

WARHAMMER
40,000



THE
FLESH TITHE

MILES A DRAKE

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THE FLESH TITHE

Miles A Drake

Sygera's sky was screaming. The sonic onslaught of the xenos vessels cutting through it sent palpable shockwaves through the narrow streets and across the wide plaza outside. Sister Lucia ducked under the arched doorway of the small cathedral she now protected, the Convent of Saint Cybele, as another sickle-shaped aircraft shrieked overhead in an erratic arc. She gritted her teeth as the debilitating vibration wracked her nerves and cut into her mind.

And then it was gone.

Gripping the enamelled casing of her boltgun, she let it provide her a measure of strength as she recovered from the aural assault. Shaking off the pain, she strode down the steps of the ruined place of worship into the city square before it. The Hymn of Saint Cybele echoing from the convent's last remaining external loud-hailer drifted away, as did the sobbing murmur of the dozens of terrified citizens within.

Hell had come to Sygera, descending upon her city, Moldevar, with a deluge of nightmares that strained even her considerable resolve. What was once a city of serenity and devotion was now a slaughterhouse on a scale that defied reason. The atmosphere wailed as the alien sickle-craft cut through it again and again, and the streets echoed with screams as the city's inhabitants fell prey to the things that stalked through the dilapidated alleys. She had yet to see the enemy, but Lucia knew they were near, and knew they would come.

She did not know why they hadn't yet mounted a ground offensive. Perhaps the convent, with its eight Battle Sisters called to war on distant Ixeris, was not

considered a threat. Or perhaps it had something to do with the seemingly erratic nature of the onslaught. In the initial hours of the attack, the invaders had struck strategic areas, but since then, the strafing attacks had been random, and downright wanton. The crackling, distorted vox reports that still managed to filter through the horrendous static said the same thing about enemies on the ground. The frantic vox-chatter had been of arbitrarily moving packs of clawed, scarecrow-like xenos horrors.

With Moldevar's panicked communications having fallen silent, replaced by eerie white noise, Sister Lucia could not guess at what had happened to the outlying mountain settlements. She could only pray that the farther, more isolated townships and hamlets had remained untouched.

It had all begun just before dawn, although that seemed like an eternity ago. The reassuring silhouettes of Sygera's meagre garrison fleet had simply come apart in flashes of painfully bright green light. Criss-crossing smoke trails of falling orbital wreckage had become a permanent stain on the frigid sky, raining down throughout the day and well into the evening. Now, new constellations of ominous crescent shapes were becoming visible in the upper atmosphere, shimmering like floating apparitions in the haze of the dying sunlight.

Lucia ached from old wounds sustained years ago, but her powered armour alleviated her steps as she reached the makeshift barricade surrounding the entrance of what remained of the convent. Her ornate black-and-white armour was coated in a layer of grey dust from the collapsed structure of the convent's lone steeple. One of the xenos fliers had atomised its lower structure with an arc of blinding emerald not three hours ago, and the image of that jagged flux of energy still burned in her retinas. Her black sallet-like helmet was buckled to her belt, revealing her weathered, statuesque features and jaw-length white hair. A black chalice tattoo adorned her cheek, and three parallel claw-mark scars marred her face from forehead to jaw, courtesy of one of the many Togorans she'd slain years before.

Another craft scythed over the plaza, its keening wail staggering the Sister. Tasting the tang of blood in her mouth as it ran from her nose, she gripped her boltgun with such determination that her gauntlets scraped lines into its chasing. And then the noise was gone. She continued limping towards the barricades, her nerves still on edge.

The aerial duels between Sygera's aeronautica defenders and the nightmarish invaders were long done, and smoke from the downed Lightnings and Thunderbolts dotted the city like smouldering funeral pyres. Still, the invaders

flew, cutting through the skies with neither rhyme nor reason, hunting prey that was long gone.

By the time the soldiers by the makeshift barricades had recovered from the sonic onslaught, she was among them. Lieutenant Perrin and his remaining men were hauling wreckage from the surrounding rubble to the barricade, but progress was slow. The constant shrieking had already caused several of Lucia's assembled band of battered survivors to fall in fits of madness that she could do little to calm, despite her years of medicae experience. Some had fled screaming into the alleys converging upon the plaza. Others had been escorted into the convent, where the soothing hymnals echoing softly from the laud-hailers might do their work.

'Sister...' the lieutenant began when he finally noticed her, his voice weak and clearly shaken. 'The barricades are up.' His eyes were baggy and dark, his hair ragged under his mauve shako. He and his men wore dust-coated fatigues in mauve and Imperial gold, but such were tattered remnants of their former finery.

Lucia nodded her assent, the steel strong in her voice. 'Good. Any luck with the signal?'

Perrin shook his head, his ashen face turning towards the vox-man, who had been attempting to raise militia command and the Adeptus Arbites precinct since their arrival at the convent. They hoped to learn if there was any sort of coordinated defence still in place. Dead static and silence left little hope.

'No way they could have held out,' the vox-man muttered to his officer. 'Told you it's no use – the damn static is everywhere, on every bloody frequency...'

The lieutenant bowed his head, resigned, but Sister Lucia would have none of it.

'Keep trying,' she ordered, her voice stern and commanding. Perhaps the task was futile, but the men needed something to do. A mind without purpose wandered in dark places, especially now. 'Start searching for other signals. Survivors. Isolated resistance pockets. If command is down, then perhaps we can bring other survivors here. And find a way to get through that static. Try every channel you can get access to.'

They had brought the static. It was some kind of jamming signal, Lucia assumed, as it had crippled vox-communications and automated cogitation systems, shutting down Moldevar's defence grid before the enemy had even landed.

The man saluted, and Lucia glared at Perrin. 'Do not lose focus,' she commanded. 'Until we draw our last breaths, we must deny the xenos in

whatever way we can. The Emperor is watching, and He disapproves of defeatism and resignation.'

She strode off to continue her inspection of the barricades, leaving the soldiers to their task. The soft padding of feet behind her made her turn around. It was Sera.

'I told you to stay indoors,' Lucia scolded. Sera was one of the many orphans that had come to Saint Cybele's for shelter, and Lucia had witnessed her grow from a girl to a young woman. While the other Battle Sisters had disapproved of orphans being allowed into the convent, Lucia had overruled them and made it a personal mission to keep at least some of the city's street urchins from the underworld that so many fell to. Now, it seemed, Sera was the only one left. While Lucia would not allow sorrow at that fact to weaken her, she did admit that she felt it.

'But...' Sera began, brushing some strands of ash-blond hair from her eyes. 'Kallen is shouting again. He says he only hears the... the noise... from the laud-hailers. But they're not making the static. They're still singing the hymns. I think he's going mad.'

Lucia sighed. 'He might be. The faithless lack the resolve of the God-Emperor's devoted. Their minds are always the first to break.' She'd known of Kallen through Sera. A purveyor of illicit narcotic substances. A sinner. Many of the street children of Moldevar had been his 'runners'. Lucia had kept Sera clear. 'If he becomes a danger to others, warn me.'

Sera continued following Lucia along the barricades. 'I don't want to listen to him, he's making me feel sick. I'd rather be out here. I want to help!'

Lucia shot the girl a stern glare. 'No. Go back inside. I guarantee you the noise out here is more unbearable than whatever Kallen is spewing. Have faith. Remember what Deacon Arvelo taught you.'

Sera nodded, and retreated back inside, much to Lucia's relief. The girl had barely made it back into the convent before Lucia's words proved true. Three xenos vessels shrieked overhead in rapid succession, buckling everyone around the barricades. Wiping more blood from her face, Lucia forced the agony away and remained standing, so that the others might take inspiration from her fortitude.

What horror had the damnable Ghoul Stars spat at them this time? she wondered. She had already endured six long years in the steaming jungles of Tysseris with the other Hospitallers of her Order, providing triage near and on the frontlines, as well as fighting to defend those in her care from the marauding

packs of Togoran Bloodreeks that had infested the world. That had been five years ago. Since then, peace, calm and contemplation of the Ecclesiarchy's holy teachings had been much of her life, with her position as the convent's caretaker and guardian.

