone. Whatever power from the warp that had kept the woman alive was suddenly gone, and all her deaths returned a thousand-fold.

Miriya did not grace the traitor with a second glance. She strode away, sheathing her bloodied chainsword on her back as she crossed to where Verity stood over Isabel’s unconscious form. The hospitaller was still clutching the other woman’s bolter, but clearly she had been unwilling to use it again for fear of hitting her friend in the turn of the sword melee.

But then the brief moment of relief on Verity’s face crumbled and she raised the weapon, aiming it unsteadily past Miriya. ‘Sister!’ she called, her shout a warning.

Miriya halted and turned in place, knowing what she would see behind her. The surviving Sister of the Valorous Heart, the one who had subsumed herself in a traitor’s identity to protect her Order’s virtue, now aimed her power sword at Miriya’s throat. ‘You should never have come after us,’ she said quietly. ‘My duty is clear.’

‘She won’t let us live...’ said Verity, drawing the bolter close. ‘We saw Oleande... The *true* Sister Oleande... And what she had become.’

Miriya nodded. ‘We are witness to her Sisterhood’s greatest disgrace.’

She cocked her head. ‘That was the command you were given, was it not? Do whatever must be done to ensure that this secret is never revealed?’

The Battle Sister nodded. ‘Just so. Anyone who learns of the shame must not be allowed to speak of it.’ She shook her head sorrowfully. ‘I am sorry, Sister.’ The woman planted her sword in the dirt, and pulled a pair of *krak* grenades from her belt. ‘But this is how it must be.’

‘I disagree.’ Miriya walked slowly towards the other Sister, and placed her hands over those gripping the explosive devices. She knew that if they detonated, the *krak* charges would bring down the shrine’s ceiling and bury them all. ‘You have sacrificed so much to this mission,’ she told her. ‘Your very self. And I have given much too. My service and my blood, my Sisters. But if we perish here today, that duty ends. And the enemy still endures.’ Miriya nodded towards the remains of the heretic. ‘Not just the foe without, but the foe within.’ She closed her eyes for a moment and remembered the horrible sense of temptation ghosting at the edges of her thoughts. To live was to be in battle with it, day after day... But to live was also to defy it, and make each breath a victory against the darkness.

The injured woman’s grip on the grenades slackened. ‘But this is my failure,’ she said quietly. ‘I must sacrifice...’

‘You must *live*,’ Miriya insisted. ‘Sister Oleande must live. Else, the archenemy will have their victory and all you have done... All *we* have done will be for naught.’

‘We will not speak of what was seen here,’ said Verity. ‘I vow this, on the honour of the Order of Serenity. I will carry it to my grave unspoken.’

‘I vow this,’ repeated Miriya. ‘On the honour of the Order of Our Martyred Lady and in the name of Saint Katherine. I will carry it to my grave unspoken.’ She paused, and then met the other woman’s gaze. ‘What say you, Sister?’

At length, Oleande gave a nod.

They regrouped with Cassandra’s team in the shrine’s nave, finding Rubria grim-faced and bleeding, with Ananke supporting her weight. There had been a firefight, Cassandra explained briskly. None of the Iconoclast’s army had survived it.

‘What of the heretic?’ she asked.

‘Sister Oleande brought down our enemy,’ said Miriya, before anyone

else could speak. 'The treachery of the Iconoclast's existence is ended.'

Cassandra helped Verity carry Isabel towards the gateway in the energy field, and they passed through it with a flash of radiation. Rubria and Ananke were next, and then it was only Miriya and the Sister of the Valorous Heart.

'What do I tell my kinswomen when I return to our convent?' said Oleande. 'I was not expected to live beyond my mission.'

'Adversity is a test, Sister. We must never fail it.' Miriya strode towards the gateway, drawing herself up, her head held high as was fitting to a victor. She paused on the threshold and offered the other woman her hand. 'And only the God-Emperor can decide when our duty is ended.'

