

**WARHAMMER**  
**40,000**



AN ADEPTA SORORITAS STORY

# REPENTIA

ALEC WORLEY

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An Extract from ‘Sisters of Battle: The Omnibus’

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# REPENTIA

Alec Worley

The nameless warrior felt the rock crack beneath her armoured boots. She grabbed the ridge above her as chunks of stone tumbled away below, leaving her entire weight suspended from the fingers of one hand. Cold terror bolted through her as she looked down past her flailing legs. Torrents of water surged around her, merging into white spray as they gushed down the face of the black cliff, feeding the misty rapids hundreds of feet below. The distant river zigzagged through jagged rocks before disappearing into the jungle, where myriad scavengers would feed upon her shattered remains. This was the land that had devoured her Sisters; now it waited to receive her too.

Strong hands seized the warrior's wrist just as she felt her fingers slipping upon the wet rock. Her fellow Sister Repentia squatted above her, bare limbs glossy with spray, bunched muscles bound with crimson rags fluttering in the wind. The older woman glared down at her comrade, grimacing from behind her executioner's hood, the symbolic veil of the penitent. Starved ribs heaved at her sides, and she adjusted her footing as she struggled to haul the younger Repentia up onto the safety of the ledge.

'Give me your other hand, Sister,' she barked.

The brutal weight of the Eviscerator chainsword strapped to the younger warrior's back threatened to drag her from her saviour's grip. The Sisterhood of the Repentia wore no harness on which to maglock their Order's weapon of choice; the sword was their burden, both a reminder of their shame and a promise of redemption to come. The younger warrior knew she could save herself by simply undoing the knotted rags that bound the immense weapon to her back. But she would sooner relieve herself of a limb than cast off her sacred armament.

She fumbled with the pouch on her belt as the older warrior yelled over the booming water. ‘Sister! What are you doing?’

The younger warrior retrieved an ancient book, the size of a data-slate, its tattered pages bound in battered iron. Feeling herself slipping from her comrade’s grasp, she thrust the relic up towards the older warrior.

‘Take it,’ she gasped.

The other Repentia snatched her outstretched hand at the wrist.

‘You are not dead yet, little Sister.’

She raised herself with a roar, lifting the younger Repentia within reach of the ledge. Her comrade clambered to safety, and they both fell onto their backs, panting like hounds. The younger warrior lay there, shivering with adrenaline. She didn’t thank her fellow Repentia; she had done so often enough these past weeks that her gratitude was by now a given.

‘Didn’t I tell you?’ said the older warrior, her eyes smiling as she pointed to the mouth of a small cave beside them. ‘These cliffs are riddled with passages. We can reach the nest from here, I’m sure of it.’

The younger Repentia felt too exhausted to move, overwhelmed by aching hunger once again. She got to her knees, still panting, and again offered the ancient book to the other Repentia.

‘Take it,’ she said. ‘Please.’

‘You’ll live to see the rescue ship, I assure you, Sister,’ said the older warrior.

The other Repentia gave her a sour look. ‘We’ve both lived long enough under the Oath to know that you can make no such guarantee. You know this world far better than I. Take the book.’

‘I’m fortunate to have studied the worlds in this system,’ said the older warrior. ‘I’m even more fortunate to have remembered half of it.’

‘Please.’

‘I am merely lucky,’ said the older warrior, kneeling beside her comrade. ‘Whereas you have been blessed.’ She pressed the book back into the younger Repentia’s arms. ‘You found it, Sister, you carved through packs of xenos predators to retrieve it from a swamp-drowned shrine. *The Scriptures of Arch-Confessor Maxus Hurn*, a relic lost for aeons. And you shall be the one to hand this prize to the canoness upon our return. *Beneficia tuum numerare*, little Sister. Treasure every blessing.’

The younger Repentia looked out from the cliff, blinking through the booming spray. She felt ghostly with hunger as she gazed over the jungle sweltering beneath a flawless blue sky. As she stared, the horizon tilted, treetops whirled

below, the emerald ocean pulling her into the depths of this primeval world, drowning her in the enormity of what she had achieved. She steadied herself, running her quivering fingers over the hieroglyphs etched into the cover of the ancient book.

‘How many of us did they send to find this?’ she said absently.

The older warrior sighed, her famished belly gurgling. ‘A great many, I imagine. The Ecclesiarchy pinpointed this world as its most likely resting place, but they didn’t have exact coordinates. That book could have been disintegrating at the bottom of an ocean for all they knew.’

‘And yet here it is.’ The Repentia squeezed the book, as if to assure herself of its reality.

The older warrior patted her shoulder. ‘Who better than the faithful to go hunting for a miracle, eh? Now, come.’

