

RED & BLACK

JAMES SWALLOW

An audio drama performed by Beth
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Red & Black

And so it was decreed, in the wake of the Age of Apostasy. So it was said by the High Lords of Terra, that the Ecclesiarchy, the great church of the Imperium, founded on the worship of the God-Emperor of Mankind, would never be granted the use of “men under arms”, lest the temptation be too great for cardinals of weak character and high ambition.

The Ecclesiarchy; the guardians of the Imperial Creed and the celestial truth of the Emperor’s divinity, whose sole purpose was to regulate the veneration of millions across the galaxy. And in a universe so harsh, where heathen alien life, heretic witch-psychics and the forces of Chaos laid their threat, the church could not go undefended.

No “men under arms”; so the very letter of the edict was adhered to, and thus rose the Orders Militant of the Adepta Sororitas – the Sisters of Battle. Some called them fanatics. Warrior-women spiritually betrothed to their religion, clothed in powered armour, cleansing the unbelievers with flamer and boltgun. The Celestians; the Seraphim; the Repentia, Dominions and Retributors, called to castigate those who defied the Emperor’s divine will. The great work of the Battle Sisters never ended, for there were always Wars of Faith to be won, always more heretics for the pyre. They were the line of fire between the anarchy of the infidel and the bulwark of pure devotion. The red against the black. For millennia they had been the burning sword and holy shield for humankind.

Few exemplified such devotion more than Sister Miriya, a ranked Celestian Eloheim of the Order of our Martyred Lady, although she would never have been so arrogant as to say such a thing herself. Under the flickering light of electro-candles, she walked the length of the penitent corridor on Zhodon Orbital, voicing the words of holy catechism amid the echoes of her footfalls.

‘A spiritu dominatus. Domine, libra nos. A morte perpetua. Domine, libra nos. Ave, Imperator. Domine, libra nos.’ The phrases in High Gothic fell from her lips easily, with rote precision, whispering off the stone walls.

Like many of the citadel stations across human space, Zhodon resembled an ancient cathedral ripped free of the land and cast into the darkness. Spires and naves spread like the points of a morningstar, plasma lanterns burning behind mile-high stained-glass windows. Located on the pilgrim route to the Segmentum Solar, the platform was a way-point for travellers and a barracks for the Witch Hunters of the Ecclesiarchy.

Miriya approached the iron gate that closed off the sanctum of the prioress, the mistress of this place. She slowed and dwelt a little, taking a moment to study the complex devotional sculptures in the walls. Above was a rendering of Saint Katherine, first mistress of her order, whose brutal death gave them their title. Miriya bowed in respect, crossing her hands across her chest, forming the holy shape of the Imperial Aquila. 'In your name,' she said aloud. 'Grant me your wisdom and clarity.'

After a moment, she rose to look upon the statue. Like the saint, Miriya's face bore the ancient mark of the fleur de lys, tattooed in blood-red on her cheek. Her hair was a cascade of black, falling to the neck of her battle gear.

Saint Katherine was shown as she had been in battle, her mail and plate little different from Miriya's, even though centuries separated them. Sigils of the aquila, purity seals and rosaries decorated the armour, and a chaplet hung from her neck. Miriya's hand rose to her own, resting on a string of adamantine beads. Each one of the beads represented an act of devotion to the Imperial church.

She wondered if her next duty would warrant a new link in the chain. Prioress Lydia had been unusually circumspect on the details, a fact that concerned Miriya greatly. Secrets were not the currency of the Sisterhood, and she disliked anything that smacked of the clandestine. The Imperial Creed was the God-Emperor's Light, and so all deeds done in His name were never to be committed in shadow.

Miriya knocked twice on the heavy iron door and from beyond it, a voice bid her to enter. She strode in, her eyes downcast as protocol demanded, and bowed. 'Your Grace. As you order, so shall I be ready.'

'Look at me. Let me see your face.' Miriya did as she was ordered and raised her head. The prioress was two hundred solar years old, but kept to the appearance of a woman a quarter of that age by juvenat treatments. Lydia had been a

prioress before Miriya had been inducted as a novice, and she would likely remain one for decades more. She was arrow-sharp and uncompromising, a masterful tactician and commander of the Orders Militant in the local sector of space. Miriya heard it said that the prioress had burned a thousand witches, and fought alongside saints. The steel in Lydia's eyes gave truth to it. 'You believe you are prepared for the task I will set you, Sister Celestian?' She smiled slightly. 'We shall see.'

The faint edge of mockery in the prioress' tone made Miriya's lips thin. 'My squad stand willing to meet the enemy,' she replied, with stiff formality. 'If you doubt their skills, mistress, I would ask why you summoned me and not another of our Sisterhood.'

Lydia studied the other woman intently. 'We are the weapons of the God-Emperor's church, Miriya. But we are more than that. We are His banner-bearers, the spear-tip that brings the rod of truth behind it. We must never lose sight of this. For each heretic we put to the sword, we must welcome another soul into the glory of Imperial Truth.'

Miriya frowned. 'Is that not the work of preachers and iterators?'

'Yes.' She inclined her head. 'But in some instances, it is ours as well. The Adepta Sororitas must inspire, Sister, and not just fear, but love. Not every test the church faces can be dealt with by bullet or blade's edge.'

The conversation was not progressing as Miriya had expected. Instead of a mission, the prioress seemed intent on giving her a lesson. She chafed under the thought. Miriya was a battle-tested veteran, not some callow novice. Lydia seemed to sense her thoughts, and went on.

'I summoned you specifically, Sister Miriya, because the duty I am about to set will require a mind clear and uncluttered by doubt. But also one that is willing to question.'

Lydia's words carried the slightest hint of challenge. Miriya's reputation preceded her; in an army where obedience was the watchword, the Celestian had often earned censure from her commanders because she frequently dared to exhibit an independent streak.

Her tolerance for the prioress' obfuscation was quickly thinning. 'I would ask

you illuminate me, mistress. I do not follow your meaning.'

'You will, Sister,' offered Lydia, rising stiffly from her chair. She beckoned with one augmented hand, the entire forearm replaced by a machine-proxy in the wake of an old battle wound. 'Come with me. And know that what I am about to show you must be veiled by the utmost secrecy.'

She followed. They travelled into the lower levels of Zhodon Orbital, to sections of the station that Miriya had never entered, past reliquaries and sacred compartments open only to nobles and cardinals. The prioress used blood-locks to bypass thick steel doors etched with hexagrammic wards, until at last they emerged in a chamber that was part prison, part hospice. The metallic space had a cold and clinical ambience. A cluster of watchful arco-flagellants stood sentinel before a wall of opaque armoured glass. They had once been men, each a heretic damned for their defiance of the church, now repurposed in its service. Their bodies were augmented with weapons, brains controlled by lobotomiac taps and hymnal implants. For now, they were docile, but if activated they would become vicious berserkers.

Miriya ignored them and peered at the dark barrier. She could not help but wonder what manner of prisoner required such guardians. A psyker mind-witch? A xenos beast? Perhaps even... a daemon? Her hand fell to the holster at her hip, where her plasma pistol lay ready.

Prioress Lydia halted before the panel and glanced at the Battle Sister. 'A question for you. The Hollos star system. Do you know the name?'

Miriya paused for a moment, drawing on mnemonic memory programmes from the hypnogogic training regimens of her time as a novice. Hollos; the name rose up from depths of her thoughts, dragging recollection with it. 'Aye. It is a vanished domain, cut off from the rest of the sector by violent warp-storms in the 38th millennium. Vessels avoid the quadrant around it like the plague.'

Lydia nodded. 'Correct. An Imperial colony world in unremembered space, unreachable for more than two thousand years. The storms killed any ships that attempted passage. The Imperial Navy and the Adeptus Terra declared Hollos to be lost...'

'But now something has changed?'

‘You are perceptive, Sister,’ noted the other woman. ‘It is indeed so. Over the past year, the storms about Hollos have finally abated and the space beyond them has once again become navigable. Contact with this errant daughter-world has at long last been re-established.’

‘Praise the Throne,’ Miriya began.

‘Not just yet,’ warned the prioress. ‘The nature of that contact has given the Ecclesiarchy great cause for concern.’

Two millennia was a long time to be alone in the darkness. Miriya wondered what kind of changes could be wrought to a world, a society, a people, over so many years. The return of a lost colony to the Emperor’s Light should have been a joyous occasion, but all too often such things only ended in bloodshed and pain.

‘A warship intercepted a small vessel a few light years from the Hollos system,’ Lydia went on. ‘There was a lone crew member on board. A messenger, of sorts.’

Something in the prioress’ tone gave Miriya pause. ‘Human?’