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**James Swallow** is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Fear to Tread* and *Nemesis*, which both reached the *New York Times* bestseller lists. Also for the Horus Heresy, he has written *The Flight of the Eisenstein*, *The Buried Dagger* and a series of audio dramas featuring the character Nathaniel Garro, the prose versions of which have now been collected into the anthology *Garro*. For Warhammer 40,000, he is best known for his four Blood Angels novels, the audio drama *Heart of Rage*, and his two Sisters of Battle novels. His short fiction has appeared in *Legends of the Space Marines* and *Tales of Heresy*.

An extract from *Mark of Faith*.



Darkness surrounds me, complete and heavy. Suffocating. I cannot see. Cannot hear. I cannot remember, either. Not how I came to be here, or where I came from. Not who or what I am. I am nothing, and no one. Little more than a heartbeat, inside a hollow shell. I try to speak. To make a noise of this nothingness, but I am mute as well as blind and deaf. No words will come. No voice, save for that locked tightly inside my mind.

*Please.*

And then, a sound. A voice, answering my silent plea.

*Evangeline.*

The name falls across me like a cloak, and I know instinctively that it is mine. I know the voice, too, despite how distant it sounds. How distorted.

‘Adelynn?’

My Sister Superior’s name escapes my throat and disappears into the unbroken darkness. Adelynn answers me once again with my own name, but this time she sounds even more distant. More distorted. I start to run, though I cannot see. Though the darkness mires me and pulls at my limbs like deep, cold water. But then I see it. A tiny pinprick of golden light, growing larger and closer until it resolves into a shape. A stone pedestal, draped in crimson cloth. That is where the light is coming from, only it is not light at all. It is an object. A shield, cast in steel and gold and engraved with the image of an armoured warrior bearing blade and aegis with a ten-pointed halo around her head. My heartbeat grows loud at the sight of it, for it is not *a* shield at all. It is *the* Shield. The *Praesidium Protectiva*.

The Shield of Saint Katherine.

‘Evangeline.’

I look up from the Shield and I see her. Adelynn is standing on the

opposite side of the hallowed relic to me. Uplit in gold, she could as well be a statue, were it not for her emerald eyes.

‘Are you ready?’ she asks me, and she gestures to the Shield.

It is a question to which there is only ever one answer, but this time I find that I cannot give it. Because I am not ready. Not for this. I try to tell her so, but even that proves impossible. All that I can manage is an empty *oh* sound. The very definition of nothing. Adelynn’s face turns wrathful, then.

‘Are you ready?’ she asks, again. ‘Are you ready?’

Adelynn repeats the question over and over and over until the sound of it surrounds me. It suffocates me, just like the darkness. I cannot bear it, nor the disappointment in her emerald eyes, so I scream for her to stop and I thrust out my hands to take up the Shield, but the very instant that my fingertips come into contact with the gold and steel, I catch fire. It blossoms on my fingers first, before blooming across my hands and up my arms, golden yellow and flickering. It tracks over my shoulders and engulfs my body and travels up my throat until I am consumed by it in the same way that the air around me is. The fire burns fiercely, melting my armour and searing my flesh. It blinds me with its brightness, and deafens me anew with a roar that is not the roar of the fire at all, but that same dreadful question rendered in an inferno’s voice.

*Are you ready?*

I wake with a gasp, lying flat on my back. Still blind, no matter how I blink. Still deaf to everything but the overloud beat of my thundering heart. My teeth are chattering and my body is trembling completely from my head to my toes. I am soaked with sweat. I try to cry out, but no words will come. No sound at all. I get up, but something mires me. I fall hard onto my hands and knees, completely unable to breathe. Someone takes hold of me, firm hands printing cold onto my feverish skin.

And then, a voice.

‘Be still, Sister. You are safe.’