She went to help the Repentia to her feet, but the younger warrior bowed her head in prayer.

*‘A spiritu dominatus,*

*‘Domine, libra nos.*

‘From darkness shall your light guide me.’

The older warrior growled. ‘Our Mistress of Repentance is no longer here to lash us for failing to carry out every last observance. Right now, you need food more than prayer, little Sister.’

‘From hopelessness shall faith deliver me,’ she continued.

‘From weakness shall your spirit strengthen me,

‘From despairing solitude shall the martyrs countless escort me.’

The younger Repentia made the sign of the aquila, feeling the eyes of her companion upon her.

‘My old canoness once delivered a sermon upon that very prayer,’ said the older warrior. ‘Shortly before I...’ She swallowed. ‘Before I took the Oath. She told us that dogma was a formidable ally, that repetition strengthens one’s resolve, but the Adepta Sororitas are not machines.’

The younger Repentia wiped her face and looked up.

‘We are not servitors,’ said her comrade. ‘We are not Space Marines, bolstered by implants and augmentia. We are human, and the God-Emperor inhabits our bodies as surely as He does our spirits. Through the yearnings of blood and heart and sinew, He speaks truths that can save us. Humanity is not a weakness, little Sister. We must know when to trust our flaws.’

‘I cannot speak for you,’ said the younger Repentia, her gaze unyielding. ‘But

weakness has brought me nothing but disgrace, and exile from the Sororitas. We are Repentia, are we not? Our flaws are what got us here.'

'Aye,' said the older warrior. 'And our flaws may yet get us out.'

With a growl, the younger Repentia sprang to her feet, slamming her startled comrade within the mouth of the cave. Seconds later, a huge shadow slid over the rocks and a rush of air hissed over the huddled warriors. A huge reptile soared close overhead, its immense bat-like wings easily the span of a Thunderhawk. It joined several others, screeching as they circled the jungle in search of prey.

The Repentia slid the book back into the pouch at her hip and grumbled at her comrade. 'Are you certain we're safe up here?'

'We're safer, certainly. Now that we're out of the marshes. If I recall my studies correctly, there are worse things in the trees down there than there are up here. Those winged creatures – *azachtera xenopteryx* – leave their nests just after dawn, and their eggs shall make a welcome change from eating grubs and beetles. Follow me.'

The Sisters Repentia entered the cave and clambered up a rocky tunnel, water dripping from above, trickling down their backs, glistening under their feet. They passed caverns and passages illumined by stray beams of sunlight, the cloying smell of ammonia growing stronger as they climbed.

'We're close,' coughed the older Repentia as the tunnel widened. 'They say Maxus Hurn could summon unbreakable courage with the poetry of his sermons, turn the tide of battle against hopeless odds. Is there anything in that book that could help us with this smell?'

The younger warrior smirked, despite herself. 'Perhaps,' she said, forcing herself not to gag upon the suffocating stench. 'But, alas, it will take the Orders Dialogus years to piece together a translation, and I doubt we can hold our breath for that long.'

Her comrade fell before her, cursing amid a flurry of crumbling rock. The younger Repentia scrambled to the mouth of the tunnel and looked out. Her comrade had slipped down a bank of loose rocks and into a huge cavern, open to the sky, its floor a swamp of reeking guano. Her hand on the hilt of her Eviscerator, the Repentia slid down to join her comrade, searching the darkened alcoves for enemies. Seconds passed. Nothing challenged their arrival.

The older Repentia laughed as she brushed herself off, indicating a nest crowded with huge grey eggs.

'Death can wait, it seems,' she said. 'But breakfast cannot.'

A spear of sharpened bone exploded from her chest. The younger Repentia stumbled back in surprise and horror, her face splashed with hot blood. She found her footing, drawing her Eviscerator as her Sister's body was scooped into the air, the long bloody spike still protruding from her gushing chest. The corpse seemed to levitate in the darkness for a moment, arms and legs swinging as her monstrous killer flung her aside and knuckled out from the shadows of an alcove.

Hunched beneath the cavern ceiling, the creature was still over twice the Repentia's height, its enormous blade-like wings folded under its spindly arms. Amber eyes gleamed either side of a huge pick-axe head that bobbed atop a neck as thick as a palm tree. The long beak scissored open, thick with her Sister's blood, as it exhaled a warning hiss.

The Repentia ran at the towering monster, the warrior's roar muffled by the Eviscerator thundering in her hands, its jagged blade now a screaming, smoking blur. Startled, the creature retreated into the shadows, jabbed at its oncoming foe.