A couple of desperate shouts brought Lucia's gaze to the right, to the entrance of one of the radial alleyways. The chattering of stubgun fire accompanied the calls of anguish echoing from between the dilapidated structures.

'Survivors!' the sentry watching that alley shouted, unslinging his lascarbine.

Lucia, Perrin and the others ran to the sentry, crouching down into cover behind the barricades there. She saw a dozen cityfolk rounding the bend some thirty metres down the alley. They were shouting in terror as they sprinted towards the convent. At the rear of the rabble, three militiamen were firing stubguns at targets Lucia could not yet see, and a man in black Arbites enforcer plate wheeled around to fire a quick burst from his shotgun, before turning to catch up to the rest of them.

Lucia sighted down her bolter, and levelled it just over the heads of the oncoming throng.

And then she saw them.

Two huge figures rounded the bend: gaunt, cadaverous things, standing half again as tall as a man, even though their stature was hunched. Their long, gangling limbs ended in razor talons, and an emerald light shone from hollow eye sockets.

As they stalked forward, she felt the urge to fire pass around her with a palpable ripple; seeing fingers squeeze on triggers, and skin blanch at the nightmarish creatures stalking towards them. She would have given the order to shoot were it not for the fleeing people in the way.

'Hold your fire!' she called, knowing that it would allow the creatures to close on the barricade.

Perrin shouted, his voice edging on panic. 'But, Sister, they—'

'Hold!' Lucia shouted again, putting fury in her voice.

They did. The terrified group struggled over the rubble, almost at Lucia's barricade, with the creatures in close pursuit. Lucia saw that their towering frames were completely skeletal and metallic, and that they were clad in ragged tatters of some kind.

She remembered Dialogous teachings back during her tenure with the Schola Progenium, which spoke of fleshless abominations of ancient metal, whose tombs lurked hidden on many worlds. From what little she'd learned, they'd

seemed more like some kind of nightmare legend than actual fact. Clearly that notion was wrong.

An old man, lagging behind the throng, fell in the uneven footing of the rubble. He shouted something inaudible over the terrified cries of his compatriots, and tried to rise just as one of the xenos made it to him.

It descended upon him, its talons flaying ribbons of flesh from him with each lightning-fast stroke, all the while howling a discordant white noise. Energy crackled through the blades, the creature cutting through clothing, flesh and bone with unnerving fluidity, instantaneously vivisectioning its screaming victim, and transferring his flesh to its own emaciated form.

She then saw the ‘tatters’ the xenos wore for what they truly were. Flesh. Sinew. Skin.

‘God-Emperor protect us,’ she whispered, and it took considerable willpower to not fire. She saw the desperate glances of the soldiers looking to her for confirmation. How she wanted to indulge them.

It had been half a decade since she’d seen combat, and the heated adrenaline of it surged through her. She felt the thunder of her heart, and the pumping of blood through her limbs. The pressure of each pulse felt as though it would be just enough to squeeze her finger that fraction necessary to pull the trigger.

As the first of the panicked survivors made it to the barricade, she shouted for them to run to the convent. Before the last of them made it, as soon as she had a clear angle on the closest of the horrors – not twenty paces away – she fired.

Her shell hit the xenos squarely in its armoured ribcage, which dented under the explosive force. Four more of her bolter’s shells nearly blew off one of its arms, and shattered a portion of its skull, pulping the fleshy remnants of human viscera coiled around its neck. Before Lucia could shout the order to open fire, Perrin and his men had already added their las-fire to her volley. They managed little more than to burn holes through the xenos’ tattered vestment and scorch its exoskeleton black.

Still it came.

The low thud of an Arbites shotgun joined the chatter of gunfire, and she saw the burly, black-clad enforcer take up position alongside her.

And then it reached them. Shattering through the barricade with its momentum and metal bulk, it descended upon two of Perrin’s men, cutting both of them down with a single swipe of its right claw. It wheeled around, backhanding Perrin with its left talon. He crashed back into the barrier, his chest cavity a mangled ruin.

It moved down the barricade without pause, straight towards Lucia and the enforcer. Backpedalling, she fired off the remainder of her clip. The shells pulverised what remained of the creature's torso and finally sent it sparking to the ground, its ribcage a metal wreckage draped in human gore.

She was about to yell something when the other xenos reached them, striding into several more of Perrin's men. They turned to flee, but it was too late, and the creature waded through half a dozen of them, each swipe of its talons accompanied by arterial sprays, crackling hisses and gurgling death screams.

Lucia reloaded, slamming the second of her four sickle-clips into the breach, and put another series of rounds into the creature as it turned towards her. She dimly saw the enforcer flank to her left as it charged. Drawing her chainsword in one swift action, she thumbed the activation stud, revving it to life, though she knew it would be too late.

A moment before the xenos hit her, the deafening crump and pressure-burst of a krak grenade dazed Lucia, staggering her back. She heard the muffled sound of shouting and saw the enforcer firing his shotgun, the pin of a grenade still between his teeth.

By the time she shook off the force of the impact, it was already staggering back. The enforcer's onslaught toppled the xenos over the remnants of the barricade, and it fell onto its back amidst the rubble.

As it began to rise again, Lucia seized the opportunity.

Dropping her bolter, she let loose a war cry, barely hearing her own voice, and charged headlong onto the thing, her chainsword held in both hands. Leaping over the rubble and landing on the fallen abomination, she angled her blade down to thrust it into its ribcage. Her chainsword's adamantium teeth howled in protest as she put all of her strength and rage into the weight of the blade. The thing hissed and clawed at her, rending deep grooves into the armour on her thighs and waist and shredding her ceremonial tabard. Thankfully, the plating held true, and the bruising force of the impacts were all that the strikes accomplished.

'Abomination!' she roared, as the chainsword finally sheared through it. The screeching of breaking teeth and flensing metal joined the dead static howl until, finally, the light in the thing's eye sockets died, and it ceased its convulsions.

After a few moments she relented, pulling her now ruined chainsword from the wreckage of the xenos. She'd need to retrieve a new one from the convent's armoury. The enforcer was just behind her, his helmet removed to reveal a

battered, square-jawed face and a shaved head.

He nodded at her. ‘Decent work, Sister.’

She barely heard him. She didn’t require his acknowledgement. Her eyes glazed over from the flood of adrenaline. Rigorous training regimens aside, she hadn’t felt the fury of battle for many years.

Lucia took a few deep breaths to calm herself. ‘Blessed are the righteous who take up His holy sword. Blessed are the crusaders who challenge His hated foes. Blessed are the victors who vanquish the unclean and damned.’ She looked over the scene, seeing nine dead, including Lieutenant Perrin; their eviscerated forms lay splayed across the rubble. The thought that Perrin and his men might have lived if she’d given the order to fire before it was almost too late swam through her mind, but she pushed it aside. There was no time for doubt or guilt. How many of the survivors would have been caught in the crossfire if they had shot sooner? Perrin and his men were local militia – it was their duty to fight and, if necessary, die, to protect the Imperium and its citizens; a duty they had fulfilled.

‘Blessed are the fallen who perish in His name, for they will walk at the Emperor’s side.’ She finished her prayer as the enforcer began salvaging what he could from the remains.

The surviving men of Perrin’s platoon looked around in shock, their faces blanched.

‘Stay steady,’ she said, the fury within her ebbing, and her voice echoing oddly in her battered eardrums. ‘More will come, and we will need every fibre of our Emperor-given resolve.’

She didn’t know if her words inspired them. They would have to steel themselves, and all she could do was set an example. ‘Get everybody back inside,’ she told them, mentally taking stock of what they had. With barely a dozen fighting men inside a half-wrecked convent, their chances seemed grim. But the arms and armour of the dead could be salvaged and distributed among the thirty or so survivors that hid within. Surely some would fight? In the face of mankind’s hated foes, they would have to. Or they would die.

‘And distribute the weapons to those who can use them,’ she added. ‘We’ll need every able-bodied soul to defend this place tonight.’

She turned to the Arbites enforcer, who stood over one of the fallen abominations, prodding at it with his iron-shod boot.

‘Not so easy to kill, are they?’ he stated, more than asked, as Lucia approached him.

‘No,’ she agreed. ‘But zeal and fury can destroy any of the Emperor’s foes.’