It is a woman’s voice. One that I do not recognise. I try to speak. To fight her. But those hands hold firm and the voice speaks again.

‘Breathe,’ she says. ‘Just breathe.’

Left with little choice, I do as the voice commands me. I breathe. I allow myself to be still. And little by little, my senses return.

Touch, first. The cold floor under my hands and knees. Then sight. Bare

steel treadplate, and my own hands, wrapped tightly in blood-speckled bandages. Scent. Incense and blood and the harsh tang of counterseptic. Other sounds filter in. I hear the click and hum of machinery, and the soft murmur of prayer. I am in a hospitaller's ward. I exhale, slowly.

'There we are,' says the voice.

I look up at the owner of the voice. She is of the convents. Non-militant, but a Sister nonetheless. The hospitaller is pale as new marble, clad in robes as white as her hair. I cannot tell the colour of her eyes, because she will not meet mine.

'You were dreaming,' she says. 'That is all.'

I try to tell her that I do not dream. That I haven't since I was a child. Since before my Sisters and before Adelynn and before the convents. But all that I can make is the shape of the words. A rasp in my throat, like steel on stone.

'My name is Lourette,' the Sister Hospitaller says, her voice patient and calm. 'Let me help you.'

I do not resist as Lourette helps me to my feet and sits me down again on the edge of my cot. This place is not so much a ward as a private room. The walls are clad with whitewashed flakboard and hung with linen drapes. Lourette gives me a plastek cup to drink from. The water is so cold that it makes me cough myself double. Lourette holds out a silvered bowl for me as I spit clots of blood and blackness into it until I can breathe again. When I do, I taste stale air. Recycled. All at once I know that I must be aboard a starship. That I am no longer on Ophelia VII.

At the thought of my home world everything returns to me. The Contemplation. The Last of Days. Losing my Sisters, one by one. I wait for grief to strike me, to sweep over me, but all I feel is emptiness.

'Are you in pain, Sister?' Lourette asks.

I wish I were. Pain is honest. It gives you focus. I am not in pain. In its place, all I feel is emptiness. That deceitful nothing. I cannot explain that to Lourette, so I just shake my head and ask a question in return. It takes three attempts, because my throat is so unused to speaking.

'What ship is this?'

Lourette still does not look me in the eyes. She sets about changing my bloodied bandages with slow and deliberate care. Even that does not hurt.

'The *Unbroken Vow*,' she says. Her voice is soft and patient, with the

clipped pronunciation of the convents. 'It is a Dauntless-class cruiser sworn to the commandery of Canoness Elivia. We are holding at high anchor over Ophelia VII.'

The information sinks in slowly. Canoness Elivia. Like so many of my Order, she was far from Ophelia VII when the Rift opened and the darkness descended.

Very far.

Dread settles over me like a shroud.

'How long have I been here?' I ask.

'You have been under our care for six weeks,' Lourette says. 'We kept you dreaming so that you could heal.'

I take a breath that hurts. Six weeks of slumber, as my world burned beneath me. *Six. Weeks.*

'Then, the cardinal world?'

I say *the cardinal world* but I think *my home*. I steel myself, expecting Lourette to tell me that it is gone. Burned and broken to nothing, like my Sisters. But she doesn't. Instead, Lourette smiles a small smile.

'It was spared at the final hour,' she says.

I remember the thunderclaps. The golden light that I mistook for the God-Emperor's final mercy. 'By who?' I ask.

Lourette stops in her work and makes the sign of the aquila. Her bloody hands begin to shake, and the moment before she speaks seems long and charged, like the quiet before a storm breaks.

'By Roboute Guilliman,' she says softly. 'The God-Emperor's son is arisen.'

I feel blinded all over again at her words. Unable to catch my breath. My skin begins to burn as though I have a fever. I start to shake, too. From my core outwards.

*The God-Emperor's son.*

'Arisen,' I say, because it is all that I can say.