She barely parried the darting blow, her buzzing blade glancing off its beak, blinding her with a spray of gritted bone. She felt the beast's head scoop her off her feet, her heavy weapon twisting itself out of her grasp as the creature flung her into a wall.

The Repentia yelped in pain and tumbled into a mire of guano. The ground trembled as the beast stomped after her. She wriggled away like an eel as the creature's talons smacked the ground by her head, seeking to pin her. She squirmed further back, lubricated by the stinking slime as the brute clawed at the muck, flapping and shrieking with outrage. The Repentia gagged, choking on the stench of ammonia, eyes stinging, streaming as she withdrew before the creature's relentless advance. She felt the omnipresent gaze of the God-Emperor, aloof and watchful, judging her worthiness to survive.

Fumbling through the excreta for a chunk of stone with which to defend herself, her fingers found the eye socket of a bestial skull. She heaved it free, hurled it at the creature's head. The missile shattered on impact, blinding the monster with its own filth. It screeched and shook its head, wings snapping like sheets as it tottered backwards.

Drenched in rage, deafened by the hymns of battle bellowing in her head, the Repentia launched herself bare-handed at the beast's wrinkled neck. The beak speared over her shoulder, slicing flesh. She grabbed the creature's skull as it drew back. It hauled her into the air, staggering under her weight. She snarled between gritted teeth, too blind with fury to comprehend her own recklessness,

as she hooked her legs around the thing's throat. Locking her long, muscular arms beneath its chin, she tensed, lifting its head as she squeezed, twisting her entire body until she felt the sinews in the creature's neck tighten under the strain.

She could feel the creature trying to scream, trembling cords trapped in its throat as she clamped its jaws shut. It swung her into the cavern walls, pulverising rocks with her spine and skull, but the pain only intensified her rage. The Repentia channelled her fury, hot and invigorating, into her powerful arms, her broad shoulders crammed with muscle, her ankles hooked as she heaved, feeling the brute's tendons grow perilously taut.

As the creature bucked and lurched in her murderous grip, the Repentia closed her eyes. She would not find death here in this stinking pit. Her glorious demise awaited her elsewhere and she would carve a bloody swathe through the galaxy until she found it.

'Until absolution finds me once more,' she whispered, as if lulling her colossal prey to sleep. She groaned as she tightened her grip even further and the creature's tortured ligaments finally cracked like a whip. The huge neck shuddered in the Repentia's grasp and the monster toppled to the ground. She struggled out from beneath the smothering corpse, wheezing and dizzy as she searched for her dead Sister.

The Repentia soon found the body sprawled nearby, a tangle of broken limbs, tired eyes gazing up at the opening in the cave ceiling and the sapphire sky beyond. The Repentia shivered as the last of her rage subsided. She dropped to her knees beside the dead woman and took up her hands, pressing them over the ruined chest to form the sign of the holy aquila. The Repentia had performed this ritual countless times upon her martyred Sisters, their lifeless hands limp and slippery as dead fish. But this time, instead of speaking the prayer of repose, the Repentia found herself silenced, clutching the dead woman's hands, unable to let go. Her heart felt magnetised, fastening her to her dead Sister, as again came that selfish yearning, not to bring the dead back to life, but to follow them where they were going.

The Emperor had bestowed upon her Sister the blessing of death, finally absolving the Repentia's terrible sins, while her own redemption had been denied yet again, thwarted by her talent for combat. The Emperor was not yet ready to accept her soul. She felt hollow with melancholy, empty, starving, too weary to move. She murmured a cherished verse from *The Repentia's Lament*.

'I shall know victory only ever as defeat,

‘Until the blessed Throne restores my name,  
‘Be it upon my living flesh or be it upon my ashes.’

The empty cave dripped around the lone Repentia, moist air cooling her limbs, irritating the constellation of stings and sores that littered her flesh. She welcomed the discomfort as a blessing, a reminder of the glorious purpose that now lay before her as she continued her prayer. She pressed her hand against the book stowed at her hip.

‘From hopelessness shall the miracle of faith deliver me.’

Still kneeling, the Repentia removed her dead Sister’s hood. The Sisters Repentia kept their faces hidden in shame; even among each other they were nameless, unknowable. The dead woman had survived on this world long enough for her ritually shaved hair to have regrown into a shock of grey bristles. She was much older than the Repentia had expected, with a narrow, elegant face and lined cheeks, sunken but otherwise unmarred by scars. She had the gentle look of a Sister Hospitaller, a scribe or a librarian.

The Repentia eventually commenced the litany of repose.

‘Before the Emperor you sinned.’

The Repentia wondered exactly what manner of sin her dead Sister might have committed, whether that sin was greater or lesser than her own. What feats of heroism in the name of the Imperium had she committed to have earned this redemption?