He gave a half-glance at the weapon she clutched. ‘The bolter probably helps.’ Lucia glared at him. He shrugged, glancing out across the darkening alleys.

‘Raul,’ he said, with no explanation. As Lucia cocked her head, he thumbed his matte-black breastplate. ‘Enforcer Raul. Last of Precinct Tercius. Probably.’

Lucia made the sign of the aquila. ‘I’m Sister Lucia, Hospitaller of the Order of the Ebon Chalice, caretaker of the Convent of Saint Cybele.’

‘The rest of your Sisters?’

‘Gone,’ the Hospitaller returned. ‘To Ixeris to protect the Pilgrim Roads from Togoran Bloodreeks.’

Raul shook his head. ‘Fragging Bloodreeks. They never stop, do they? A shame. Could have used them here.’

‘Indeed,’ Lucia agreed. ‘But all of the Emperor’s holy work is of paramount importance. I was left behind to protect this convent.’

‘There aren’t by chance any more Sisters of your order planetside?’

‘None, regrettably. All of the military convents were dispatched to Ixeris after the latest Bloodreek incursion.’

‘Well...’ the enforcer mused, the shadow of a smile forming on his face. ‘Then we’re on our own.’ He turned away from the Sister, gesturing towards the blood-stained, debris-ridden plaza. ‘I’ll keep watch and see what I can do about cleaning up the mess.’

Lucia made the sign of the aquila again. ‘No. We are never alone. The Emperor watches. And He protects.’ With that, she moved to administer last rites to the fallen.

An hour later, the last rays of Sygera’s daylight raked the cold, smoky atmosphere. As night fell, a dismal darkness engulfed the city. The chatter of distant gunfire and fading cries were the lonely dirges to which they waited. The laud-hailers had died with the convent’s reserve generators.

Inside, the convent remained dimly lit by candles and torches, but other than that, with power cut to the city, the darkness was absolute. Xenos aircraft periodically shrieked through the skies, but their frequency had lessened, to everyone’s relief.

Several more throngs of survivors emerged from the dark alleys to seek refuge in the chapel. They were bewildered, exhausted, and horrified, and Lucia directed them inside while the remaining militia and Raul kept vigilant order on the barricade. A fair number of the arrivals came armed, either as survivors or soldiers, and joined the ragged band of protectors outside.

The tales told by these survivors were all the same: of sheer horror. The xenos abominations were spread throughout the city, stalking the streets, hunting for their human prey. Lucia heard of only small packs – never more than five, never less than two. The enforcer reluctantly mentioned that over two-score of them had swarmed the precinct, with the seemingly random support of their marauding aircraft.

Pacing along the barricades, exhaustion began to chew at the survivors. What little recaff remained had already been distributed amongst the militia and the enforcer. Lucia kept herself awake by sheer force of will, and regular prayers muttered under her breath. She applied her Hospitaller's trade to the wounded. With the xenos' onslaught and weaponry, it became evident that they left few victims alive, such was their lethality. All the while, she watched the dark alleys for any signs of further survivors, or the horrors that were certainly out there.

Several times, alarm was called by sentries at sightings of monstrous, scarecrow figures standing motionlessly in alleyways, before fading into the gloom again. Each alarm spurred a wave of panic and a bustle of activity as men and women moved to meet the phantom threat. Each alarm amounted to nothing, save for the cloying sense that 'they' were out there, watching and waiting.

The dead of night brought the flashing lights of a void battle. Criss-crossing arcs and blooms of emerald, orange, yellow and blue energy lit up the sky. A ship that had remained hidden, or reinforcements? Lucia didn't know. She saw many of the folk within the convent peering out of its shattered windows to watch, their eyes wide with wonder at the sights above, and glimmering with hope. Some of the braver, or more foolhardy, refugees came out onto the steps of the convent for a better view. The Sister thought of leading the survivors in a Hymn for Salvation but, in the end, decided against it. With the rapidity that Sygera's garrison fleet had been disassembled in orbit, she hardly expected a positive outcome from whatever this engagement was. She did not wish to fan the flames of hope, knowing that they could gutter out in but a moment.

Half an hour passed before a new star blossomed in the sky, and Lucia knew it was the plasma-core detonation of whatever warship had offered its resistance. She closed her eyes, offering a prayer for the souls of those on board. As she did so, the hopeful whispers of the survivors turned to gasps of shock, and then to murmurs of despair. Bidding them to return indoors, she was forced to usher some of the more shaken back inside, before returning to the line.

'As I said... we're on our own now,' Raul muttered to her back at the barricade.

There was no fear in his voice, nor care.

Lucia did not respond, but stared out into the darkness, removing her bolter from its maglock. The xenos' talons had marred its chasing, but she knew it was still functional. She had refilled her magazines, clamping several more clips of blessed shells to her belt from the chapel's armoury. With little access to las or stub-weapon ammunition, she knew the situation for the others was probably even worse.

'If we are alone, then we die here. On hallowed ground,' she said, quietly enough for only Raul to hear. 'And we take as many of the unholy abominations with us as we can.'

He cocked his head, the curl of a smile forming on his lips. 'So be it.'

Almost an hour later, the pitch in the distant symphony of noises echoing through the city intensified, growing louder as it drew nearer. Rising to kneel behind the blood-matted barricade, she listened to the reverberating dirge of screams and the staccato of chattering gunfire. She pushed the noise to the back of her mind, and forced herself to focus through the growing fatigue.

'Vigilance,' she told herself. Her body ached from her old wounds. She closed her eyes. Tysseris had been bad. The line had pushed back into the war camp on so many occasions that even she, ordinarily kept from the front, had fought enough to be considered something of a veteran. Those six years on Tysseris had been terror; facing the grotesque Togorans had been a living nightmare. But at least then the enemy had clear strategy, and could be killed by one well-placed bolter shell. These xenos were something else entirely.

Smoke obscured Sygera's moons, and the gloom was darker than it had been on any other night, thanks to the loss of power. The sightings were becoming more frequent, with alarm being called every ten minutes or so. It was nerve-racking, knowing that they were so near, yet waiting. Lucia's tenacity kept her calm. She knew that most of the others looked to her. If she faltered, their spirits would break. And so, she would not falter.

The wreckage of the two xenos lay amidst the macabre carpet of the army they had slaughtered. Most of the human bodies had been moved and placed under tarps, but much of the mess still remained. On several occasions, Lucia thought she saw the chrome remains of the xenos stir: a twitch of a razor claw, or a sickly glow in hollow eye sockets. She attributed it to a glint of light reflecting in its eye, or the emerald retinal flare that still marred her vision.

Lucia scowled as she saw Sera approaching her along the barricade. 'What did I

tell you?’

‘I want to help!’ the girl protested. Somehow she’d found an ornately chased autopistol, which she was clutching tightly. Lucia saw both fear and eagerness in her green eyes. She took the pistol away from the girl, nonetheless.

‘Where did you get that?’

‘I took it from Kallen. He had it in his bag,’ Sera explained.

Lucia sighed. ‘Naturally. Now go back inside. You are not a soldier.’

Sera glanced defiantly towards the militia manning the barricades. ‘Neither are they. There aren’t any soldiers anymore. Just people that don’t want to wait and die. I want to help. I know how to shoot a gun. And how to reload it. And I don’t want to wait for those... things... to kill me. I’d rather die fighting!’

Lucia almost turned away, even if Sera’s words had a truth to them she could not deny. But then she saw the fire in the girl’s eyes.

‘Please,’ Sera pleaded. ‘Otherwise I’ll grab rocks and throw them if they come again.’

Lucia sighed again, resigned. She placed the autopistol back into Sera’s hands and gave her a stern glare. ‘Fine. But do not fire until I fire, and if I, or the enforcer, give an order, you will follow it. If I tell you to run, you run. Do you understand?’

Sera nodded eagerly. ‘Yes. Yes, I understand.’

‘Very well,’ Lucia agreed. ‘Then stay on the steps of the convent. If they come, get behind the barricades and do as I say.’ And with that, Lucia returned to what remained of the makeshift wall to continue her vigil.