Lydia raised an eyebrow. ‘See for yourself, Sister.’ The prioress gave a command and the misted glass became clear. Beyond it, Miriya saw a sparse dormitory chamber, furnished with a simple pallet, a fresher unit and a small, makeshift shrine venerating the God-Emperor.

But it was the cell’s lone occupant that made every muscle in her body tense. It was humanoid in form and female, after a fashion. The being’s skin was milk-pale and dressed with peculiar striations that at first seemed like tattoos. Tall and athletic in build, but not willowy like the alien eldar, it was clearly human, and yet it was not. Miriya’s combat training immediately took hold, and she found herself evaluating the way it moved about the cell, looking at it for points of weakness and wondering how it might be killed.

Her eye was drawn by its innate grace and poise. The Battle Sister studied it and a strange thought occurred to her. The creature seemed almost engineered in its perfect symmetry. Beneath a cowl of close-cut white hair, eyes of stark violet glanced up to peer at her, then looked away.

Miriya shot the prioress a wary look. ‘What in Terra’s name is it?’

‘She is not aware of us,’ said Lydia, without answering immediately. ‘The glass does not allow her to see through it.’

‘If this thing were xenos or a mutant, you would have executed it,’ noted the Battle Sister. ‘So, then... I would hazard a guess that it is a breed of abhuman.’

‘In a way,’ allowed the prioress. ‘What you see before you is not a subspecies like the ogryn or a gene-altered human like the Adeptus Astartes. No, she is a synthetic creation, grown of cultured stock from blood and flesh. Tests conducted by adepts of the magos biologis confirm it. She is an artificially manufactured organic being.’

‘A... replicae?’ The old word felt strange to say aloud. ‘A cloned life grown from human cells?’ Miriya shook her head. ‘Such technology does not exist!’

‘Not so,’ Lydia corrected. ‘Such technology does not exist anymore. But the God-Emperor, His light find us, created many miracles such as this. It is the tragedy of our age that they have been lost to the Imperium of Man.’ The prioress moved closer to the glass, watching the prisoner carefully. ‘Our guest speaks a common dialect of Imperial Gothic. Her ship and its systems are comparable to those of ours. She calls herself “Rho”, and all gene-scans indicate that she is as much of human stock as you or I.’ She gave that slight smile again. ‘Outward appearances notwithstanding, of course.’

Miriya found it difficult to accept Lydia’s words. Gene-forged beings and modified humans were a common thing in the Imperium, from the warriors of the Space Marines, to helots and cherubim, and even the arco-flagellants... But what the prioress described was an order of magnitude more complex. And certainly, if this “Rho” was indeed a replicae, it deserved to be no more than a menial, a servitor at best.

Then the being did something that made Miriya’s breath catch in her throat. Rho bent down before the brass shrine in the cell wall and made the exact, correct stations of obeisance before an icon of the God-Emperor, crossing her long-fingered hands over her chest, just as the Battle Sister had done in the corridor before Saint Katherine’s icon.

‘It... It is praying!’ It shocked Miriya to see the being doing something so sacred to her, an act that only a human was permitted to perform.

‘Yes, she is,’ said Lydia. ‘And to our deity.’

They returned to the sanctum in silence, and along the way Miriya struggled to interpret what she had seen.

The prioress saw the conflict in her expression. ‘It is quite shocking, is it not? A being born from an artificial womb, something that cannot possess an immortal soul, and yet she kneels before the Emperor’s grace like one of us.’

‘It is mimicry of some sort,’ Miriya began. ‘I’ve seen aliens that imitate human behaviours.’

Lydia shook her head. ‘You are mistaken, Sister. The clone, Rho... She is not some mindless, drooling servitor commanded by punch-cards and neuro-stimms. She is a thinking, reasoning being. What she does is a learned behaviour, not one copied from observing one of us. I am certain of this.’

‘You have spoken to it?’ Miriya could not overlook how the prioress continued to refer to the replicae using the female pronoun.

‘I have spoken to her, yes,’ she insisted. ‘When Rho saw the sign of the holy aquila upon my robes, she was elated. The replicae worships the God-Emperor of Mankind as her creator and master. She claims her mission from Hollos was begun in His name, to serve His will.’

It was difficult for Miriya to accept what she was hearing. It was enough that her view of the universe had been challenged by the mere existence of such a being, and now she was to believe that it could know the magnificence of the Imperial Creed? It went against the order of things, and she almost said as much aloud.

She held her tongue, and at length the prioress came to the full explanation of why Miriya had been summoned to Zhodon Orbital. ‘Your mission, Sister, will be to seek the truth of this,’ began Lydia. ‘You will travel across the unmapped zone to the Hollos colony. There, you and your squad of Sister Celestians will ascertain what has transpired during the time of isolation. It will fall to you to determine if the populace has retained its true faith in the God-Emperor.’

She nodded, accepting the command. ‘But, mistress... The replicae. If it exists, then—’

The prioress cut her off. ‘Rho will go with you. Take your Sisters and do as I order.’

‘And what shall I do if we find more of them?’ Miriya’s eyes narrowed. ‘What if they are all that is left on Hollos?’

The prioress did not answer her question. Instead, she pushed a pict-slate across her desk towards the Battle Sister. Miriya gathered it up and saw dense text outlining her new orders. It bore the seal of the High Lords of Terra.

‘You will not be alone,’ said the other woman. ‘Due to the unusual nature of the emissary from Hollos, the Adeptus Mechanicus have taken a direct interest in the situation. An agent of their magos biologis will also be accompanying you.’

Miriya paged through the contents of the slate. The Adeptus Mechanicus, the guardians of all technology within the Imperium of Man, were well known to her, and Lydia’s statement came as no surprise. Every scrap of science and learning was jealously hoarded by them, from their master forges on Mars to the countless manufactoria worlds across a thousand star systems. A discovery like Rho – a living, functioning clone – would be like nectar to the adepts of the biologis. She came across a data panel showing a name and visual profile of the agent who would be joining the mission; Genus Nohlan, a questor, one of countless adepts who scoured the galaxy for lost scraps of technology, missing since the Age of Old Night.

She glanced up at the prioress. ‘Command of this mission is mine, yes? I will not brook interference from the hand of the Mechanicum. If certain choices need to be made about the fate of Hollos and its people...’ She trailed off, unwilling to finish the sentence.

The prioress did not seem to notice. ‘Nohlan has been instructed to obey your orders. You may do whatever is required to retain the sanctity of church and Imperium.’

‘Even if that requires the death of a world?’

Lydia turned away, dismissing her with the motion. ‘It would not be the first time, Sister Miriya.’

The warship Coronus knifed through the void of deep space, a sword-blade prow

leading towers of iron and steel, the wicked maws of lance cannons and massed laser batteries decorating the flanks. The ship was by no means the largest of the God-Emperor's fleet, but it was still powerful. The weapons it carried could rain death from high orbit and crack continents.

The ultimate sanction lay nestled within the warheads of a dozen cyclonic torpedoes. The command need only be given – Exterminatus – and the planet Hollos would die.

Sister Miriya had prayed each day of the journey that she would not be called upon to speak that word, but she had beseeched her saint and her God-Emperor to give her the strength to do so, if the moment came.

For despite the size of the Imperial church, despite the millions of loyal, devout souls in its service, its faith was a delicate and fragile thing, in constant need of protection. One single thread of poison could be enough to let rot set in. The Sisters of Battle were ever vigilant, always watching for heathens, witches and betrayers cloaked in the mantle of friendship. Put in such terms, the mission seemed clear, but Miriya knew that was a falsehood. There were no simple choices in the eternal service to the God-Emperor. Only in death did duty end, and until that time, Miriya would do as her oath demanded.

The voyage would be over soon, and she welcomed it. Her Celestians – Sisters Lethe, Cassandra, Isabel, Portia and Iona – were troubled by their orders. The presence of the replicae Rho had divided them. Some considered the clone to be an aberration, something that should be destroyed out of hand for daring to ape humanity, but they had not seen the curious, affecting sight of Rho at prayer. Try as she might, Miriya could not shake that image from her thoughts.

In the end, it was inevitable that she would seek to better understand the messenger from the lost colony.

She found Questor Nohlan where he had been for the duration of the voyage, prowling the observation chamber before Rho's cell, his mechanical limbs clicking and whirring.

Through means Sister Miriya was not privy to, the entire compartment had been shifted from Zhodon Orbital to a bay aboard the *Coronus*, so strict was the security around the clone envoy. Nohlan had not moved from there, conducting scans and taking reams of notes on the humanoid, as if he were a collector with a

newly discovered species of animal.