Lourette nods. She does not try to prevent me when I pull away to make the sign of the aquila, too.

'The primarch came from Terra, and brought with him a new crusade to wrest back what has been taken from us by flame and by sword. Countless warriors follow with him. The Adeptus Astartes. The Silent Sisterhood and the God-Emperor's own Custodian Guard.' Lourette takes a breath.

Another awestruck smile pulls at her scarred face. ‘And our Sainted Sister.’

Her words settle slowly on me. The God-Emperor’s son arisen. The Silent Sisters and the God-Emperor’s watchmen treading the stars. Saint Celestine, returned.

‘It is a miracle,’ I say.

Lourette goes back to removing the bindings around my arms. She still has not looked at me directly. Another long moment passes before she speaks again.

‘I have heard the same word whispered about you, now and then,’ she says.

I blink. My eyelids are still sticking. ‘Why?’

‘Because of how they found you. Ablaze, but alive.’ Lourette finishes unwinding the bandage from my left arm and lets it drop onto a silvered tray in loops. ‘I have never known a soul to be burned the way you were and live, much less heal.’

I look down and see where my skin has run and set again from the touch of the warfire. In places, I am patchworked to stark white, all of the pigment gone. There is no blood, though.

No pain.

‘And then there is the matter of the mark,’ Lourette says.

‘Which mark?’ I ask, because there are so many.

Lourette finally looks at me, then, and the expression on her face makes me wish she hadn’t. Her limpid eyes are wide with fervour.

‘You do not know,’ she says. ‘Of course you do not know.’

She stops her work and goes to fetch a mirror-glass from one of the equipment trays. She holds it up in front of my face, and I notice that her hands are trembling now too.

‘Do you see?’ Lourette asks.

I take the mirror-glass from her and look at my reflection, and the patchwork that the warfire has made of my face. All of the pigment is gone from around my eyes and across my cheeks, leaving bright white streaks against my skin that almost look like wings.

‘It is the God-Emperor’s mark,’ Lourette says. ‘A blessing.’

I stare at my reflection. At the shape of the eagle, so clearly writ into my skin. It is the God-Emperor’s mark, just as Lourette says. A blessing.

‘Do you see it?’ she asks.

I nod, because I cannot speak. Because I can see the mark, but I cannot feel it. I cannot feel *anything*. I am nothing, and no one.

Just a heartbeat, in a hollow shell.

I realise that Lourette is still speaking, her words hurried by zeal.

‘The God-Emperor saw you, Evangeline,’ she says. ‘He sent His son to spare you. Graced you with His mark and His favour.’

I put the mirror-glass face down on the cot and ask Lourette the only question I can think to ask. The only one that matters.

‘And my Sisters?’

Lourette frowns, taken aback by my words, and the implied dismissal in them. ‘They were lost,’ she says. ‘All save for one.’

My thoughts slow to a crawl once more. It is all that I can do to ask her who survived, and Lourette’s frown only deepens when she says the name.

‘Ashava,’ she says.

Lourette is reluctant to let me leave my cot, but I insist on it. Six weeks of sleep is enough for a lifetime, and I will wait no longer to see my Sister. Lourette uncouples the pain relief and fluids before bringing me a set of robes. I stand, for the first time in weeks. My legs buckle and try to give under my weight, but I refuse to fall. I refuse Lourette’s offer of help.

*Stand*, Adelynn’s voice says, in my head. *Until you cannot*.

So I do, because I must. Because I want to see my Sister.

‘Where is she?’ I ask.

Lourette’s frown is still in place. ‘The training halls,’ she says.

I blink, surprised. ‘Then, she is healed?’

‘Ashava lives,’ Lourette says, though that is not what I asked, and then she beckons me to follow her.