The Repentia chided herself for the sin of curiosity.

‘Beyond forgiveness. Beyond forbearance. Beyond mercy,’ she continued.

The memory of her own banishment rose within her like a daemon, her own pain seeking to consume her.

‘The Adepta Sororitas turned their backs upon you,’ she told her dead Sister. ‘They cast off your armour and your arms.’

She winced and shook her head, trying to disperse the dogged memory of her own sacred power armour being lifted from her body, piece by piece, and discarded like scrap. She remembered sobbing so hard that she could barely stand. She remembered hands tugging at her hair, shearing her scalp with a knife.

‘You left your company of your own free will,’ she struggled through the words. ‘And by your will you have returned.’

She felt tears dripping from her chin as she remembered her Battle Sisters turning their backs upon her. It had felt as though she had become suddenly invisible, as if the light of her Sisters’ companionship had vanished, reducing her to a shadow. She recalled the sickening emptiness in her belly, as if she had been

disembowelled, as if everything she cherished had been torn from inside her. The sanctity of sisterhood, of belonging, that unity of purpose, that blessed certainty that the woman with the bolter beside you would die for you and you for her. Together you were part of the only truth, the only certainty this treacherous galaxy could ever possibly know.

She blinked away tears until she could see her dead Sister's face once again.

'You have found the Emperor's forgiveness.'

She kissed her dead Sister hard upon the forehead, tasting blood and salt.

'You are nameless no more,' she sobbed.

Something was bleeping, a miniature alarm ringing beside her. The homing beacon at her belt was flashing red.

The rescue ship. It was near. Finally.

The Repentia retrieved her Eviscerator, hauling it onto her shoulders as she clawed her way up the rocks towards the cavern opening. Her belly groaned as she ignored the banquet of eggs clustered nearby. As she reached the mouth of the cave, a white Thunderhawk howled overhead.

'Throne be praised,' she gasped.

But the ship trailed smoke, scrawling a black line across the sky before disappearing behind the chimneys of a derelict manufactorum, one of countless such complexes the Imperium had erected across the planet centuries ago. A distant boom startled birds from among the broken buildings, followed by a column of smoke.

'Alive,' she told herself. 'They shall be alive. I have faith in their deliverance, my lord.'

The Repentia half bounded, half tumbled down the steep rocks towards the jungle below.

The trees soon enveloped the Repentia once more, immersing her in a gloomy bath of heat. She darted between the mossy green trunks, slipping on the mulch that carpeted the forest floor. Watchful shadows croaked and hooted at her from the undergrowth. Long-limbed creatures crashed through the branches of the canopy high above. She used the long hilt of her Eviscerator to bat aside looping vines and sopping leaves as she dashed along a familiar route towards the edge of the manufactorum.

Her eyes stung with the sweat already pouring from beneath her hood, her lungs straining against the steamy perfume of damp leaves. The humid air felt thick enough to drown in. She quickened her pace regardless, as if the jungle might consume her if she lingered, devour her as it had the rest of her squad. The

stricken rescue ship was clearly a test of faith. She relished the thought, drawing strength from the agony of her tortured muscles. This world would not take her yet, nor would she let it take those sent to collect the precious book.

The canopy thinned, gradually parting to reveal brilliant blue sky. The Repentia followed the trail of smoke, dodging through the trees until they gave way to riveted girders streaked with rust and snaking vines. Her boots now pounded on a meshed walkway smeared with leaves and moss. She skidded to a halt, exhausted, crashing into a balcony railing overlooking one of the manufactory's airfields. Her knees buckled, her strength dissolving as she fought for breath, coughing as she surveyed the scene before her.

The Thunderhawk lay on its side like a landed whale, its port thruster still churning smoke into the sky. A torn wing lay beside the furrow the ship had ploughed across the airfield upon landing. It had barged through a crowd of antique tanks, crates and transports, rusted husks that lay strewn for miles.

The Repentia could see figures in white power armour swarming around the hull of the ship, squirming onto the ground from a buckled hatch. They wore black cloaks, lined with red, their hair dark, faces bare. Battle Sisters of the Sacred Rose.

‘Arabella,’ she murmured. ‘Sainted Liberator, I shall not fail them.’

The Repentia kissed the scraps of a purity seal upon her chainsword and vaulted over the balcony, her exhaustion forgotten. She leapt down stairwells, bounded over railings, until she was sprinting towards the stranded ship.

She dashed through seams of grass erupting from the cracked rockcrete of the airfield when she heard the hum of another ship. She halted to squint into the sky, shielding her eyes from the fierce morning sun. The Repentia thought at first that what she heard was another Thunderhawk, but even at this distance the ship's outline appeared strange.