Rho's odd, bird-like movements were visible through the armoured glass, and as Miriya approached, she saw Nohlan copy them, as if attempting to understand the replica.

'Honoured questor.' She gave him a shallow bow of greeting. 'You should prepare. We have emerged from the warp and the ship is making its approach to Hollos.'

'Oh. Sister Celestian!' Nohlan flinched, surprised by her arrival. 'Forgive me. I am deep in my analysis. Processing. Processing.' His vox-processed voice had an officious quality to it, but that couldn't hide his captivation with the subject of his study.

The adept was a typical example of his kind. Beneath voluminous crimson robes, the remnants of a human being lay among numerous bio-mechanical enhancements, implants and cybernetics. Serpentine mechadendrites wandered across the deck near his clawed feet, or wavered in the air like fronds in a breeze. A whiff of ozone and scented machine oil was always present around him. What she could see of his face beneath his hood had too many eyes, all of them red-lit and set in brass.

Miriya looked away towards the glassy wall. 'You have been here for days. Tell me, adept, do you ever sleep?'

'Praise the Ommissiah, but that need was edited from my body many years ago, four-point-two recurring,' he explained. 'It is quite liberating.'

'What have you learned about...?' Miriya paused, mentally correcting. 'About her?'

'Much indeed, forty giga-quads of data, still rising.' Nohlan became enthused. 'I admit to being both fascinated and unnerved by the very presence of such a being as designate: Rho. She stimulates emotional responses in me that are rare occurrences. I am quite inspired!'

'The clone is what it seems, then?'

Nohlan's hooded head bobbed. 'Affirmative. The ideal of a genetically-

engineered, vat-grown “perfect human” has hitherto been a myth. Now it is fact. She is fact. Ninety-seven point six per cent.’ He paused. ‘However... I admit to some concern over her unusual neurological development.’

Miriya watched Rho pick carefully at a data-slate she had been given, a simple child’s primer on the glory of the Golden Throne. ‘She seems as intelligent as you or I.’

Nohlan nodded again. ‘My point exactly. The records of the magos biologists note that replicae were designed to be a replacement for machine-life, automata and the like. Great creations indeed, but made to be the servants of mankind. Loyal slave-warriors for our wars. Not our equals.’ He shook his head. ‘Error condition noted.’

On the other side of the glass, Rho put down the slate and closed her eyes. The clone’s head was cocked and her lips were moving. ‘What is she doing?’

‘Singing,’ said the adept. ‘I have observed her doing so on several occasions. Parsing the audial portion, it appears to be a variant of the Oleon Anthem, probability factor plus or minus two per cent.’

‘I know it well.’ Miriya recalled the hymnal from her orphan youth in the Schola Progenium, and in that moment she made a decision. ‘Open the chamber, adept. I want to look her in the eye.’

Nohlan hesitated, uncertain if she was serious, before finally obeying her order. ‘As you wish...’ A mehadendrite snaked out across the floor before rising up to tap out a code on a panel in the wall.

The glass wall shifted and retracted into the deck, and Miriya caught a brief snatch of Rho’s faint and eerie singing before she fell silent. With pause, the Battle Sister strode into the compartment and stood before the clone, daring it to speak. Those odd violet eyes measured her, sweeping across to Nohlan and then back.

‘I do not blame you,’ said Rho. Her words were gentle and breathy. ‘I understand why you have kept me confined here. But I forgive it. You fear me.’

‘I am Sister Miriya of the Order of Our Martyred Lady,’ she replied, ‘and you are nothing to be afraid of.’

Rho blinked slowly. 'The actions of your prioress would seem to suggest otherwise.' She went on before Miriya could respond. 'But it is of no consequence. I sense we grow nearer to my home world with each passing second. You have brought me back. Thank you, Miriya.' Rho bowed to her. 'Truly, the God-Emperor has smiled upon us.'

'You believe so?' Now she heard the clone-being say the words, Miriya wanted to challenge her. 'How can you know His will?'

'I do not presume to,' she replied. 'I am only His servant. But there can be no other explanation. You and I are here by His design. All that has happened is the wish of the Great Progenitor.'

At closer quarters, Miriya could better see the replica's shape and form. While slight, Rho's body was all engineered muscle, without a single iota of useless flesh. Her looks belied a hidden strength, and the Battle Sister imagined that in combat Rho would be formidable indeed. Yet she radiated an air of calm stillness.

She tried a different tack. 'Your world has been isolated from the Imperium for two millennia. You are a living example of that fact.'

'Yes,' Rho said sadly. 'Can you imagine such pain, Sister? To be surrounded by a veil of madness for century upon century? Some began to fear that the universe had been destroyed in a great cataclysm, and only cruel fate had left our worlds untouched. Others believed we were the playthings of the Ruinous Powers. But not I. I have always known the truth. It is why I was chosen to be the messenger.'

Miriya took a step closer. 'What is the truth you speak of?'

When Rho replied, her eyes were shining and her words were those of a true zealot. She reached up and clasped Miriya's hand. 'It was His doing. The God-Emperor isolated Hollos in order to test us. To keep us pure. And our faith in Him has finally been rewarded. The veil has fallen.'

'The veil... You mean the warp storms?'

Rho nodded. 'Aye. Now, after so long, we are free and ready to return. Our world has endured... It has prospered! I cannot wait for you to see it!'

‘Nor I,’ said Miriya, unable to keep the wariness from her tone.

The engines of the Arvus-class shuttle hummed as it dropped towards the capital of Hollos, and the sound kindled old battle-memory in Sister Miriya. Many times she had deployed into combat from a craft such as this, and it took a near-physical effort to remind herself of an important truth.

‘This is a mission of words,’ she muttered to herself. ‘Not warfare.’

‘Not yet.’ The warrior seated in the crash-couch at her side gave the reply with a grim nod, and Miriya glanced at her

‘Did I voice my thoughts aloud, Sister Lethe?’

The other woman gave a nod. ‘You did, Eloheim. But trust we are all ready with hymnal and bolter, sword and scripture alike, should either be needed.’

Miriya gave a thin smile. Lethe was her strong right arm, second-in-command of her unit and a trusted comrade. They had fought many Wars of Faith side by side, and this day they shared the same silent concerns. ‘Ready the Celestians, Sister. We will make planetfall soon, and I wish to be prepared.’ She got out of her couch and made her way to the back of the shuttle; she didn’t need to make sure Lethe was following her orders. The gruff, dour Battle Sister was already immediately snapping out commands to Sister Iona and Sister Portia to secure their weapons, and calling upon Sister Cassandra and Sister Isabel to prepare for a security sweep across the landing site on touchdown.

Miriya left her second to her work and moved forward to find Adept Nohlan and the replicae near the bow of the vessel, peering out through a wide viewport.

‘Look there,’ Rho was saying, picking out points of interest with her long, delicate fingers. ‘Can you see? That is the hive-tower of Solasian. To the west, beneath the photon sails, our farmlands. And the White Plains. A world living under the Great Progenitor’s munificence.’

‘Ah, “The Great Progenitor”,’ Nohlan echoed her words. ‘This is your local designation for the God-Emperor?’

Rho gave a nod. ‘It reflects His position as the forge-master of all that we have and all that we are.’

‘Indeed,’ he mused. ‘Processing...’

Miriya watched the interaction between the clone and the adept with a cold eye. Nohlan seemed to have no trouble adjusting to the abhuman’s appearance, but then she imagined his interest in the replica and the technology that had made it overrode any other intentions.

‘Initial scans indicate that this region of the planet appears to be stable,’ he went on. ‘Data collation in progress.’

Rho seemed uncertain what to make of that reply. ‘Hollos has its problems, like any world. But they have not dimmed our faith. We strive to improve our lot with each new day.’ She glanced up as Miriya approached.

‘Tell us about the council we are to meet on our arrival,’ said Miriya. ‘They have the authority to speak for all citizens of Hollos?’

Rho nodded again. ‘I am one of their number. We are the legal government of our planet. Some of us have held high office for more than seven hundred Terran years! It is through the council’s guidance that we have developed a benign, enduring society.’

Nohlan caught the inference and immediately seized upon it. ‘Interrogative: beings like you, the replica. In this culture you are the serviles, the soldiers, the protectors, yes?’

‘The protectors... Yes,’ Rho replied, but cautiously.

The shuttle’s winglets bit into the air as it turned on a final approach and Miriya felt a vibration shiver up through the deck. Behind her, she heard Lethe calling the other Sisters to readiness and unbidden, her hand once more slipped towards the holster of her plasma pistol.

‘This is a historic day!’ Rho’s violet eyes grew wide with something like joy. ‘There will be celebrations!’