The Sister jolted from her reverie as the keening wail of one of the invaders’ aircraft scythed overhead, skimming the rooftops. It was the first in hours. She gritted her teeth and scrunched her eyes shut in agony as the sudden sound cut through every fibre of her being.

As she recovered, she heard others shouting. ‘Sister,’ Raul called, pointing down the alley near his section of the line. ‘I think they’re coming.’

Hearing the distant screaming and gunfire echoing nearer, she readied her boltgun and saw three huge skeletal shapes shambling towards Raul’s dazed line. One of the ‘dead’ xenos lying out beyond her barricade was rising as well, draped in its tattered mockery of human flesh. She saw the gouge inflicted by her chainsword earlier was all but mended, and she cursed whatever vile sorcery allowed these things to repair themselves.

Lucia blinked once to make sure she wasn’t hallucinating, and upon seeing the

rest of the defenders, Raul aside, gawking in horror at the rising abomination, she shouted a war cry. 'Purge the xenos! If they rise again, we shall slay them again!' Sighting down her boltgun, she fired a controlled burst at the creature as it started shambling towards her. The rattle of militia stubguns joined her bolter's fury, and the thing's metallic exoskeleton deformed, jolting back from the impacts.

It kept coming.

It howled dead static, and Lucia gritted her teeth, firing again and again. It would have to get through her to get to the people she'd sworn to protect. She would see that it never made it that far.

It fell a second time and she glanced around, noticing the tide of people running from two of the other alleys towards the convent, dozens of survivors and fighters just paces ahead of yet more of the xenos. They loped forward, their ragged shrouds of human viscera glistening in the baleful moonlight as much as their half-metre-long talons and their hollow emerald eye sockets.

This was it, she thought. This was how it ended. Her heart thundered, and the surging adrenaline heightened her senses to the deadly focus of raging battle.

She turned and fired at the xenos descending upon the enforcer's line. His shotgun blasts were staggering them back, and he lobbed his remaining krak grenade into them, toppling the first.

Another almost fell to the combined fire of a dozen stubbers, jolting back several times, its skeletal armour pockmarked by hundreds of indentations, but it was Lucia's fire that shattered its skull. The last reached them, knocking the enforcer aside with a backhand, and shredding the militia while Lucia reloaded, disembowelling men and women as they tried to run. It wasn't until Raul rose and unleashed a point-blank volley that it finally fell.

The mass of fleeing men, women and children pouring through the alley had now reached the barricade on the other side of Lucia, and she wheeled around, even as she noticed the second of the fallen xenos on Raul's barricade rising again. They would have to deal with it on their own.

To her frustration, most of the militia were already firing. She took some satisfaction to see Sera, to her side, holding fire, waiting for Lucia's order. The bullets cut through the last of the approaching crowd in the attempt to stop the three xenos in close pursuit. Shaking her head in disgust and rage, Lucia fired over the head of a screaming woman, knocking back the scarecrow abomination about to cut her down, but not before the woman fell to the indiscriminate gunfire of the militia.

With the militia, Sera included, firing with full abandon, the relentless hail of stub-bullets and cracking lasfire put one of the xenos down while Lucia's bolter was focused elsewhere. Lucia fired a controlled burst at another, blasting its skeletal limbs from its body in quick succession. A third xenos vaulted the barricade close by and disembowelled two of the militia with a single sweep of its claw.

It wheeled towards Sera, who shrieked in terror and stumbled away, drenched in the gore of the two men who had stood beside her. Lucia shouted to get its attention, shooting it in the back. Sparks flew, and it spun around in an instant, lashing its other talon at her with startling speed. She leaped back, feeling the hissing blades narrowly miss her. It moved after her and Lucia fired her remaining ammunition at point-blank range, knocking it back to create distance.

Dropping her empty bolter and drawing her damaged chainsword, she lunged towards it as it staggered. With a desperate battle cry, she delivered a series of wild swings, the chainsword rattling as it revved. There was no precision or finesse to her attacks, just the brute force of desperate survival instincts and zeal-fuelled rage. Her onslaught drove it back, even as it lashed at her, its claw scraping across her side. She felt one of the blades punch through her armour, across her lower ribs. Screaming, she took her chainblade in both hands, and brought it sideways in a wide arc across its thorax, hacking through its metallic spinal column.

It fell in two, and Lucia staggered back, the agony of the wound, however vestigial, momentarily overwhelming her. The xenos crawled towards her, dragging its severed torso across the blood-slick cobbles.

Seeing it stagger a few more times as the militia put fire into it, she kicked out savagely before swinging her chainsword in a downward arc. She bludgeoned it down, and lunged forward to kick it again in the skull; stamping again and again until it ceased its spasmodic jolting.

Lucia wanted nothing more than to step back and take a momentary breath, but it was not over. The thunder of adrenaline pulsed through her like an unstoppable tide. She searched for Sera, but could not see her. She saw Raul finish the remaining creature with repeated slams of his shock maul even as two more of them emerged from the alley behind them.

'Behind you!' she shouted, her voice hoarse. He wheeled around and fired the last of his ammunition. She would have rushed to his aid were it not for the trio of cadaverous giants erupting from the gloom near her own position, and the rising form of one of the fallen ones outside the barricade. Attempting to vault

over the low barricade in the direction of the rising xenos, she stumbled at it, delivering the same savagery towards it until it ceased moving.

The warning shouts of the militia behind her, and a howl of white noise, prompted her to wheel around. Another nightmare, in full charge, slammed into her and flung her back nearly five metres with a backhand. She landed hard, her armour absorbing the impact. Noticing that her armour was cleaved open over her midriff, she struggled to her knees, biting back the pain. Thankfully, the electrical crackle of the xenos talons seemed to have cauterised the wound. She dimly noted a roaring sound from somewhere above, but ignored it as the xenos closed the distance towards her with its stalking gait. Disarmed, she raised her gauntleted right hand, extending and revving up the small bonesaw in her medicae gauntlet as a last attempt to ward off its killing strike.

And then it died.

Incandescent blue plasma-fire engulfed the creature. The flash burned her retinas, momentarily blinding her and leaving yet another searing after-image in her blinking eyes. The blazing husk of the xenos was crushed under the immense, black-armoured bulk of the giant that landed upon it.

Letting out a ragged gasp, Lucia rose to her feet and saw the carnage unfold around her. Five towering shapes of hulking ceramite were among the human defenders. Five of the Emperor's angels of death. They wore massive jump packs on their backs, their thrusters still glowing a vivid, infernal orange. She hadn't seen them arrive, and gasped, gawking at their sudden presence.

Dazed from the pain, Lucia could do little other than watch them finish off the remaining xenos. Though the abominations were just as tall as the massive forms of the armoured Space Marines, the transhuman giants defeated them quickly enough; ending them with precise shots from their bolt pistols and quick slashes of their chainswords. She watched a Space Marine struggle with one of the xenos, locked in a deadly grapple as he repeatedly bashed it back with the pommel of his chainsword before shooting it three times in the torso, blowing it apart.

The other four moved about the plaza, their chainswords dismembering the downed xenos to prevent them from rising again. Their jet-black ceramite plate clashed with their ghost-white corvid helms, and when Lucia saw the sinister heraldry of jawless skulls on crossed scythes emblazoning their right pauldrons, she recognised them for what they were.

All around, men and women staggered about. Lucia found Sera lying amidst a slick pile of crimson in the midst of three eviscerated corpses, and felt a brief

moment of heart-stopping panic as she thought the girl was dead. But Sera rose to her feet, terror in her eyes, clutching the autopistol in both hands and repeatedly squeezing the trigger of her empty weapon at the fallen xenos.

‘Calm, now,’ Lucia gasped, putting a hand on Sera’s shoulder, accidentally putting far more weight on it than she had intended, as the girl almost buckled. ‘It’s over. The Emperor’s angels have come.’

It was only then that Sera seemed to notice the Space Marines, and her eyes widened even further. For a brief instant, Lucia thought she saw hope. It rapidly turned to dread as one of the Space Marines advanced towards them.

In his left hand, he clutched a bulky plasma pistol, its cooling coils glowing a searing, hissing indigo. In his right, he clutched a blue, crackling power axe, the open-mandibled skull of a Togoran Bloodreek worked over the top of the weapon’s narrow wedge-like blade.