We leave the quiet and the sanctity of the *Vow*’s hospitaller ward behind and go out into the ship proper. The *Unbroken Vow* is ancient. Ironwork shows through the gilding and plaster all along the vaulted corridors. Candles burn in sconces leaving long, overlapping trails of wax to run down and pool and thicken on the deck floor. Cherubim thrum their artificial wings amongst the rafters and iron supports, playing repeated loops of hymnals through their tinny vox-casters. The arterial corridors are long, and made longer by the slowness of my still-waking limbs, and the

constant flow of ship's crew and priests and others of the Orders. Everywhere I go, there are whispers and sideways glances. I catch sight of one of the ship's crew making the sign of the aquila as I pass, and it takes all of my self-control not to lash out and put him against the wall.

Eventually, we reach the *Vow's* training halls. They are vast and vaulted, made to accommodate dozens of Sisters at any one time, but inside Hall Tertius we find only two, standing alone in the middle of the massive space. The first is another Sister Hospitaller, clad this time in the crimson vestments of the Bloody Rose. The other is Ashava. Looking upon her, I understand Lourette's answer, because my Sister might indeed live, but she is not healed.

Ashava is clad in loose training clothes that are cut short to mid-thigh and shoulder. Both of her legs are encased in brutal wire and steel support frames that catch the candlelight. Long, ridged scars run down the lengths of her arms and her legs, and her skin is marked with fading bruises. Ashava leans heavily on a pair of gnarlwood crutches, limping slowly towards the Sister Hospitaller. The crutches toll against the exposed decking like funerary bells. As we approach across the training hall floor, the Sister Hospitaller turns. Her augmented eye glows in the dim light.

'Sister Lourette,' she says, and then looks at me. Her human eye widens, just a little. That makes me want to lash out, too. 'Evangeline,' she says.

Ashava stops limping, but she still does not turn.

'Melanya,' Lourette says, in reply. 'A word, if I may.'

The Sister Hospitaller nods. As she passes Ashava, she puts her hand on my Sister's shoulder.

'Keep strong,' she says to Ashava. 'All pain must pass.'

I do not know if Melanya is referring to Ashava's injuries, or to me. The two Sisters Hospitaller leave the training hall, their boots echoing on the deck. The door slides closed behind them with a thud, and only then does Ashava turn to look at me. It is an awkward, unsteady movement. Her crutches toll against the deck again. She locks her eyes with mine. Her scarified face is still and unreadable. For a moment neither of us says a word. I have known Ashava for the better part of a decade. I have fought and trained and prayed with her, but in that moment, I am unsure of what to do.

I am unsure of her.

Ashava limps over to me slowly and stops, less than an arm's reach away. This close, I can see the way the frames around her legs are secured by pins that go straight into the bones. All that I can think about is how swift she was before, and it makes me want to weep.

'Sister—' I begin, but Ashava cuts me short with a sudden and fierce embrace. Her crutches fall against the deck with a clatter. She falls against me a little, too, without them. I hold her up, and hold onto her, and for the first time since waking in the hospitaller's ward I don't feel quite so alone, or quite so empty.

'It is good to see you, Eva,' she says in her soft, edgeworlds burr.

'And you, Sister,' I say, and I mean it.

Then Ashava lets me go, and I stoop down and give her back her crutches. She leans on them anew, and I can see the relief written plainly on her face. Merely standing is agony for her, now.

'Do you want to rest?' I ask her.

She shakes her head. 'As I recall it, Adelynn bade me to stand.'

A small, sad smile finds its way onto my face. 'Yes, she did.'

'And Melanya bids me to walk,' Ashava says. 'So, let us walk.'

I nod, and together we walk the training hall deck. I slow my pace to match hers. Neither of us acknowledge it.

'They were set to take my legs,' Ashava says. 'To carve me like a kill and replace the broken parts.' She shakes her head, her face set in a scowl. 'They said it would be less pain.'

'And what did you say?' I ask her, though knowing Ashava I can guess.

'That it would be kinder to kill me,' she growls. 'That I would stand again on flesh and bone or not at all.'