The surviving Battle Sisters were now fleeing their grounded transport.

The descending ship gleamed red in the sun.

The Repentia searched through the tall grass, now frantic. She had spent weeks exploring these ruins with her squad. There was a labyrinth of drainage tunnels deep below ground, built centuries ago to channel the monsoon rains of this world. She scanned her surroundings for a possible entrance, but found only an expanse of overgrown rockcrete.

The enemy ship's engines had risen to a steady drone. The Repentia knew it would take out the Thunderhawk first, cutting off any possibility of cover or escape. Then it would wheel back and mow down the fleeing Battle Sisters long

before they could reach cover in the outlying streets of the manufactorum.

At last she found an earth-choked gutter and hurried along it, studying the ground.

She could hear the cries of the approaching Battle Sisters.

‘Here!’ she cried, feeling a twinge of shame for addressing the warriors so directly. ‘Over here!’ But the squad had already seen her. The Repentia looked to the skies and saw the ship diving straight towards her, towards the Battle Sisters behind her and the downed Thunderhawk beyond.

The enemy ship thundered into a killing run as the Repentia burrowed away a layer of earth to reveal a large drain cover. She looked up in time to see a brazen skull insignia flash upon the vessel’s belly as it swooped overhead, its downdraught sucking the Repentia into the air and tossing her onto the ground.

‘Khornate scum,’ she snarled as she picked herself up. ‘Heretic filth.’

The gunship itself was a glistening red mockery of Imperial design, its hull mutated by the powers of the warp into the likeness of flayed muscle, bound in spiked brass. The Repentia cried out in helpless fury as the Chaos ship unleashed its heavy guns, punching a stream of explosive rounds among the defenceless Battle Sisters below.

The warriors had spread out to minimise casualties, while fearlessly returning fire with their bolters. Their rounds criss-crossed the air, creating a junction of fire through which the gunship tore heedlessly, bolter shells flashing and smoking along its armoured belly. The Battle Sisters held their ground with the fabled discipline of their Order as the guns of the enemy tore through their ranks. The barrage ripped three of them to pieces, armoured limbs spinning through the air as the gunship continued its run.

For a moment, the Repentia felt the unholy spectacle burn away her courage, blast her muscles to ash, blacken the world until it threatened to snuff out all hope of her salvation.

‘I shall not fail them.’

She tore her gaze away and retrieved her Eviscerator. Revving the blade, she swung it down, driving it point first through the iron drain cover in a screaming shower of sparks.

Twin missiles dropped from the gunship’s underside as the Battle Sisters recovered and continued their run towards the Repentia. The whistling rockets dived into the rear of the downed Thunderhawk, igniting its promethium tanks with an earth-shaking roar. The Repentia swung her chainsword again, striking another spray of sparks before the sheared quarters of the drain cover tumbled

into the darkness below.

A thunderous volley of burning wreckage crashed around her as a wall of dust and smoke descended. The Repentia revved her chainsword, announcing her position to the Battle Sisters blinded by the haze. Moments later, bulky white figures hunkered towards her, blinking through the dust, cloaks flapping, pauldrons emblazoned with a white rose clutched in a mailed fist.

‘Thank the Throne,’ muttered the Repentia. ‘This way.’

Aside from a few curious glances, the Battle Sisters ignored their exiled saviour as they hurried one by one into the open drain. The Repentia looked away, pained by their disregard, loath to look upon these snow-white visions of her former self. She heard the gathering roar of the Traitors’ gunship as the squad’s Sister Superior staggered from the smoke, dazed, her head bleeding. The Repentia ran to her side, but hesitated before helping her, as if her sinful touch might somehow pollute the Battle Sister’s sanctified armour.

‘Formalities can wait,’ grunted the Sister Superior and threw her arm around the Repentia’s shoulder. Heavy bolter fire thumped the ground behind them and the crimson gunship roared overhead. It cast aside sheets of dust, revealing a wasteland of flaming scrap and ruined bodies.

The Repentia helped the Sister Superior into the open drain, where she was guided down the ladder by the rest of her squad. The Repentia followed.

Together they ran down a huge circular tunnel, their boots plunging through a slurry of mud and rubble. A trail of vents bearded with moss and dripping roots lined the high ceiling, disappearing into the gloom ahead.

The wounded Sister Superior raised her hand abruptly and gestured to the squad. The warriors immediately took cover among the surrounding debris, kneeling as they levelled their bolters back down the tunnel. The Repentia readied her Eviscerator.

Nothing but the echo of trickling water emerged from the darkness before them.