While there was nothing overtly threatening about his motions, the sheer size of the warrior, and the sinister air about him, made her involuntarily step back and sent Sera skittering off towards the convent’s doors. After a moment, he maglocked his weapons to his belt.

‘Survivors,’ the giant spoke. His voice was the deep, dull crackle of a distant thunderstorm. ‘Intriguing.’

Lucia did not know how to respond. She’d encountered Space Marines before; she’d seen the Novamarines in their quartered blue-and-white war-plate on Tysseris, and she’d seen others in the heraldry of those before her prior to the Imperial counter-attack on that Emperor- forsaken world. But she’d never seen them this close.

‘Death Spectres,’ she whispered, still in shock.

‘Yes. Sergeant Nevekarion, Seventh Squad, Eighth Company,’ the Space Marine responded.

‘Thank you,’ Lucia said, her voice somehow muffled. ‘Your timing is... divine. The xenos almost had us overrun.’

‘Yes,’ he said, turning to survey the area. ‘Almost.’

The sergeant muttered a series of sub-vocal vox orders and the other Space Marines acknowledged with clicks of their helmets’ vox-grilles. The momentary calm was broken by the roar of one Space Marine’s jump pack as he rocketed onto the roof of the convent. He landed upon the vantage point of its shattered steeple, dislodging shingles and debris as he gained his footing. The others spread out to secure the alleys converging on the plaza.

There was a brief pause as the sergeant listened to the reports of his warriors,

all the while affixing her with his unblinking, lifeless gaze.

Lucia had so many questions, and Nevekarion seemed to read that.

‘Our strike cruiser *Somnium Nihilo* was silenced in orbit,’ he said flatly, and Lucia realised just how hopeless their situation was. She understood now how the enemy was so quickly able to dispatch the garrison fleet overhead. If they could destroy a Space Marine strike cruiser, then there would be little else to stop them from razing or reaving the rest of the city, or the world.

‘We made our escape via Thunderhawk, but were shot down by enemy interceptors. We were swept out of the hold.’

‘And then you landed here,’ Lucia finished, finally understanding where the Space Marines had descended from.

‘Correct. How many survivors are there inside?’

‘Thirty, forty perhaps. No more,’ Lucia replied with uncertainty.

The Space Marine made another sub-vocal vox-communication to his warriors.

After a few moments, he spoke. ‘We can bring you and your survivors to potential safety.’

Lucia looked up in surprise.

‘Our Thunderhawk is down, but its status reads as still being intact. Our Techmarine was able to guide it safely to the ground.’

Lucia nodded, taken aback at Nevekarion’s sudden offer. ‘Would the enemy vessels not simply shoot you down again?’

‘Negative. The enemy craft have mostly returned to orbit to hunt the saviour pods and escape craft from the destroyed fleet,’ he growled.

‘And where would we go?’ If there was no way off-world, then escape from the city seemed only a temporary solution.

‘The outlands of Sygera,’ the sergeant responded. ‘We have documented the aftermaths of similar xenos incursions, and it would appear that they devote most of their attentions to densely populated urban centres, not outlying regions.’

Lucia affirmed as another wave of pain washed over her. She couldn’t guess as to why the xenos invaders would leave the countryside untouched.

‘Given your position in the Orders Militant, I assume you have some knowledge of the enemy,’ the sergeant continued.

‘Rumours only. Distant reports from distant worlds of some buried, re-emerging threat.’

‘Necrons,’ Nevekarion confirmed, and Lucia mouthed the foul word in disgust. ‘An ancient enemy, calculating, insidious and highly technologically advanced.’ The Space Marine paused. ‘Except for this particular case. These necrons are of

the Bone Kingdom of Drazak. A demesne forsaken to damnation and madness, even by the standards of their own kind. As you have likely noted, there is little logic or calculation to their behaviour.'

Lucia finally understood the erratic aerial incursions. 'The Bone Kingdom?'

'A necron domain hidden deep within the Ghoul Stars. Over the last three centuries, their forces have emerged, attacking unpredictably into the Halo Sectors.'

'How have I never heard of this?'

'Knowledge of such is strictly sanctioned. You know by whom.' His answer was clear enough. 'There are few enough survivors to allow for mnemonic censure.'

Lucia nodded after a few moments, understanding the need to keep such knowledge hidden, for the sake of the general population. 'Has no one managed to stop them?'

'No. The enemy is gone by the time we can answer any distress calls.'

Lucia knew the solemn duty of the Space Marines before her. The Death Spectres had been created specifically to watch over the Ghoul Stars, and prevent its vile inhabitants from spilling forth into the neighbouring sectors. Against the Togoran Bloodreeks, the twisted eldar reavers, and the fearsome Chrinoids, they'd been successful. But not against this threat, it seemed.

'Upon our arrival, all major population centres have been devoid of life. Only the smallest, isolated settlements are spared the harvest.'

'Harvest?' Lucia exclaimed.

'Yes, we speculate that is what this is. This is no territorial conquest, no supply raid. The Bone Kingdom has use for neither. The only thing it seems to care about is *you*.' When Lucia's eyes betrayed her confusion at the Space Marine's choice of words, he clarified. 'Humans. Or more specifically, human remains.'

'They harvest flesh...' Lucia trailed off, revolted as she looked over the tattered remains of the necrons around them, seeing what they all wore.

'To them, it is a tithe.'

Lucia shook her head. There was no knowing the motives of the xenos, only denying them. She was about to say something when Nevekarion raised his hand. Lucia heard the clicking of a vox-transmission coming from his helmet.

'We will depart for our transport shortly. More xenos are encroaching upon this area. My warriors and I aim to be under way before they reach the convent. If you stay here, you will die.'

Lucia looked at the cobbles, seeing the blood of those she had fought so hard to

save spattered across them. She knew that following the Death Spectres would be risky, dangerous, and that many of her people – the wounded, the infirm and the elderly – would die. Fighting to the heart of the city might be the end of them all, but the alternative meant certain death. They could not stay, that much was obvious.

The Sister nodded, resigned to the decision she had to make. Satisfied she'd come to the only possible conclusion, Nevekarion turned and strode off towards his warriors, leaving Lucia alone for a few moments. Enforcer Raul strode over to her, apparently having overheard most of the conversation.

'Glorious,' he said, his face deadpan.

'We'll all die here if we stay,' she stated.

'That's a fact.'

Lucia grunted.

The enforcer glanced down. 'And you might want to tend to your own wounds.'

Lucia looked down and saw three clean slashes through her cuirass, just above the hip. They didn't bleed, thankfully. They smoked lightly. Looking at the wounds made the pain all the fiercer. 'No,' she grimaced, shaking her head. 'There's no time. And they're cauterised.' She gazed out over the carnage around. 'Help me gather the rest of the people. They need to be ready to move.'

He looked at her incredulously.

'I'm fine!' she exclaimed through gritted teeth, pushing away his helping arm, shoving the pain to the back of her mind as best she could.

'All right then,' he nodded sceptically. 'I'll go and assemble who's left.'

The group of survivors readied themselves as quickly as possible. Lucia found Sera in the back of the convent, using the remaining holy water to wash away some of the gore covering her face and hands.

'Come. The Emperor's Angels will lead us to salvation.'

'S-salvation...?' Sera stuttered, and Lucia still saw panic in her eyes. She saw a trauma that might never leave those eyes, and in that moment, she thought she felt true sorrow. Sorrow that she had been unable to save the other orphaned children. Guilt that she had allowed the girl onto the front line.

They were emotions she did not have time for.

'Yes,' Lucia returned, repressing her inner conflict so that her resolve might lend the girl strength. 'They have a gunship, deeper in the city. They can get us out of Moldevar.'

Sera nodded hesitantly, and Lucia guided her to where the refugees were

gathering in front of the convent, carrying the wounded on stretchers. Lucia and Raul delivered the same message to the others, and she saw in their eyes that the promise of salvation just barely outweighed the fear of leaving the safety of this holy place.

As the Space Marines secured the perimeter, Nevekarion gave a signal, and the exodus of what might well have been Moldevar's last survivors began.