The answer does not surprise me. The world where Ashava was born is far from the galaxy's heart. Triumph is dominated by a singularly martial understanding of the Faith that sees them raise warriors without peer. Ashava's people see the body as an extension of the God-Emperor's will, scars, wounds and weaknesses all. That is their creed, and even after being taken from there and raised in the convents, she has not forgotten it.

'They could have gone against my wishes,' she says. 'But they didn't.'

'Do you think that the Canoness intervened?'

Ashava shrugs. 'Or perhaps they did not wish to take anything more from me.'

‘Perhaps,’ I allow.

We are quiet for a moment then, accompanied only by the rapping of Ashava’s crutches on the deck.

‘The mark,’ she says, after the moment passes. ‘You truly can see the God-Emperor’s sign in it.’

I cannot find words with which to answer her, so I don’t.

‘It troubles you, doesn’t it?’ Ashava asks.

‘The mark does not trouble me. It is everyone else. They watch and whisper and look to me as though I am blessed. As if I am worthy of praise.’

‘Aren’t you?’ Ashava asks. ‘You bear His mark, Eva. You stand where others have fallen, without the aid of cages or crutches or butchery.’

I stop walking, and so does she. I look at the mess that’s left of her.

‘I am sorry, Sister,’ I say. ‘I meant nothing by it.’

‘Neither did I,’ she says. ‘I do not begrudge my injuries. Things are what He shapes them to be, through blade or clay.’

It is another of the Triumphal creeds. One that Ashava has written into her skin in scars.

‘And what of me?’ I ask her, before I can stop myself. ‘What is He shaping me to be?’

Ashava smiles in a patient sort of way, as she often would when we trained. *You must be swifter, Eva. Always swifter.*

‘Only two can know that,’ she says. ‘You, and Him.’

The door at the far side of the training hall slides open again. I look, expecting to see Lourette and Melanya returning, but the woman who enters the room is clad for war, in ornate black battleplate. A crimson half-cloak stirs at her back like a bloodied shadow, and a gilded longsword is sheathed at her hip. Her face is dominated by a deep, knotted scar that starts at her throat and ends when it reaches her cropped white hair. That alone is enough to tell me who she is, though we have never met. I duck into a shallow bow and Ashava does the same beside me, though it clearly pains her.

Canoness Commander Elivia shakes her head. ‘Please, Sisters,’ she says as she crosses the room to stand before us. Elivia’s voice is warm, and war-torn. ‘We bow for no one save the God-Emperor.’

I know that Ashava smiles at her words without having to look.

‘How may we serve, your grace?’ I ask.

‘That is why I have come,’ she says. ‘I must speak with you, Evangeline.’

I nod my head. ‘Of course,’ I say. ‘Though if I may, what is it that you wish to speak of?’

Elivia smiles at me, fractionally. It reminds me of a blade’s edge.

‘The matter concerns a sword,’ she says.

I go with Elivia to her quarters, high on the *Unbroken Vow*’s spine. The room is large and vaulted, like the rest of the *Vow*, and kept as cold as the stone towers of the convents. It is lit scarcely by tall, slender candles, leaving deep shadows at the edges of the room. The only adornments are the prayer scrolls and the many weapons that hang in rows on the walls. I see fine swords and flails and a massive, star-headed mace.

The far wall of Elivia’s quarters is made up of a dimmed armaglass viewport that looks out over the prow of the ship and the void beyond, allowing starlight in to augment the flicker of the candles. Dozens of warships hang in the blackness, all void-blackened and bull-snouted and bristling with weapons. Some are painted with the white ultima of the Ultramarines. It occurs to me that the Lord Commander could be aboard any one of them at this moment. Arisen. Moving amongst the living. The thought of it is so overwhelming that the ships become difficult to focus on, so I drag my eyes from the viewport and concentrate on the tangible. On what is in front of me.