We shall see, Miriya told herself. Hard-earned experience had shown here that even the most benign of missions could twist into something dangerous if one were not ever-watchful.

Like a spire of sculpted ice, the white stone citadel of Hollos rose up above the planetary capital, catching the dazzling light of the day. It towered over a broad marble plaza dotted with ornamental fountains and gardens, filled with ornate statuary that rose at all points of the compass, the sculpted figures standing proudly and gazing up into the sky. Tallest among them was a rendering of the God-Emperor in the garb of an ancient knight, the stone inlaid with jewels and platinum.

The Arvus landed atop a granite rose tiled into the stonework, and past the distant lines of crowd barriers, a throng of Hollosi citizens raised their voices in cheers of happiness and a rolling fanfare blared from golden trumpets. Floating drone-birds wheeled overhead, camera-eyes feeding images to the crowds and the world beyond.

But as the shuttle's hatch hissed open, the music and the voices ebbed and the first silent note of dread lingered in the air. The Battle Sisters were the first to disembark, moving in cautious lock-step. Lethe led them forward, and each cradled her Godwyn-De'az pattern boltgun in a low, unthreatening carry, but each woman was primed to bring them to combat ready if the slightest threat presented itself.

Miriya exited last with Rho and the questor, taking in the scope of the place. Hollos' air smelled of blossoms and morning rain, clean and welcoming.

Eight figures stood waiting at the foot of the Emperor's statue, and Miriya threw Lethe a nod. As one, the Sisters paused to bow in the direction of the great effigy before proceeding.

Nohlan leaned in to speak to the Celestian as the group approached them. 'Analysing. The council... It would appear that only two of them are—'

She cut him off. 'Humans. Yes.' Miriya could not conceal a frown of dismay at the presence of six other replicaes among the planet's ruling body.

Rho stepped forward, beaming and excited, and addressed her people. 'I have returned, my fellow arbiters, and with great tidings! The Imperium endures, just as we have! I bring these emissaries from the God-Emperor's church to reunite with us! We are delivered!' Her words brought a new wave of applause and cheering from the crowd, but the goodwill did not spread to shift the mood of the Battle Sisters.

‘Look sharp,’ grated Lethe, glancing to her commander. ‘Do you see them, Eloheim? The clones are everywhere.’

Miriya nodded. The replicae were not just part of the Hollosi Council, but also visible in the crowds, standing on the battlements and out amid the gardens. She estimated there was at least one of them for every two humans in sight. ‘Stay your hand, Sister,’ she warned Lethe. ‘The ways of this world are unknown to us. Caution is our watchword.’

‘They are garbed in such finery,’ remarked Nohlan. ‘Hypothesis – the clone-beings appear to be the ruling class in this culture. Further study is warranted.’

The adept’s theory gave Miriya pause, but before she could consider it further, Rho was turning towards her and gesturing to the air. ‘Allow me to present Sister Miriya, Celestian Eloheim of the Adepta Sororitas, and Questor Nohlan of the magos biologis!’ Her smile took them both in as she and the council members bowed. ‘Welcome our first visitors in thousands of years! This is truly a glorious day. Let us give praise to the Great Progenitor for His munificence. We welcome our kindred to our home!’

‘Kindred?’ Lethe muttered, as if she were insulted to be considered the same manner of being as the replicae.

Miriya silenced her with a look, and instead she returned the bow, looking up to find the faces of the humans who stood alongside the line of clones, both of them dressed in the same robes of office. One was an older male who seemed fatigued and distracted, but the other was a woman of Miriya’s age and returned her gaze intently.

The Sister took a breath. ‘Well met, arbiters. I bring greetings from the Ecclesiarchy of Holy Terra. Know that we are heartened to see that your...’ She searched for the right word. ‘Your disconnection from the Imperium did not break your faith.’

‘Of course,’ said Rho. ‘We are an elected leadership, selected by our people to embody their faith and service to the greater community. The council has managed the affairs of Hollos for centuries, Sister Miriya. Through it, our world has become the ideal you see around you.’

The human arbiter suddenly broke her silence. ‘Our replicae partners have held

their roles for many, many years. In that time they have guided us... to a kind of prosperity.' Her words were neutral, but Miriya sensed something unsaid lurking just beneath their surface.

'Indeed so, dear Ahven,' continued Rho. 'Together, we are all children of the God-Emperor of Mankind.' She beckoned the group to follow her. 'Come, kindred. We will receive your mission in the great hall.'

Miriya gave a nod, but paused to give new orders to her second. 'Lethe. You and Isabel remain in the plaza until I summon you. Keep the shuttle secure.'

Lethe accepted the command with a nod, but not with silence. 'Eloheim. I don't like what I see here. Synthetics lording it over humans? It's not right. It goes against the natural order.'

Part of Miriya agreed with her, but she pushed that thought away. 'Perhaps so... But we cannot rush to judge these people by our lights.'

Lethe's eyes narrowed. 'Forgive my presumption, Sister, but I assumed that the very reason we are here is to pass judgement.'

Miriya found she had no reply and set off towards the white tower, the other woman's words dogging her all the way.

In the citadel's great hall, an arc of dark wood rose from a massive stone dais, and behind it each of the council members took up a station as another formal fanfare piped them to their places. Looking around, Miriya saw paintings worked into the walls, the floor and the ceiling. All of them were detailed landscapes of Holy Terra, Ophelia, Evangelion and other planets with great religious significance. Her eye was drawn to a set of tall panels that showed an unfolding narrative, apparently the history of Hollos itself.

Rho nodded sagely as she saw Miriya studying them. 'The chronicle, yes. I imagine you have many questions about what became of our world after the monstrous veil fell between us.'

The first illustration showed a recognisable depiction of an Adeptus Mechanicus explorator base, and Miriya said as much.

Nohlan confirmed her thoughts. 'Affirmative. That appears to be a Type-Zed

embedded test and research colony. I have recovered what data remains of that endeavour from the Mechanicum's knowledge pool.'

'Hollo was originally an outpost dedicated to studying the science that birthed me,' explained Rho. 'You call it "replicae". But after the warp storms came and we were alone in the void, the surface of the planet was ravaged by lashes of dark energy.' She indicated the next few panels. Miriya saw paintings of terrible tempests sweeping across the landscape, and of desperate battles against the elements and other, more unnatural forces.

'Those creatures depicted there,' said the Battle Sister. 'The monsters...'

'Daemons.' Rho's bright and open face was momentarily darkened by the shadow of an old, deep fear as she uttered the word. Some of the Hollosi within earshot reflexively spat at the mention of it and made the sign of the aquila. 'The storms spilled out foul warp spawn upon the land,' continued Rho. 'The colonists fought, but they were pushed to the verge of extinction. Isolated and alone, with no hope of rescue, they reached out to the only ones who could save them.'

'The replicae.' Nohlan studied the images on the next panel of the chronicle, parsing the images. 'Processing. The survivors decanted the prototype soldier clones to help them fight off the archenemy, and keep their world alive.'

Miriya walked along the line of the panels, watching the images shift from those of warfare and desolation, first to hardship and adversity, and finally to a bold new rebirth. It was a pretty tale, she had to admit.

'We drew Hollos back from the brink of destruction,' said Rho. 'We turned away the tide of the warp and held it at bay. And over the centuries, we – the replicae – evolved beyond our simplistic warrior natures into something superior.'

That last word caused Miriya to give the clone a sharp look. 'Superior to what?'

Rho returned her gaze. 'To what we once were. Little more than organic machines, tools and cannon fodder. We unlocked our potential.' She indicated the last few panels of the chronicle. 'Eventually, the colonists decided to cede governance of Hollos to us. We are tireless, virtually immortal. And under our stewardship, this world has thrived.'

‘You must be very proud of your accomplishments.’ Miriya kept her tone level.

Rho didn’t respond to the implicit judgement in the Battle Sister’s words. ‘It is only by the will of the God-Emperor that we have endured. Without Him, we would be ashes. But instead, we are a peaceful world ready and willing to return to the Imperial fold...’ Suddenly she faltered, as if a terrible possibility had occurred to her. ‘That is... if you will have us? If you still want us?’

The ready desperation in Rho’s strange eyes gave Miriya a moment of pause. ‘I... We will need to be certain,’ she said.

‘Of what? Do you fear we are tainted by the warp?’ Rho came closer and placed a hand on the vambrace of Miriya’s power armour. ‘I swear on my honour it is not so! We have purged our planet of such things!’

Beneath his hooded head, Nohlan’s artificial eyes clicked as they focused on her. ‘The way of Chaos is insidious,’ he intoned. ‘Are you sure? Probability factors unclear.’