‘I am Sister Eunice,’ panted the Sister Superior. She turned to the Repentia.

The nameless woman bowed her head and went to kneel before the hawk-faced warrior, but the Sister Superior caught her arm. ‘No time for that. The heretics. They’re after the book. Where is it?’

The Repentia obediently fumbled at the pouch on her belt and presented the Sister Superior with the relic. The rest of the squad murmured in awe at the sight of it.

A distant rumble shook dirt from the ceiling.

‘Missile fire,’ said the Sister Superior, her smile tight as she wrapped the book

in sanctified cloth and slid it into a bag. ‘The Traitors must still be aboard their ship, which means they know we’re down here, but they don’t know where exactly. They’ll bombard the surface until they think they’ve trapped or buried us.’

Another boom shook the walls, louder this time. One of the Battle Sisters dodged as a metal grate dropped from the ceiling and clanged into the water beside her.

‘This way,’ hissed the Repentia and scurried down the tunnel ahead, her massive chainsword slung over her shoulder. The squad splashed after her as she read the stagnant rainwater streaming around her boots, east to west. She darted down an identical tunnel on her right, away from the nexus of drains beneath the open airfield and towards the shelter of the ruined factory city.

Sister Eunice hurried to the Repentia’s side as they ran.

‘We’ve already contacted the fleet,’ she huffed. ‘Help is coming. We need to find a hiding place. Somewhere defensible. Can you find us such a place, Sister?’

The Repentia nodded, shivering with unease. *Sister*. The word sounded to her like blasphemy. She left Eunice behind as she ran faster, leading the tramping squad through tunnel after tunnel, struggling to read her surroundings by the meagre threads of sunlight afforded by the choked drains overhead.

Another missile screamed and the Repentia threw herself in front of Sister Eunice, shoving her back as a flash lit up the tunnel ahead. A rippling explosion poured a cascade of earth and bricks into the tunnel, blocking their way. Dark water exploded through a ruptured wall, released from a neighbouring passage. The deluge plunged over the rubble towards the Battle Sisters.

Trusting to instinct, the Repentia shoved her way to the head of the retreating squad, directing them back into a side-tunnel they had passed minutes before. The water crashed behind them as it passed.

The Repentia ran on, but the water was rising, its current strengthening as the Traitors’ bombardment forced the drainage to change course. Rats chattered on the slopes of the tunnel either side of her, plump, glistening bodies scurrying out of the water’s reach. Her bare knees bashed through a scum of decayed leaves, her boots tripping on obstacles obscured beneath. The Battle Sisters ran close at her back, their power armour enabling them to jog through the water at a steady pace, unlike the bare-limbed Repentia, who felt as though she were wading through a swamp. Her breathing grew ragged, the atmosphere heavy with the odour of earth and rot, as if the air itself were trying to bury her alive.

She paused, gasping beside a huge fissure running along one wall. Another volley of missile fire shook the world above and the tunnels echoed with the crash of shattered stone.

The opening resembled a crude portcullis with thick metal rebar exposed within the crumbled rockcrete, the gaps between just big enough for the armoured Battle Sisters to crawl through. Beyond appeared to be a basement, sunlight pouring through a broken ceiling, illuminating a flooded floor stacked with metal barrels.

The Repentia turned her back as she spoke to Sister Eunice. ‘You can make for the surface from here. Find somewhere safe.’

Eunice motioned to her squad. One by one, they struggled through the bars and into the abandoned basement.

‘We were ambushed on our way to retrieve you,’ said Eunice. ‘The Traitors must have intercepted our transmissions. They’re from the Abrogatum Campaign. The Blood God’s forces there must be as desperate as we to break the stalemate. Thanks to you, Sister, we may yet stand a chance of doing so.’

‘Forgive me,’ said the Repentia, clutching her Eviscerator as if trying to hide behind it. ‘But I am no longer your Sister.’

Eunice took the Repentia’s shoulder and gently turned her around.

‘That gunship will likely be full of Traitor Space Marines, perhaps a dozen of them, along with their followers and whatever horrors they may be capable of conjuring against us,’ she said. ‘And I count nine of us. Including you. Sister.’

The Repentia winced at Eunice’s obscene familiarity, and ached to shrink from her grip.

‘I will not let the heretics destroy the book, mistress,’ she said, watching the last of the Battle Sisters slip through the fissure. ‘I shall strive to protect it so that its sermons may be heard upon the field once more.’

‘Should those Traitors recover the book, they shall do worse than destroy it,’ said Eunice. ‘Our blessed canoness believes they’ll reconsecrate it, perform rites in the name of the Ruinous Powers, perverting the relic’s purpose to unleash all manner of warp-born upon the battlefield. Should that happen, the Abrogatum Campaign shall be lost within weeks.’