Canoness Elivia’s quarters are dominated by a large gnarlwood table, laid with maps and star charts and tools for tide-taking. Other than that, there is no furniture at all. Not even a chair. It does not surprise me. From everything that I have heard, the Canoness is not the type to be found in repose.

I stand and I wait for her to speak as she makes her way to the weapons hanging on the walls. Elivia puts her armoured fingertips to each blade in turn as if she is checking their quality.

‘You and Ashava are to be taken into my commandery, as are the other survivors of Palatine Helia’s Mission,’ she says bluntly.

My heart skips at the word *survivors*.

‘If I may, Canoness, how many others survived the incursion?’

Elivia nods. She still isn’t looking at me, but at the swords. ‘At the time

of the incursion, there were over five thousand serving Sisters at the Convent Sanctorum. More than twenty times that in adjutants, auxiliaries and serfs.’ She pauses. ‘We cannot be sure, but early estimates suggest that almost half of those defending the convent were lost.’

My heart more than skips, then. It feels as though it stops as I think on all of those losses. On all of those martyr’s deaths.

‘Only six of Helia’s fifty-strong Mission were recovered from the ruins of the eighty-fifth preceptory,’ Elivia continues. ‘That is counting yourself and Ashava.’

‘And the Palatine herself?’

‘Taken unto Him, sword in hand,’ Elivia says, her voice much softer than I would have guessed it could ever be.

I blink. Breathe out.

‘May her blade never dull,’ I say, finishing the old adage.

Elivia nods, before reaching out to take a power sword from the wall. It is beautiful. A slender, double-edged blade with spread wings wrought into the hilt in gold. Elivia weighs it in her hand, nods, and then turns away from the wall of weapons and looks at me.

‘Precious little remains of Helia’s Mission,’ she says. ‘And no Sisters of rank.’

I can see what she is about to say looming large.

*No, I think. Not me.*

‘Effective immediately, I confer upon you the rank of Sister Superior,’ Elivia says, approaching me with that sword. ‘The survivors will be yours to lead, as well as five Sisters from my own commandery.’

Elivia holds out the sword towards me by the neck of the blade, offering me the hilt.

‘Take up the blade,’ she says. ‘And take up the mantle, under the sight of Saint Katherine, and of the God-Emperor, whose realm is everlasting.’

I want to say no. The word rises up from within me so quickly and urgently that it takes everything I have to stop it from spilling out. I was the youngest of my Sisters, before. The least experienced. The one who was trained and taught. I was the *dawning bird*. I do not seek progression, nor do I want it. I am not ready. But Elivia is not asking me what I want, and this is not an offer to be refused. It is a duty, so I push down my doubts and the word *no* and I answer how I am expected to.

‘Under their sight,’ I say, and I reach out and take the sword from her. The blade catches in the starlight from the viewport, illuminating the words engraved along the blade’s length.

*Inventi sumus in fide.*

In faith, we are found.

With the sword granted, Elivia turns away from me and crosses to the opposite side of the gnarlwood table. Under other circumstances, the rite would have been much grander. There would have been readings and hymnals and praises sung, but this quieter method fits what I know about Elivia as much as the lack of places to sit does. I was always told that she is abrupt and direct, and that ceremony irks her. It is a strange thing, for someone raised amongst the Orders. We are surrounded for our entire lives by ceremony of one kind or another.

‘Ophelia VII is as good as recaptured,’ Elivia says, reaching out and tracing her armoured fingers over the maps before her. ‘The Lord Commander’s crusade will soon move on.’

I take a few steps forwards and join her at the table, the sword heavy in my hand. *My sword.* The maps chart a multitude of systems and pathways from across the God-Emperor’s domain. I see the Armageddon system. Badab, and Tallarn. At the heart of the largest of the charts, Holy Terra is wrought in gold leaf. But it is not just our worlds and fiefdoms that I see. Every one of Elivia’s maps has been amended and revised. I see Cadia, blotted out in red. Great warp storms, wrought in ink, and across all of Elivia’s charts and maps a vast, red scar that touches everything in one way or another.