The beleaguered refugees struggled to keep up with the remorseless pace of the Space Marines. Winding through the labyrinthine alleys of Moldevar's outer Ministoria district, they passed between dilapidated tenements with overhanging balconies fitted with leering gargoyles, and tall, arched windows. The windows were long since shattered by the sonic onslaught, and glass shards blanketed the cobbled street, reflecting the pale emerald shapes hovering high in the night sky. Pools of congealed blood welled up in the potholes, seeping from the piles of flayed corpses that were strewn haphazardly through the alleys.

Seeing several people falling behind, mostly the wounded and those carrying the stretchers, Lucia begged the Space Marines to slow their pace. They did not, and Lucia began to wonder just how much they truly cared about saving the survivors.

Four of the Death Spectres kept point, with Nevekarion leading. They were faceless in their corvid helms, pistols drawn, over-watching every crossing alley. The other Space Marine moved from rooftop to rooftop, observing from above and jumping the gaps between the buildings without using his jump pack.

Suffering from the pain of her wounds, Sister Lucia kept the centre, her words calming the barely suppressed panic within most of the survivors.

Raul led the militia in forming an outer perimeter around the refugees, even if they were nearly as frightened as the people they were trying to protect. The enforcer's icy calm demeanour, the Sister's benedictions and the transhuman presence of the Adeptus Astartes kept the battered band of survivors together.

Three times in the first hour, the enemy emerged in ambush. Ear-splitting static wails preceded the sudden rise of pairs or trios of xenos as they erupted from the piles of the dismembered dead the group passed. These ambushes ended before Lucia could even act. Twice, the Death Spectres reacted quickly enough, cutting down the rising xenos before they could assail the group. Once, however, one of the abominations slipped past the Space Marines and scythed into the beleaguered crowd of survivors, hacking four to ribbons before being ended by a

burst from Nevekarion's plasma pistol.

Lucia rallied most of the terrified people, but several fled into the dark alleys during the attacks. With Nevekarion and his Space Marines already moving on, ignoring the plight of the refugees, Lucia was forced to leave the dead and missing behind.

It continued that way for several hours, the silence of the dead city pressing in upon them, broken only by bouts of frenzied terror when the nightmares materialised from their macabre ambush points. Lucia lost count of the fallen, but it was well over twenty. The Death Spectres seemed to be more focused on conserving their ammunition than stopping the xenos quickly. Several times, one that could have been shot to pieces before it could reach anybody was allowed to close in and reap its bloody harvest before being put down in melee by the Space Marines.

Lucia fought as best as her battered body would allow, putting herself between the xenos and the refugees, and using her bolter to slow the loping monsters, outright felling the occasional one she managed to get a clear angle on. Raul fought as well, throwing himself into the path of one of the stalking horrors, and paying the price for that defiance with a raking wound that sheared clean through his carapaced pauldron.

The Space Marines never slowed, nor allowed for a pause to treat wounds. They simply kept their relentless pace, uncaring of those they claimed they were protecting.

Lucia's mind raced, a growing sense of unease and suspicion falling upon her. If the Space Marines wanted to save them, then why were they letting them die just to conserve ammunition? Why sacrifice them in the interest of time? Leaving Raul to staunch his own bleeding with a ripped piece of one of her black sleeves, Lucia marched towards Nevekarion. The other three Death Spectres had already disappeared around the next bend and she was determined to get answers.

'Why do you not wait for them?' she hissed, before realising what exactly she was doing. The thought alone of making demands of one of the Emperor's angels of death might qualify as blasphemy, but at that moment, all such care was gone.

He turned around, cocking his head to the side, perhaps confused that a mortal would dare challenge him in such a manner.

'We must reach our gunship,' he stated, his voice a hollow vox-crackle.

Nevekarion turned away from her to rejoin his warriors, and Lucia felt a sudden flush of anger overcoming her. She moved to block his path, uncaring of how that could end poorly. Much to her surprise, the Death Spectre did not push through her, but stopped. After a few moments of tense silence, he reached up to release the seals on his helmet. It came off with a pneumatic hiss, and she found herself staring into eyes as black and empty as a starless void. His pupils were so wide that they almost entirely engulfed the whites of his eyes. Ghostly pale and hairless, utterly devoid of pigment of any kind, the Space Marine truly resembled an apparition of death. She fought the ephemeral urge to look away and kept his gaze, the anger boiling in her blood keeping her courage.

The almost human gesture from a warrior that had long abandoned his humanity somehow calmed and humbled her. ‘You said you can save these people,’ Lucia stated, looking back over the ever-thinning crowd behind her.

‘I did.’ He looked away from her to his men, and ordered them to slow their pace, before turning back to her. ‘Walk with me.’

Lucia did as he asked, closing her eyes for but a moment, knowing already what was coming. ‘You were never here to save us.’

‘I never said we were.’

‘Then why *are* you here?’ she demanded.

‘You know of us? You know what we were created to do?’

Her reply was wary. ‘Yes, you watch over the Ghoul Stars.’ Most knew as much.

The Space Marine nodded. ‘The Ghoul Stars are immense. We are but one Chapter, and most of our companies guard the worlds deemed by Terra to be of paramount importance. The rest of us are spread thin across the border worlds,’ Nevekarion explained. ‘There were ten of us on board the *Somnium Nihilo* watching over Sygera. Two died when we were boarded. Three more died in our descent to the surface. We are all that remain.’

‘How can ten warriors defend a world against such an invasion?’ Lucia responded. She’d never known there were Death Spectres looming above her world, but she supposed that had been their intent.

‘We cannot,’ he said, his voice descending into a spiteful growl. ‘We were never meant to.’

Several moments of terrible silence fell upon them, and Lucia felt what little hope had been sparked by the Space Marines’ arrival flicker away.

He continued. ‘This necron incursion, this tithing fleet, is a threat we have yet to fully subdue. After the last incursions from the Bone Kingdom, the Mesazar,

our Chief Librarian, has devised a new protocol to counteract this threat. We call it Protocol Praesignatio.’

She paused, thinking for a moment. ‘*Praesignatio*. Forewarning,’ she repeated.

He nodded. ‘We cannot know where this fleet will strike next, so we spread our reserve numbers. If the fleet arrives on a world under our vigilance, our numbers will not be enough to defend it, but it will be enough to enact the protocol.’

‘Which is?’ Lucia felt a growing chill creep through her.

‘An astropathic cry to all nearby systems,’ he replied, pausing, his face souring in an expression that Lucia could almost recognise to be regret, or whatever passed for such to his kind. ‘And the deployment of an atomic device into the population centre currently suffering the attention of the tithing fleet’s ground forces.’

As the gravity of his words set in, Lucia was unable to respond.

‘With the majority of these ground forces positioned for the harvest, it will greatly weaken their numbers,’ he replied, reading the horror on Lucia’s face. ‘It will destroy the city and the xenos infesting it.’

‘Moldevar...’ Lucia managed.

‘Look around you, Sister. Moldevar is already dead.’

She could see the truth. Death was everywhere, and the sounds of fighting were all but gone. She could believe that her group was the only life left in the city.

‘The bomb. Where is it?’

‘In our Thunderhawk,’ he replied, confirming her suspicion.

‘And it survived the crash?’

‘It did. The life signs of Techmarine Hyrkannen persisted until well after landing. The Thunderhawk is damaged, but it landed successfully. The bomb is intact, and ready for priming.’

‘Then why did you abandon it?’

‘Not by choice,’ he growled. ‘As I said, the xenos fighter disintegrated a portion of our vessel’s hull. Three of my brothers died, and we were swept out of the hold.’

Shaking her head in resignation, she finally understood what was coming.

‘Then why bring us? Why drag my people along to their doom?’

He did not answer immediately. ‘Because we will be descending into the slaughterhouse. The xenos are there in force, and before we reach this device to activate its self-detonation sequence, we will be swarmed. Each body will be an obstacle. Everyone in the path of the xenos will be a distraction to their madness. If we were five, we would be overwhelmed, and our chances of success would

be minimal. With greater numbers, we may be able to reach the gunship and activate the device inside.'

Lucia's eyes widened with horror and disgust as she understood the depth of the Space Marines' deception. 'You mean to buy time with our blood?'

'Yes.'