Such sweeping talk of campaigns and strategies sounded so grand and distant to the Repentia, almost trivial. She told herself such matters were not her concern. The Oath of the Penitent bound her to the front line, to a world of blood and pain. She had sworn to hurl herself into the fray whenever the opportunity for combat arose. Her fate was not bound to the schemes of generals or tacticians,

but to the unknowable will of the God-Emperor Himself.

One of the Battle Sisters appeared at the bars beside them.

‘Area’s secure, Sister Superior.’

The Repentia murmured to herself. ‘I shall seek the Emperor’s forgiveness in the darkest places of the night.’

She saw Sister Eunice give her a curious look, her expression somewhere between awe and bewilderment. She followed the Repentia through the fissure and into the flooded basement. Together they followed the Battle Sister up a rockcrete ramp slippery with mould and into an abandoned warehouse, where the rest of the squad awaited them, crouched and ready.

Centuries ago, the manufactory buildings had processed a wealth of resin and wood from the surrounding jungle. Now the place lay half-devoured by the very wilderness it had sought to conquer. Strange vines wriggled over the broken walls, entire sections of the roof collapsed, welcoming blue sky and humid air. A compost of dirt, sticks and animal bones buried the floor.

‘Sister Superior,’ said one of the Battle Sisters. ‘The Traitors have ceased bombarding the airfield.’

‘If so, they’ll be looking to land and hunt us down,’ said Eunice. ‘And I have no desire to complicate matters by stumbling upon whatever species of xenos beast once made its home here.’ She kicked aside a huge shard of eggshell.

‘Where next, Sister Repentia?’

‘I explored these ruins with my squad, mistress,’ she said. ‘One of whom was a scholar.’ She swallowed. ‘She said the winged beasts have nests all over the outskirts of the manufactory. We shall need to move deeper into the city, find a shelter less exposed. There!’

She pointed towards a metal balcony.

‘These buildings are of uniform pattern and I recall a network of galleries beyond there, one that connects to the other buildings, sturdier ruins than these.’

The Repentia hurried on and the squad followed her up a groaning flight of metal stairs onto a gallery lined with shattered windows. She indicated a doorway at the far end and the Battle Sisters filed past, drawing their black cloaks around them to conceal their radiant white armour. The Repentia could hear distant engines. She moved to a window and peered outside.

From here she had a good view through the foliage-choked streets to the smoking wreck of the Thunderhawk less than a mile away. For some reason, the Traitors’ gunship was hovering a hundred feet above the airfield. Three men stood on its open front ramp, arms outstretched.

‘Cultists,’ growled Sister Eunice, crouched beside her, peering through a small pair of magnoculars. ‘Astra Militarum deserters by the look of them.’

She handed the magnoculars to the Repentia, who stared at them for a moment, wondering whether it would be a mortal insult to refuse them. She eventually took them and focused on the men. They were shirtless, their muscled torsos streaked with blood from a frenzy of symbols carved into their flesh. The men appeared to be singing, eyes bright with zeal. A hulking figure in crimson armour plodded into view behind them and swatted them off the ramp.

The Repentia tracked the three figures as they plunged to the ground.

‘What happened?’ said Sister Eunice.

The Repentia didn’t answer.

Eunice snatched back the magnoculars, leaving the Repentia to consider what she had just seen: three pools of blood and something monstrous rising from each one.

She clutched the hilt of her chainsword and shuddered with excitement. Death was coming for them and with it her chance for absolution. The Repentia felt the eyes of the Emperor upon her once more, blessing her with the chance to die for Him.

She went to slip back down the stairs, but Sister Eunice caught her arm.

‘We need you with us, Sister,’ she said. ‘The heretics still don’t have our exact position, which is why they’re sending their hunters in to track us down. If we’re quick, we can rig our trail with grenades, bury our pursuers in rubble and disappear until help arrives. But we must move swiftly.’

The Repentia struggled to free herself from Eunice’s grip, aware that she was listening to reason but unwilling to hear it. She craved combat, felt giddy with need for the warrior’s death she might find in the tunnels below. The words of the Oath rang in her head.

*I shall seek the Emperor’s forgiveness in the darkest places of the night.*

Eunice growled with impatience and grabbed the Repentia by the hood, pulling her close. Forced to finally look upon the Sister Superior’s face, the Repentia found herself transfixed by eyes dark and serpentine.

‘I understand, Sister,’ said Eunice through gritted teeth. ‘You must fulfil your oath. But if the heretics in that gunship find us, if they catch us out here in the open, they shall slaughter us, and countless more thereafter should the book fall into their hands.’