The Cicatrix Maledictum. The Great Rift.

‘Where will the crusade go?’ I ask, because I would not know where to begin.

‘To the galaxy’s edge,’ Elivia says. ‘To liberate more worlds as it did our home.’

Her words run fingers down my spine, because this might look to be our darkest hour on maps and charts, but even so, it is a time of miracles. True miracles, like the Lord Commander, returned. The need to fight sets a fire inside me.

‘And we will accompany it,’ I say.

Elivia lifts her fingertips from the map. Her battleplate hums

discontentedly.

‘No,’ she says. ‘We will not.’

Elivia’s response is like being struck. I cannot help but ask, ‘Why?’

Elivia picks up a slim roll of parchment marked with the seal of the open eye. ‘Because we have received an astropathic communication from the Convent Prioris on Terra,’ she says. ‘The message was sent months ago. It was delayed by the opening of the Great Rift. Distorted by distance, and by the storms. It killed half of our choir just to hear it, but they divined the meaning nonetheless.’

Dread grows large in my chest.

‘What did it say, your grace?’ I ask.

‘That the Shield of Saint Katherine has been lost beyond the Great Rift,’ Elivia says.

All in an instant, I am consumed by my dream. By the fire and the question, and the gold and steel face of the shield.

‘I dreamt of it,’ I say, before I can stop myself. ‘In the hospitaller’s ward, as I healed.’

I expect Elivia to challenge me, or at least to frown, but instead she surprises me by smiling her blade’s-edge smile.

‘And so we come to the second part of the message,’ she says, unrolling the parchment and passing it to me. It is spattered with ink, written in violent, instinctive scrawl by several different hands.

‘The Shield rests where the light began,’ I say, reading from the parchment. ‘In the space between spaces. It will bestow itself upon a worthy soul. One who was burned, but not butchered. Spared by Him.’

I pause, because I cannot bring myself to say the words. Cannot bear to see them, bound there in ink. It is worse than the whispers. Worse even than the crewman and his holy sign.

‘It will bestow itself upon she who bears the mark of His favour,’ Elivia says, finishing the message for me as the parchment starts to tremble in time with my hands.

‘This cannot be,’ I say.

‘This message comes from Terra, Evangeline,’ Elivia says. ‘From those who see the furthest and the most clearly. They cannot be wrong.’

‘But the Rift could have distorted the message, as well as delayed it.’

‘I thought the same, at first,’ Elivia says. ‘But the message has been

ratified by every choir within the flotilla. Even the astropaths in service to the Lord Commander heard it.'

My scars burn all over again. I have to fight the urge to put my hands to my face. If accepting the sword felt heavy, then this feels crushing.

Suffocating.

'It cannot be me,' I say.

'It can be no one else,' Elivia replies. 'Burned, but not butchered. Spared by Him. The mark. The dream you had. It can only be you.'

I blink, still struggling to breathe. 'But I do not know where the Shield lies.'

Elivia smiles. 'The answer will come to you in time,' she says. 'The God-Emperor chose you, Evangeline.'

I cannot dispute that. I will not, no matter how hollow I might feel. So instead I roll the parchment slowly, put it back on the table and ask the only question that is appropriate to ask.

'What happens now?'

'We break with the fleet and set sail for the Throneworld as fast as the tides can take us,' Elivia says. 'Once there, we will meet with the cardinals senior for our duty to be blessed. We will pray for guidance. Resupply and prepare the *Vow* for the test to come. Then you will lead us to the Shield.'

On any other day, my heart would sing joy at the notion of standing on the Throneworld, under His skies. But not today. Today, all that I can think about is the sword at my hip. The great red scar that has taken so much from me, and those echoing words from the dream.

*Are you ready?*


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