They walked on in silence for several more minutes, and Lucia shook her head, unwilling to accept Nevekarion's words. He slowed to match her pace, evidently aware of her anguish.

Lucia had sworn to protect these people, both in taking her oath to the Order of the Ebon Chalice, and when the invasion began. Now duty seemed to require her to sacrifice all of those who had come to her for protection. She had promised them salvation, and all she had brought them was a gruesome end in the name of the greater Imperium.

The Sister realised that even if she attempted to make for the countryside now, they could not survive. Almost a third of the survivors were already dead, and that was under the 'protection' of the Space Marines. What chance did they have without them? Even if they did survive, the probability of outrunning the atomic blast, should the Death Spectres succeed without her, was negligible.

'A life given unto the anvil of His holy work is a life brought to the Emperor's side in death,' she managed, the scriptures giving her courage to do what was necessary.

'It brings me no pleasure to have deceived you in this manner.'

'I know...' she answered, acknowledging the sacrifice of honour that the Space Marines had made in this deception. She realised she would sacrifice her own, and her vows, to uphold the lie.

'We are beings of honour,' he said, looking directly at her, his face sorrowed in a manner even she could see. 'This trickery is anathema to our code. But it was necessary until we knew the strength of your resolve.'

There was almost an admiration in his voice, and were it not for the circumstances, Lucia would have felt bolstered by that praise. Instead, she felt only despair.

She also understood the burden the Death Spectres carried, and understood why the others could never be told. With that terrible knowledge, she hardened her heart to what was coming. There would be no rescue this time. 'Those who give their lives unto His service shall meet again by His side,' she muttered to herself as she took position among the survivors again. And with grim determination, she continued leading the refugees along in their solemn death march, accepting

that the only salvation they would find would be by the Emperor's side.

The silence continued for another two hours into the predawn hours, made all the more terrible by the secret she carried. The wan purple glow of Moldevar's last dawn began to seep between the high-buttressed structures of the city's central district. The xenos aircraft were gone, and even the corpse-piles became more infrequent, although blood spatters still coated many of the alley walls, and pools of congealed gore marred the cobbled streets. And yet, the stench of death and viscera only seemed to grow. A foul hint steadily grew to an unbearable, choking miasma. When the band finally reached the Ecclesiarchal Plaza at Moldevar's heart, they learned why. Emerging from a wide street, the coughing, almost suffocating refugees followed the Space Marines and Lucia to the edge of the Great Plaza of Saint Cybele.

And they beheld its horror.

What was once a space of devotional fervour was now a mass grave on a scale Lucia could barely comprehend. A quarter of a mile wide and half a mile long, the plaza had brimmed with tens of thousands each day, gathering for the holy ministrations of the Ecclesiarchy. Now it was dotted with the remains of a slaughter so absolute that even Lucia's resolve threatened to shatter.

The pontiff's palace, far to the left, once a gilded cathedral of the Emperor's splendour, was a burning remnant of its former self. All six spires lay toppled, and its crumbling architecture revealed the skeletal framework of its innards and inferno roiling within. The beautiful statue of Saint Cybele standing at the heart of the plaza's vast fountain, winged and white, was now a tattered angel clad in rags of flayed flesh.

The true horror lay scattered across the vastness of the plaza's flagstoned surface.

The flensed remains of most of the city's population were strewn across it: a grisly mantle of stinking red that blanketed the entire cityscape from the pontiff's palace all the way to the Boulevard of Saints nearly half a mile away. Amidst the carnage were the hulked remains of dozens of local militia and Arbites vehicles, as well as an entire swathe of civitas groundcars and Ecclesiarchy transports.

Lucia stood, mouth agape, as she took in the horror. For that moment, the sobbing of the miserable survivors stopped. Everyone, even the Death Spectres, was stunned by the scale of the atrocity before them.

She saw the flesh-clad things stalking about the plaza, picking over the dead,

dragging them about, seemingly at random. But there was intent, purpose, in their erratic movements, rows of corpses were stacked in walls, and channels were carved out through the viscera. It was as if the entire landscape of carnage was being sculpted into a particular shape or form. Lucia blinked the growing image away in her mind, and did not dare analyse it further, for the sake of her own sanity.

Thankfully, most of the refugees were staring upwards, gawking at the massive xenos vessel hanging in low orbit. It was suspended directly overhead, at least three miles long, and elongated, insectile in form. Its stretched abdominal stern, thoracic wings and reversed crescent prow were illuminated in a faint column of emerald light that shone down from it onto the plaza below.

Lucia didn't know how long they stood there, transfixed by the nightmarish scene slowly worming its way into their minds. Nevekarion, standing helmetless beside her, was the first to speak. 'We need to move.'

'Where?' she managed, after a moment of gathering herself.

He pointed towards one of the many accumulations of wrecked vehicles in the plaza, and Lucia saw what he was showing her. The sturdy hull of a midnight-black Thunderhawk lay at the heart of the carnage, not three hundred feet from the grotesquely defiled statue of Saint Cybele.

'We make our final push,' he said, before turning to his warriors. 'Brothers. The Black River calls us again. And we will rise to meet it. You know our purpose. Let nothing stand before it!'

The Death Spectres did not respond. Their silence was all the affirmation Nevekarion needed.

Lucia turned to her flock. She did not know what to say to them. Any words of encouragement would be hollow. All those terrified faces – men, women and children – she had promised them salvation. And where had she led them?

She almost couldn't look at them, and she certainly couldn't meet Sera's gaze. Facing down xenos abominations was one thing, and talking down a Space Marine something else entirely, but standing before her ragged band of survivors, knowing what she knew, was far harder.

She opened her mouth to speak, and the words finally came. 'That,' she pointed at the Thunderhawk, 'that is our salvation.' She swallowed the lie, however bitter it tasted. 'The Emperor's angels of death will guide us there... across this horror. Stay together, and stay strong in faith. Do not let panic overcome you, and do not become separated.'

Nevekarion's vox-grille crackled as he spoke. 'The xenos might appear to be

spread out, but they are able to move unseen amongst the dead. Be ever on your guard, and keep pace. We will not wait.'

Lucia exhaled, steeling herself, glancing at last at Sera. Unexpectedly, the girl seemed to have regained some of her composure, and somehow, that made it all the worse. Taking in a deep breath, Lucia spoke, hoping she might bring some bravery to those around her, hoping that through her words, they might find some consolation before death claimed them. 'In the face of death, one can only stare into it with valour and zeal. The darkness of the unknown stands in our way, and the candles of courage within our hearts must be lit to burn as bright as bonfires to stave off that darkness. We go in the wake of beings who can know no fear, so let us march alongside them, alongside the Emperor's angels of death, and meet whatever fate awaits. Let that courage burn so bright that the Emperor Himself will take notice, and bring us forever to His side, should we fall!'

Most of the survivors still looked hesitant and broken, if not downright terrified, but some seemed more determined. Raul took up position alongside the Sister, his face as stern and unphased as those of the Death Spectres, his shotgun levelled in the direction of the scarecrow horrors stalking the visceral wasteland.

The enforcer nodded. 'Well, this is it then...'

They were two-thirds of the way across the plaza before the first of the xenos noticed them. They'd stumbled in a half run through the nightmare landscape, winding between hills of flayed bodies and through ravines of mutilated remains. Their resolve plummeted like sand falling through an hourglass, and were it not for the ever-nearing shape of the massive gunship ahead, she knew the courage of the survivors would already have shattered.

Several slipped and fell in their haste. Some of those did not rise again, overcome by fits of maddening sobs, and Lucia could do nothing to draw them back to their feet. She took Sera by the hand, realising that she could not help everyone, but she would do everything in her power to ensure that the girl's end would be a quick one.

A scream bade her to turn around. One of the creatures seemed to materialise from the congealed gore behind a fallen man, and impaled him with both its talons, pulling him apart in a shower of blood. Still running, she let go of Sera and fired her bolter from the hip, blasting the xenos horror back into the charnel pile from which it had emerged. She didn't bother checking whether or not it was truly dead. The Death Spectres did not stop, merely turning and seeing that the threat was already dealt with.