‘In the God-Emperor’s name, yes!’ Rho drew herself up. ‘Hollo is at peace! A replicae has no need to raise arms! We have embraced pacifism and transcended our violent roots. There is no warfare here!’

‘You truly have been isolated.’ Miriya felt a moment of genuine pity for the clone. ‘The rest of the galaxy has not been so lucky.’

Rho looked stricken, and turned to her fellow replicae as if she were seeking support, and then without warning, a distant explosion sounded out beyond the windows of the citadel, swiftly followed by the rattle of bolter-fire.

‘Analysing,’ said Nohlan, instantly parsing the noise of the discharge. ‘Chemical explosive detonation, high yield, close proximity.’

In the same moment, Sister Lethe’s voice issued out from the vox-bead in Miriya’s ear. ‘Eloheim! We have multiple attackers pushing through the crowd, armed with ballistic weapons and grenades! They’re killing anything that moves!’

‘Move to cover and stand by,’ Miriya ordered, then turned on the arbiters, her eyes flashing. ‘What is the meaning of this?’

That same flash of cold fear she had seen on Rho's face moments before now rushed back as the replica female shrank back. 'Oh, Emperor, no... It must be the Red... But they have been silent for so long...'

'Explain!' barked Miriya, reaching for her pistol. 'Now!'

'Please, you must believe me, this is not our doing!' Rho grabbed at her in sudden panic, but the Battle Sister shrugged her hand from her arm and turned to her squad, an old and familiar sensation filling the Celestian's thoughts.

'Sister Iona will remain here with the questor.' The pale, morose Sororitas accepted Miriya's command with a nod. 'Cassandra, Portia, remove the peace-bonds from your weapons and come with me.' The women did as they were ordered, ripping off the ceremonial ribbons and racking the slides of their bolters.

Nohlan held up a metal-fingered hand. 'What are you doing?'

She ignored him, tapping the vox-bead to re-open the channel to the rest of her squad. 'Lethe! Assume defensive formation! We're on our way to you.'

'Aye, Sister,' came the reply, followed by the crackle of gunfire. A split-second later, the same sound reached the windows of the citadel.

'Stay here,' Miriya told the adept, meeting his gaze. 'And trust nothing.'

By the time the Battle Sisters reached the plaza, the crowd was a seething mass of terror as the Hollosi citizens crushed each other in their heedless attempts to flee. Miriya sprinted out from an ornate arcade and across the glittering marble, her steel boots clattering across the stone. Smoke and blood wafted on the breeze.

She heard Lethe calling out orders to Isabel. 'Target to your right, moving behind the pergola!' The other Battle Sister shifted up ahead and let off a burst of bolter fire; Miriya could not see the target from where she was, but she heard it die with a feral screech.

Lethe was in cover behind the shuttle, furiously reloading her weapon. 'In Katherine's name, what are these things?'

‘Report!’ snapped Miriya, as she slid in next to her.

‘They came out of nowhere,’ said Lethe. ‘One moment, all was serene. The next, the citizens were like panicked cattle!’

‘What are we dealing with?’

Lethe eyed her. ‘Combat replicae. Or something very similar.’

‘More clone-forms?’ Miriya peered out from behind the cover of the shuttle and got her first clear look at the attackers.

There were a dozen of them, moving with incredible speed across the plaza, dodging from side to side to avoid the shots from the Battle Sisters. They resembled Rho and the other clones, but these new beings were wild and savage. An aura of feral brutality and vicious, animal anger spread before them. Their flesh was a livid crimson the colour of blood.

‘Rho... She called them the Red...’

‘They’re like beasts!’ spat Lethe, firing towards the advancing creatures. ‘They fight with fury and no heed to danger!’

With each passing second, the attackers were closing in, and the turmoil of screaming and gunfire grew louder and louder. ‘So much for promises of a world at peace,’ Miriya said bitterly. Her next act was now cast in stone, and she called out over the vox-net. ‘Sororitas! In the Emperor’s name, destroy them!’

The Celestians were no strangers to conflict, and as one they laid a wall of shots upon the enemy. Miriya aimed her plasma pistol and sent sun-bright streaks of burning death into the advancing ranks.

Crimson-skinned replicae became shrieking torches, burning to ruin on the marble square. But their comrades did not falter and did not slow, still coming onwards, hurling grenades and firing blindly with heavy stub-guns. Luckless civilians caught in their path went down, lives brutally snuffed out in moments.

‘We can’t break the line!’ Lethe spat out a gutter curse. ‘They keep coming!’

Miriya saw movement behind her and realised that Rho had followed them out

to the plaza. The pale female cowered behind a planter, her face a picture of raw fear. Miriya dashed across the space between them and grabbed her by the shoulder. 'Where are your soldiers?' she demanded. 'These creatures will overwhelm us if your kind do not fight!'

'No.' Rho shook her head. 'No. We cannot. We reject warfare!'

The idea that a sentient being would rather embrace inaction and certain death than fight to survive was anathema to Miriya's character. 'You were born a clone-warrior!' She shook Rho hard. 'That is your template, your birth right! You have the skills! Pick up a weapon and defend yourself!'

'No!' For a brief instant, Miriya saw anger in Rho's eyes, but then it was gone again, and she cowered as shots whined off the stonework around them.

'More of them coming in!' called Lethe. 'We can't take them all!'

'Damn this... ' Miriya released her grip on Rho and turned her back on the clone. Lethe was right. As formidable as the Sisters of Battle were, the numbers of the attackers were swelling as more of them poured into the plaza from the surrounding gardens. The Celestians were just one squad, and if the tide of this fight did not turn now, they would be overrun.

A change in tactics was required.

'Lethe!' Miriya marshalled her strength. 'Cover me!' The Celestian broke into a sprint and raced across the plaza to the rear of the shuttle, stubber shells cracking at her heels every step of the way, bolter rounds flashing back the other way as her Sisters met the enemy approach.

She threw herself up the ramp of the shuttle and vanished inside, and when Miriya emerged from the Arvus once more, her plasma pistol was holstered. In her hands, she cradled the hissing bulk of an Inferus Infinitas-pattern heavy flamer drawn from the vessel's weapons locker.

Filling her lungs with air, she let out a furious battle cry that carried across the plaza and echoed off the walls of the citadel. 'With Faith and Fire!'

Her finger tightened on the igniter, and jets of burning liquid promethium lashed out like flaming whips, snaking across the enemy advance and stopping it dead.

Miriya's squad-mates formed up behind her and followed their commander's lead.

'It's working!' shouted Lethe. 'They're falling back!'

The searing heat washed over Miriya's face as she advanced. 'Drive them into the ground, Sisters! Show them the folly of their heresy!'

Before the cleansing flame, the enemy line fell in disarray. Leaving the corpses of their dead behind, the red-skinned attackers broke apart and scattered, some fleeing down hatches into the sewers, others disappearing across the ruined gardens and into smoky side streets.

'You... You killed so many of them...' Rho staggered through the coils of haze wreathing the bodies of the dead, aghast at the carnage. In the aftermath of the brutal, bloody fight, the opulent plaza resembled a war grave, littered with the dead and the dying.

'We stopped them,' Miriya corrected. 'Now you will tell me what they were! You lied to me. You said Hollos was at peace.'

'It is! We are!' Rho tried to recover her composure, but failed. 'The Red... They're not like the rest of us.'

'You will explain it to me,' Miriya's voice was iron hard.

Rho seemed to wilt before her eyes and she looked at the ground, nodding once.

'Sister Miriya.' She turned as Lethe approached, reloading her bolter. 'It's over. The enemy have fled.'

'Status of the squad?' asked Miriya.

Lethe jerked a thumb over her shoulder. 'Cassandra was injured, but her armour took the brunt of the damage. She remains combat-ready. Other wounds were minor and of no concern. The total of civilian dead is still incomplete, but it is estimated to be in the hundreds. We tally nineteen replicae corpses. Questor Nohlan came down from the citadel... He insisted on examining them.'

'Very well.' Miriya sensed there was more Lethe wanted to say, and inclined her

head, giving her permission to continue.

‘I have contacted the Coronus,’ added the other woman. ‘They stand ready to deploy additional squads to the surface at your command.’

At first glance, it seemed like the right thing to do. Representatives of the Imperium of Man had been threatened, and the standard response would be to answer that attack with the maximum available force. But there were still too many variables at play here, still too many questions unanswered. ‘Not yet,’ she told her. ‘We did not come here to invade this world, Lethe.’

Lethe scowled. ‘They attacked us. We are the scions of the Imperial church on this world. That makes it an act of Holy War.’