Lucia grabbed a woman who stood transfixed by horror, her foot momentarily stuck in the flensed chest cavity of one of the many dead they had trodden across, and dragged her along, before turning back to Sera. The girl began to fire with her autopistol at a cadaverous shape rising from a pile of gore, the panic in her eyes mixed with a desperate survival instinct.

That was when the screaming began in earnest.

Three of the things erupted from ‘hills’ ahead of them, and closed in on the ragged band. Two fell to carefully aimed bursts from the Space Marines’ weapons, but the third cut through three of the survivors, descending upon them with a frenzied abandon, flaying them in an instant. Lucia and the militia brought it down with the focused fire of their las and stub weapons and kept running to follow the massive strides of the transhuman giants.

The Thunderhawk was so close, its lower hull gouged open.

‘Forward!’ Lucia yelled, letting her rage and disgust boil over the cloying touch of horror clawing at her mind. More shambling scarecrow shapes erupted from the mountains of dead and began to stalk towards them in great numbers. Death was coming for them now, and there would be no escape.

‘Fear not death, we who embody it in His name!’ Nevekarion shouted, his voice a hollow machine rasp beneath his helmet, unleashing his full genhanced fury upon the closest of the xenos. His warriors did likewise, all the while advancing towards their objective. As more of the horrors began ripping their way from the viscera around the Thunderhawk, two of the Death Spectres activated their jump packs and rocketed towards them, shoulder-slamming into the xenos to send them sprawling before descending upon them with their chainswords.

Two strode to meet Nevekarion, driving in from the left flank. He ended one with the incandescent fire of his plasma pistol and bisected the other with his axe. Two more intercepted a trio of stragglers from Lucia’s band, ending them in seconds and ravenously descending upon their fallen forms.

Lucia, Raul and what remained of the survivors followed in his wake, the pain of the Sister’s wounds and her fatigue lost in the adrenaline flood. More of the horrors closed in all around them as they reached the gunship. The first two Space Marines, having rocketed ahead, had already reached it, and easily slipped into the massive tear in its hull.

A deafening bang turned Lucia around, and she saw one of the Space Marines die. It was not something she’d ever expected to see, and it almost halted her in her tracks. The rearguard fell to the stalking horde that was not twenty paces behind them, detonating all of his grenades as one as three of the flayed horrors

dragged him down into the gore.

‘Emperor’s mercy,’ she said to herself as she turned, seeing Nevekarion and the enforcer reach the hull of the Thunderhawk. The former wheeled around and lobbed a grenade over her head, which exploded with a deafening crump, the shockwave knocking her forward. The enforcer caught her and dragged her into the entrance of the craft, before pulling Sera in too.

Everyone behind her had been claimed by the tide of death that followed them.

It was then that she saw how few people had survived. Less than a dozen were crowded in the hull, the rest having distracted the ravening horrors outside with their lives. She hadn’t even seen most of them fall, but heard several more screams echo from outside into the scorched hold. Two of the Death Spectres held the door, and she already heard the screeching of their chainswords, the thunder of their bolt pistols, and the grating, dead-static howls of the nightmares they held at bay.

The insanity of their suicidal charge shifted to the muted despair of what was coming, the gloom of the Thunderhawk’s claustrophobic hold pressed upon them. Lucia pulled a gasping, and likely concussed, Sera to her feet as the stablights from the few remaining militia and the enforcer began to criss-cross through the hold. Two of the Death Spectres were already unlatching a sturdy crate from a compartment near the prow. One Space Marine’s helmet was sheared off, his bleached features raked by three deep red slashes. Nevekarion and the remaining Space Marine barred the entrance with their black-armoured bulk, and Lucia saw them hacking at the horde of taloned horrors outside, their revving chainswords and heavy pistols keeping the xenos at bay.

‘Hyrkannen?’ Nevekarion shouted over the din.

‘Dead, but his duty is done!’ the helmetless Space Marine returned. ‘It is active. Praesignatio is active!’ The two Death Spectres set the heavy crate down and opened it, reverently removing the atomic device within. It was a cylindrical thing, covered in a thick, gunmetal chasing emblazoned with the skull and cog of the Adeptus Mechanicus. A metre long and covered in hazard stripes, flashing red warning runes, and thick cables, there was very little disguising what it could be. A faint hum echoed through the chamber.

The survivors gawked at it, either not knowing what it was, or perhaps realising its deadly intent and finally coming to the conclusion about what was to come. From one knee, Lucia breathed a benediction.

‘Let Your light lead us to Your side at the Eternal Throne.’

Nevekarion kicked away the creature he fought, and blasted it with an incandescent burst of his plasma pistol.

‘The gunship?’ the sergeant called to the wounded Death Spectre, his voice a crackle through his vox-grille.

‘Still operable,’ he responded.

Lucia wasn’t sure if she’d heard correctly.

Nevekarion glanced at the Sister, and turned back to his warrior. ‘Then pilot the craft out of here. Get these souls to the mountains. Keep them from the Black River for one more day. Find a way off this world and give word of our endings to the Throne of Glass.’

The Space Marine paused, and Lucia guessed he might be disappointed in being denied the chance to die alongside his brothers. But then he nodded grimly. ‘I will carry out this task, my lord.’

‘Good. Then you have three minutes to leave this place.’ Nevekarion stepped back, letting the other Death Spectre hold the door, to assist the one carrying the bomb. ‘We will bestow the Gift of Oblivion upon these xenos. Walk once more from the Black River’s banks. Now is not your time, Brother Vairan!’

Vairan neither saluted nor affirmed, but merely regarded Nevekarion and those still outside with his empty black eyes. ‘Drink deep from its current, brothers.’ And with that, he strode off towards the cockpit.

Lucia watched with disbelief as Nevekarion and the other Space Marines left the hull with the primed atomic device. Three warriors against a tide of death. She saw Enforcer Raul, and made eye contact. ‘Good run, Sister. Maybe we’ll meet again at the Emperor’s side,’ he said, a cold smile on his face, before he joined the Death Spectres.

‘Walk at His side,’ Lucia breathed, tasting blood in her mouth. But he was already gone. Gone to the sound of gunfire, the howling dead static and the battle cries.

Lucia looked to the others: ten terrified faces, perhaps broken by their experience, but glimmering with a hope she hadn’t realised was possible. She looked at Sera. Dazed as she was, Lucia saw hope aflame in those green eyes, burning away the trauma and the horror. For the first time since the incursion began, Lucia allowed herself the hint of a smile.

The gunship’s lights flickered on, and its thrusters began to hum, drowning out the sound of the carnage unfolding outside. Vairan’s voice cut in from the craft’s vox-speakers.

‘Stay away from the hull-breach, and hold on to something if you want to live.’

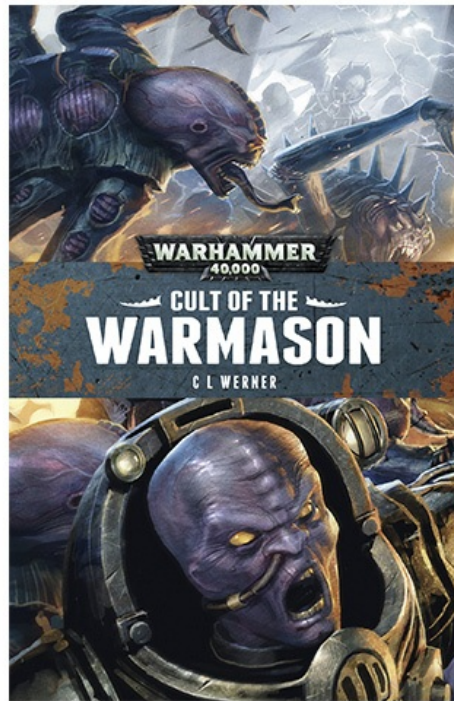
Lucia seized one of the hanging bars overhead, locking her knuckles around it in a death grip. She held Sera's hand in case she fell, before she felt the sudden lurch of the Thunderhawk leaving the ground. 'The Emperor protects,' she breathed, closing her eyes.

A deafening roar sounded and the momentum shifted to horizontal acceleration as the Thunderhawk surged forward towards the mountains. Towards the dawn. Towards salvation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Miles A Drake is a professional bartender and aspiring author based in Amsterdam, Holland. 'The Flesh Tithe' is his first story for Black Library.

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