‘Perhaps,’ she admitted. ‘But I will not respond in kind without an understanding of the situation. Too many conflicts have begun that way.’

Lethe shot a look at the replicae, who stood by silent and unmoving. ‘The truth is being kept from us. That’s reason enough. There is more than meets the eye at work here.’

‘All the more reason for the full truth to be uncovered.’ Before her second-in-command could speak further to the matter, Miriya gave out her orders. ‘Carry on here. I will return to the citadel and determine our next course of action.’

‘As you command,’ snapped Lethe, giving Rho one last lingering glare before stalking away.

‘She looks at me as if she wishes to kill me,’ the clone said softly.

Miriya rounded on her. ‘Give me a reason she should not, Rho. Those beings who attacked us, they were replicae. Like you.’

‘I told you, they are not like me! The Red are... throwbacks. They are an aberration among our kind, violent and consumed by destructive emotions. We have tried to re-educate them, rehabilitate them... But we cannot. Nothing works. They are... irredeemable.’ Slowly, reluctantly, Rho explained that in every generation of clones, some would exhibit the reddening of their flesh and a marked predilection for aggression and violence. The council, reluctant to cull what they considered to be innocent beings with no control over their baser

natures, exiled the Red to an outlying island continent. But somehow, they returned to plague the peaceful cities of Hollos.

‘You kept this from us,’ said Miriya. ‘How can we trust anything you say now?’

‘You must understand,’ insisted Rho, ‘the Red are an isolated problem. They are not responsible for what they do.’

Miriya considered that. ‘Like a rabid animal?’

‘Yes.’

She tapped the butt of her plasma pistol. ‘Where I come from, violent beasts are put down, not given free reign to go where they wish! How often do these attacks occur?’

‘Rarely.’ Rho’s answer was too quick, too practised. After a moment, she went on. ‘Not as rarely as they used to be, I must admit. But they are like tempests, Sister Miriya. They come and we weather them, and they pass. We endure. We rebuild—’

Miriya nodded towards the shrouded corpses being gathered up from the bloodied grassland of the ornamental gardens. ‘Tell that to your people who died today.’ A weary sigh escaped her. ‘I will speak with your arbiters. And then I must confer with my ship.’

‘What are you going to do?’ Rho could not keep the fear from her words.

‘That remains to be seen,’ she replied. But in truth, the Celestian knew that her options were already beginning to narrow.

She strode back into the council chamber, her temper only held in check by the oath to this duty she had sworn to Prioress Lydia, but the corridors of the citadel were in disarray, the servants and the counsellors scattered and missing, frightened by the massed assault on their most sacred building. It seemed that they had retreated to safe havens and left the Sororitas to oppose the Red alone. Only Rho had shown any courage to join them and look the assault in the eye.

Miriya cast around, frowning. Were these people so weak that they fled at the first sign of battle? How had they managed to survive in a universe as hostile as

this one? There was no place for the pacifist way in Miriya's world. There was only war, and the need to fight to live.

'Arbiters!' she called out across the empty chamber. 'Where are you? I would speak with—'

The words died in her throat. The Battle Sister heard the clumsy, inexpert approach, a sudden and furtive movement nearby, boots scraping on flagstones. Someone was attempting to flank her, figures moving unseen in the shadows beyond the light thrown from the tall stained-glassaic windows that dominated the chamber. She relied on instinct, turning as the inevitable attack came.

Darts arrowed from the depths of the shadows, whistling through the air like lazy hornets. The first flew wide as she dodged away, but the second came at her from another direction and she was distracted for long enough, for one tiny moment. Enough for the dart to bury itself in the bare flesh of her neck. Gasping as the chilling flood of a neurotoxin flashed through her veins, Miriya seized the dart and yanked it out, tossing it away.

'Who... dares...?' she snarled, but her throat was closing up and it was a monumental effort just to speak. The rush of blood in her ears rose to a thunder. Even as she pulled her plasma pistol, the Celestian felt the tranquilising agent passing into every part of her body. Her hands felt heavy and numb.

The Battle Sister resisted, fighting against the void coiling at the edges of her vision, cursing her assailant through gritted teeth. 'Damn... you...'

'Shoot her again, you fools!' The voice was distant and distorted, but she knew it. She had heard it before, in this very room...

More buzzing shots lanced into her and she gave a strangled cry, stumbling to the ground. Miriya fell, cursing herself as her body refused to answer her commands. The pistol was dead weight in her hands, her legs turning to water. The glittering tiles of the council chamber floor rose up to meet her, turning black and dark, opening up to swallow her whole.

She rose back to wakefulness with a choking gasp.

Miriya could not reckon the passing of time. It seemed like an instant, but it could have been days. The Battle Sister awoke, resting in a heavy wooden chair,

and found her armour untouched but her pistol absent from its holster. She had expected restraints, but there were none.

Her eyes adjusted to the dimness. Her new surroundings were a cellar of some sort, lit by dull bio-lumes, damp and chilly. And there, standing before her in a loose group, were five hooded figures in heavy cloaks.

One of them detached from the group and came forward, rolling back the hood to reveal the face beneath. ‘Sister Miriya,’ began Arbiter Ahven, ‘I must apologise for—’

The Celestian did not let her finish. The grave mistake these fools had made was now fully revealed to them as Miriya became a blur of black and crimson armour, crossing the chamber in the blinking of an eye. Her gauntlet clamped about the throat of the other woman and she lifted her off her feet, scattering the rest of the group.

Miriya slammed her captor into the stone wall and hissed in fury. ‘You have attacked the God-Emperor’s Sororitas! You will answer for that!’

The other hooded figures drew weapons – common blades and stubber guns – but Ahven desperately waved them away, gasping for air. ‘No! No! Stop! Miriya, please! Let me explain!’

It was a long moment before the Battle Sister released her grip and the arbiter dropped to the floor. ‘Speak,’ she said coldly.

‘I... I am sorry,’ Ahven managed, recovering as her cohorts helped her to her feet. ‘I deserved that. But you must understand, I had no choice...’

‘I have had my fill of this world’s lies and half-truths.’ Miriya’s reply was icy. ‘You will explain yourself to me now, or I swear by dawn Hollos will be ashes.’

The threat hung in the dank air between them, and no one doubted that it was genuine. ‘I could not take the chance you would refuse me. This was the only way to be sure we could speak alone.’ She massaged her bruised throat and coughed. ‘We are in the sewers beneath the citadel. This is the only place where we can meet without fear of being overheard by the replicae.’ At a nod from Ahven, the rest of the group revealed their faces. They were all normal humans. ‘You have seen a glimpse of our society,’ she went on. ‘You see how the replicae

have made themselves the supreme power on our planet. They allow two of us to sit on their precious council, but they ignore everything we say! They know better than we natural-borns! They are superior!' She turned her head and spat in disgust. 'But there are many who reject their rule.'

Miriya scanned the faces of the others in her group as they nodded and mutter their agreement with Ahven's words. 'And you speak for them?'

The arbiter nodded. 'In secret, I lead a sect who oppose Rho and her vat-bred freaks. We have been working against them for years, waiting for the opportunity... And now you are here!' She exchanged a look with her co-conspirators. 'It is time. The stars are right.'

'What are you saying, Ahven?' Miriya found her plasma pistol sitting undamaged atop a low wall and returned it to her holster. 'That you wish the support of the Imperium in your plans for a coup?'

'Will you stand with us?' Ahven took a step towards her, her tone shifting towards entreaty. 'Human and human against synthetic? You have seen them! Weak-willed and pathetic, working against the order of things. They have no right to rule us! The replicae are supposed to be our servants, not our masters!'

'On that point, I may agree,' allowed the Battle Sister. 'And what of these... Red? Did you summon them to attack the plaza today?'

Ahven stiffened, becoming defensive. 'In every revolution blood must be spilled. The Red are what the replicae should be, slave-warriors. But today's attack was not directed against you!'

Miriya eyed her. 'You bring me here by force. You attack civilians and cause bloodshed. And now you dare to petition my church for help?'

When Ahven spoke again, her eyes were alight with a passion. 'I remember the words of the Codex Imperialis! The words of the Ecclesiarchy, left behind two millennia ago! No heretic, no mutant, no xenos can be suffered to live! What are these replicae if not inhuman?'

The ferocity of the arbiter's words gave Miriya pause. 'I will consider your request,' she said after a long moment.

Night had fallen across the capital as Miriya returned to the plaza before the citadel, and she sought out Questor Nohlan, picking her way through the rubble and the churned earth of destroyed flowerbeds.

Beneath a floating lumoglobe, the adept was bent over the burned remains of one of the Red, his machine-enhanced hands and a trio of mechanical limbs prodding and poking at the innards of the attacker. He seemed quite enthused by his grisly work, oblivious of the stark horror before him. With the bright, buzzing edge of a laser scalpel, Nohlan painstakingly flensed strips of skin from the dead replicae, all the while talking to himself in quiet, sing-song tones. 'Processing. Oh, how interesting... Processing.' He froze mid-action as Miriya came into the glow from the lume and offered her something approximating a smile. 'Sister Miriya! You've been off the vox for hours, where were you? Sister Lethe was quite perturbed.'

'It is of no consequence,' she told him, deflecting the question. 'Have these corpses provided you with any new information?'

'Oh, indeed...' His head bobbed. 'The locals were reluctant to let me examine them, but Sister Iona can be quite persuasive. Processing.'

'What have you learned?' She came closer, eyeing the corpse with mild disgust.

'Cross-referencing. Original files from Mechanicum colony Hollos Seven-Nine-Seven. I have formed a hypothesis about the variant strains of replicae we have seen here. The Red and the, uh, others.' He cocked his head. 'You see, the brain tissue of the violent clones shows evidence of a distinct neuro-chemical signature not present in the tissue of Rho and her kind.'

'You performed an autopsy on one of the... normal replicae as well?'

He nodded. 'I did it without informing the locals. I thought it best not to ask permission. I imagine they would have been opposed to the idea,' Nohlan added airily.

'Quite.' Miriya put aside the adept's cavalier attitude to the sanctity of the dead for a moment and went on. 'So, this chemical... Is it artificial? A virus?'

'Negative. Sister Miriya, it is the absence of the chemical that is artificial.'

She glanced around, to be certain that none of the replicae were within earshot of their conversation. ‘What are you saying? That Rho and her kind have been biologically altered in some fashion?’

‘Remnants of the original gene-template for the replicae from the Hollos Seven-Nine-Seven remain in my databanks,’ explained the adept. ‘They show the missing neuro-chemical as a ‘bio-trigger’. A genetic control mechanism implanted by their creators, if you will.’

‘Implanted by the Imperium,’ Miriya corrected.

‘Affirmative. But clones like Rho and the others we have met in the city, those without the bio-trigger, have free will. I believe they have deliberately re-engineered themselves to switch off the production of the neuro-chemical. They... evolved.’

Nohlan’s theory, if it were true, suggested a heretical act that would incur grave consequences. ‘How could that happen, unless they defied the orders of the gene-smiths who made them? Unless the slaves defied their rightful masters?’

‘There is another possibility,’ offered the adept. ‘It may have occurred naturally, without external interference.’ He spread his machine-hands. ‘Perhaps it is the will of the God-Emperor? Remember, not all of the replicae have been granted this... gift.’

‘A gift, or a curse?’ She wondered aloud. ‘No. I do not see His hand in this, questor. I see division and violence on the horizon. This planet is on the verge of a revolution. And I must decide if I am to stop it, or allow Hollos to be engulfed by war.’

It was Nohlan’s turn to be a step behind. ‘What are you saying, Sister Miriya?’

‘Prepare for greater violence,’ she told him. ‘No matter what happens, I fear it is inevitable.’

A new dawn rose, and it was as if the attack had never occurred. Overnight, human workers had washed away all traces of spilled blood and mended every last broken stone, until the plaza was spotless.

Miriya led her Battle Sisters to the council chamber, where Rho and the others

were waiting. For a moment, Miriya's gaze dwelled on Arbiter Ahven, but the other woman showed no reaction to her scrutiny. The Celestian moved to stand in the centre of the room, the squad in guardian stances and Nohlan at her side. After the events of the previous day, the peace-bonds on their weapons had not been restored.

Rho stood up and bowed to the room. 'Honoured representatives of the Imperial church. You have our deepest regrets. We hoped that you would not be touched by our internal social problems. That you were dragged into such a lamentable incident shames all of Hollos. We beseech you and ask that you understand we meant no artifice in this matter. The... embarrassment of the Red is a problem we are working to bring to an end. We hope it will not sour your feelings towards our world.'

Miriya gave a nod, her expression cold and steady. 'I understand. Know this, people of Hollos. The Imperial church will welcome you back to the rule of Holy Terra.' There was a murmur of approval from the council, but they fell silent once more as the Celestian continued to speak. 'I have communicated via astropathic signal to my superiors regarding the situation on this world. The ships of the Ministorum are already on their way. But be clear, there will be changes ahead. For many of you, the... re-integration with the Imperium will be difficult.' The mood of the room changed, as her words made the council become wary.

'What changes do you refer to, Sister Miriya?' said Rho.

Miriya met the gaze of the arbiter, knowing that her next words would change the fate of a world forever. 'It is with regret I must inform you that all replicae on Hollos will fall under the jurisdiction of the magos biologis, the gene-smiths of the Adeptus Mechanicus.'

The clone-beings on the council reacted with open shock and dismay. Rho raised a hand to quiet them. 'If you please, what does that mean, exactly?'

'Confirming,' noted Nohlan. 'As artificially created life forms, clones have no rights to citizenship in the Imperium of Mankind.'

A bleak silence fell in the wake of the adept's words, and when Rho finally broke it, it was with anger. 'You cannot expect us to accept that! We, who have protected this planet for twenty of your lifetimes? We, who made Hollos a near-

utopia?’ Her pale face darkened to a rosy shade. ‘How dare you make such demands?’

‘It is as the Imperial church has decreed,’ she said sadly.

Miriya saw a smile bloom on Ahven’s face, and the human arbiter suddenly rushed to her feet, waving Rho aside. ‘Be silent, vat-born,’ she snapped. ‘Your weakling reign is at an end, as it should be!’

All too soon, Miriya realised that she had handed the woman exactly what she wanted. ‘Ahven, no! You will not be allowed to—’

But the arbiter ignored her, instead snarling into a vox-bead hidden in her collar. ‘Now! The time is now! Begin the revolt! The Red Sect rises this day!’

‘What are you doing?’ Rho reached out a hand to the other arbiter. ‘Ahven, please...’

‘I told you to be silent!’ Ahven spat the words at the replicae and then struck her across the face with a vicious backhand blow. Beyond the smack of flesh on flesh, there came another sound, the same that had rocked the citadel only hours ago. The distant rumble of explosions and the chatter of gunfire. Ahven tore a weapon from the folds of her robes, and from the corridors leading into the chamber came dozens of humans wearing clothes streaked with blood-red dye.

The Battle Sisters instinctively raised their weapons, drawing into a combat wheel formation, but Miriya stepped away, approaching the council. ‘Stay your hands,’ she demanded. ‘I did not do this for you, Ahven! I gave this decree to stop any further bloodshed!’

‘It’s too late for that!’ Ahven shook her head, aiming her gun in Rho’s direction. ‘Today, we show our true colours. We show our secret sign, hidden for so long...’ The arbiter tore open her tunic, bearing her breast, and her action was mirrored by her followers. ‘We show our unity!’

What the Celestian saw branded into their flesh made her blood chill. Each of the Red Sect bore a mark – a disc and a line bisecting two arcs. It was a symbol of the Ruinous Powers, of Chaos itself.

Nohlan recoiled from the sight as if he had been physically struck. ‘The mark of

the daemon Tzeench!’ It cost him just to say the name of the horror. ‘Terra protect us, they are a Cult of Change!’

The Sororitas raised brought their weapons to bear, but Ahven seemed shocked that fellow humans would threaten her. ‘What are you doing? We are the same! We have followed the words of the old books since before the fall of the veil! We have been loyal! Why do you turn against us?’

‘Because you are tainted.’ The words were ashes in Miriya’s mouth. Her thoughts raced as she took aim with her plasma pistol. What she had feared all along was so. During its great isolation, Hollos had been tainted by the touch of the Dark Gods lurking in the warp, so deeply and so insidiously that those perverted by it were not even aware that they had been kneeling before a corrupting power.

‘Why do you take their side, Miriya?’ Ahven slammed her fist against her chest. ‘We are both human! The clones are the enemy, they are the ones who are unclean and tainted! The Red are the way of new change! We are the secret truth!’

‘No.’ Miriya shook her head gravely. ‘You have been deceived. You are pawns of Chaos and as the God-Emperor wills, we cannot suffer you to live.’

As the last words left her lips, Lethe and the other Battle Sisters cut down the Red Sect members in a brutal hail of bolter rounds. Ahven and her cohorts died screaming, their blood splattering across the chamber floor.

‘The bodies will need to be burned,’ said Lethe.

Miriya nodded. ‘And more besides.’

‘They... They’re all dead...’ Rho’s delicate hands flew to cover her mouth.

‘Not yet,’ said Nohlan. ‘Look, out in the streets.’ He pointed towards the glassaic windows, where flashes of yellow light marked the flares of gun muzzles. The anarchy of the battle in the courtyard was dwarfed by the conflict now erupting in the city. Staring down, Miriya glimpsed dozens of the feral replicae the Battle Sisters had faced before, laying waste beyond the plaza, and killing without pause.

Down in the vast courtyard, the carnage was horrific to behold. The numbers of the Red dwarfed those that had attacked the previous day, with legions of them running riot through the streets, an army of cloned berserkers emerging from the underground sewer system where Ahven's cult had been containing them in preparation for this day.

Miriya watched them killing their way through the civilian populace, human and replicae alike. It was less a battle, more a cull, and the grim mathematics of war were abundantly clear to her. 'We cannot fight such numbers.'

At her side, Lethe gave a nod of agreement. 'Aye, Eloheim. Five squads more, even ten would be hard-pressed to match them.' She looked up into the sky. 'So, then. The ship. If we have the Coronus deploy their lance cannons from orbit, the gunners could wipe out the insurgents within moments. Contain this before it spreads beyond the city limits.'

'The collateral damage would be immense. Hundreds of thousands of civilians dead. And the capital would be nothing but a smoking crater.' She shook her head. 'No, Sister. There's another way.' Miriya turned to Rho. Along with the other council members, she had followed them down into the plaza to witness the bloody destruction of their metropolis. 'I will ask once again, replicae,' she began. 'Help us to fight these creatures. You are gene-engineered with superior strength, superior speed! If you fight back, you can defeat your savage equivalents... If you will not take up arms and defend your world, I will be forced to destroy it!'

Once more, Rho shook her head. 'No! We have foresworn conflict. We excised the ability to kill from ourselves, forever. We are passive... Even if we wished to do so, the ability to take life is no longer a part of us!'

Nohlan gave the clone a measured look. 'Error,' he said. 'That statement is incorrect.' The adept gestured with a cyber-limb. 'I have computed the nature of the... mutation that separates the Red strain of the replicae from Rho and her kind... Those who consider themselves pacifists. In the past, they changed themselves to expunge their warrior natures. Error. They have only deactivated that part of themselves. It still remains.'

Rho blinked, not comprehending his meaning. 'That was all so long ago, before I was decanted...'

‘I can undo the alteration,’ Nohlan explained. ‘It is, in fact, a very simple task to accomplish. An aerosolised viral form of the correct neuro-chemical, synthesised by my internal bio-fac module.’ He presented a nozzle at the tip of his cyber-limb, one of a dozen micro-tools built into his augmented form. His clicking lens-eyes studied Rho sadly. ‘It will regress all of them to their default warrior-helot nature.’

The naked shock on Rho’s face was an awful sight on so gentle an aspect. ‘God-Emperor, no! You would rob us of our reason, our very freedom?’

‘You don’t have any freedom,’ Lethe said grimly. ‘You are slaves. That’s how you were made.’

With an expression of pure, undiluted horror, Rho turned to Miriya, pleading with her. ‘Sister, please! Tell me you will not do this!’

It took an effort of will to look away from her. ‘How would it work, questor?’

‘Once released, it will reproduce very rapidly, moving from clone to clone.’ Nohlan’s limbs whirred as he drew them back. ‘Infecting them. Reactivating the dormant neural links. Effect would be near-instantaneous. All replicaes would revert to type. All humans would be unaffected.’ He paused. ‘But you must understand, Sister Celestian, this is a grave act. It is irreversible. Once implemented, all that the altered replicaes are would be lost to them. Memories, personality, self... Erased.’

‘In the name of Holy Terra,’ Rho cried, her panic rising. ‘I beg of you! Do not consider this!’ She tried to reach out for Miriya, but Isabel and Cassandra moved to block her way.

‘I will not let a world fall to the taint of Chaos.’ Miriya turned back to look Rho in the eye. ‘Not one single world. Never, as long as I draw breath. If I must sacrifice some to save others... I will do whatever is required to retain the sanctity of church and Imperium.’ She shut away the sorrow that threatened to rise in her chest before it could fully form.

‘You... have destroyed us,’ wept Rho.

‘Do it,’ Miriya told the adept.

Nohlan gave a curt, solemn nod. 'As you command, Sister Celestian.'

The scream that tore from Rho's lips was the agony of a soul thrown into the darkest reaches of torment, drowned out for a moment by the shrieking hiss of the neuro-chemical dispersing from the adept's bio-fabricator. Rho and the other replicae around them moaned and wept, collapsing to the ground. It was a sickening sight. But then an eerie silence descended on them as their cries died off to nothing.

The change flooded over the replicae like a storm cloud blotting out the sun. Miriya watched Rho's pale flesh grow darker, becoming a deep, sullen crimson.

'Throne and Blood,' whispered Lethe. 'It's working. All of them, they're becoming like the others...'

Miriya approached Rho as she rose shakily to her feet once more. Her eyes were dull and lifeless now, the spark of intelligence that had animated them before sniffed out. 'Rho. Do you hear me?'

'I hear you.' The reply was hollow and distant, like the rote speech of a machine-VOX.

Nohlan studied Rho carefully, then nodded once. 'Confirmed. Balance is restored. The pacifist replicae are as they once were. Ready for your battle orders.'

'Rho. Heed me.' Miriya pointed down towards the lower city, where the turmoil was in full force. 'Gather your kindred and take weapons. Destroy the Red Sect and the clones they control.'

'As you command.' They were the last words she would ever say to Miriya. Without pause or hesitation, Rho and the other replicae stormed across the plaza in the direction of the conflict. They moved as automatons, fast and lethal, striding into battle in silent formation.

'Now we have a chance to save this planet,' said Lethe. 'In an hour, we'll have an army of them.'

'And what has it cost?' Miriya severed the treacherous train of thought that would lead her toward doubt and sadness with a near-physical effort. She drew

her plasma pistol and pointed after the replicae. ‘Sisters! Follow them in!’ Miriya broke into a run, blotting out all other concerns for the glory and the fire of battle. It was all that mattered; it was all she was.

She let out a shout that rang across the conflict unfolding before her. ‘Ave Emperor!’

In the aftermath, there finally came a moment for her to reflect.

From the observation gallery of the Coronus, Sister Miriya watched the planet turn beneath her feet. Lines of black strayed across the surface of Hollos, the wind carrying plumes of smoke from the burning capital and out across the plains.

The Celestian saw shuttles passing back and forth through the atmosphere, and sharing the warship’s high orbit, the massive slab-sided forms of other Imperial vessels drifted like great iron monoliths. Summoned by Questor Nohlan, the Adeptus Mechanicus had arrived in force. Even now they were down there, gathering up every last clone that had survived the uprising, plundering all remnants of the lost technology that had created them.

And with every cargo that left the planet, Ministorum preachers and iterators were being deposited in their place. The confessors and the firebrand priests of the Imperial church would take the reins of Hollos and fill the gap left by the planet’s ruling council. With their words and deeds, in a few years the locals would forget their former leaders and embrace the same monumental, unbending worship that lived in the chapels of thousands of worlds.

Sister Miriya’s mission was complete. The lost had been returned to the fold. The price of it no longer mattered. ‘It is done,’ she said to herself, recalling an ancient catechism in High Gothic. ‘Omnis Vestri Substructio. Es Servus, Ad Nobis.’

She did not turn as mechanical footsteps approached from behind her. At length, Questor Nohlan spoke. ‘I believe we destroyed something unique on this world, Sister Celestian. It troubles me.’

‘We did it to save them,’ she replied. ‘For church and Imperium.’

‘Fortunate for us, that we have such ironclad justification to absolve all doubts,’

he noted. 'If we did not... One might go quite mad.'

She turned to the adept, her eyes dark and weary with the weight of what she had done. 'They were not human, and only the God-Emperor has the divine right to create new life. They allowed Chaos to take root among them during their stewardship. These are all reasons enough.'

'Are you certain?' Nohlan asked gently. 'We have taken vital, intelligent beings, and reduced them to little more than walking weapons. Is that right?'

'Rho said they wanted to act in the Emperor's name. To serve His will.' She turned her back on the adept and once again allowed her gaze to be drawn down to the newly scarred planet below. 'And now they shall, in the manner they were created for.' She found a transport ship leaving the atmosphere, a cargo carrier taking whatever was left of Rho's kind so they might be studied, understood, dissected and replicated, all in the name of the God-Emperor's eternal wars.

'In battle,' said the Sororitas. 'Unto death.'