‘You do not need me, mistress,’ said the Repentia, still struggling. ‘You are a blessed veteran. You—’

‘Without you I am lost within unfamiliar and potentially hostile terrain. We need your guidance. We cannot risk giving away our position.’

‘I shall seek the Emperor’s forgiveness in the—’

Eunice shook her, her grip tightening around the Repentia’s hood as if ready to strangle her.

‘The Emperor needs you to be His fighter not His automaton,’ she snarled. ‘Now think. Lead us away from here, and absolution may yet find you.’

The Repentia slammed the hilt of her Eviscerator into Eunice’s armoured wrist, knocking her hand away. Released, she fled the gallery and bounded down the stairs. She heard Eunice bark a command to pursue, but the Repentia was too swift. By the time the Battle Sisters were clattering down the stairs after her, she had slipped back through the fissure in the basement wall. She turned, activating her chainsword, and sheared through the rusted metal bars behind her, collapsing the ceiling and shutting out her pursuers. She fled, splashing back down the tunnel alone, leaving a cloud of dust behind her.

The Repentia retraced her steps, reciting The Oath of the Penitent as she ran, soothed by the certainty of its words.

‘Before the Emperor I have sinned. Beyond forgiveness. Beyond forbearance. Beyond mercy.’

The Repentia had not abandoned them. The Oath was everything; it was all she was. The Emperor would brook no deviation in her quest, no matter how pressing. She had not abandoned the squad, of this she was certain.

‘I leave my Sisters’ company of my own free will and by my will shall I return.’

Perhaps she was wrong. Perhaps she had indeed abandoned them.

‘I shall seek the Emperor’s forgiveness in the darkest places of the night.’

But did the Throne want her to achieve some purpose beyond fulfilment of the Oath? Was Sister Eunice right? Could absolution be found along a path other than death?

‘See me and do not see. Know me and know fear, for I have no face today but this one.’

The Repentia halted at a junction near a wall half-crumbled into a slope of bricks and twisted rebar. She stood ankle-deep in water and felt the bristles beneath her hood suddenly tighten into gooseflesh. A strange static prickled the air, sending needles into her bowels. As she stared down the black tunnel to her left, she realised something other than water was moving over her feet.

Looking down she saw a living carpet of rats streaming over her boots, chittering in panic as they fled the darkened passage before her. She stood

motionless, blinking, trying to clear her vision as the darkness of the tunnel seemed to deepen into something more than shadow. It felt as though the water in which she stood were slowing, thickening, congealing around her feet. The walls seemed to glisten strangely, black as clotted gore, until the curved walls of the tunnel appeared to heave like some monstrous artery. The odour of blood filled her every breath until she could taste it, rich and metallic. She felt warm vapour soaking the bare flesh of her limbs, stirring the blood within as if preparing it to be spilled. The last of the rats had fled, abandoning the Repentia to the crimson darkness crawling around her.

She giggled, grinning with excitement.

‘I stand before you a Sister Repentia.’

Her fingers squeezed the trigger of her Eviscerator. The chainblade spun, its roar deafening in the dank quiet of the tunnel, announcing her presence to the horrors that sought to kill her. She exhaled, shuddering with anticipation, delighting in the incense of engine smoke and boiling grease. She thumbed a clip over the trigger, locking it. Now the blade would churn whether she squeezed the switch or not. This would allow her greater manoeuvrability, though it increased the possibility that she might carve herself in two with the slip of a blood-slick hand.

Three hulking shapes resolved into view at the far end of the tunnel, seemingly poured into being by the darkness itself. They crouched within the tunnel, their eyes glowing in the gloom like beads of lava. These daemons were quadrupeds, each as tall as a man, hunched shoulders bristling with horns and spines. Even above the bellow of her Eviscerator, the Repentia could hear them howling from the far end of the tunnel. The sound carried with it an icy crackle, as if their breath issued not from mortal lungs, but from the freezing depths of space.

‘*Spiritu dominatus,*’ screamed the Repentia and charged up the trail of water and rubble towards the daemoniac trio.

Startled by the ferocity of their prey, the daemon hounds ceased howling and scrambled into a bounding run, heads bowed in a bullish charge.

The Repentia passed her chainsword from hand to hand as she sprang over clumps of filth and stone, whirling the blade about her, gathering an unstoppable momentum.

The daemons’ mountainous shoulders flashed in the feeble light of the drains above, red reptilian scales gleaming like blood.

She recalled her sins, her weakness in committing them, letting shame goad her into madness. The Repentia surrendered herself to the holy blade shuddering in

her hands. Its vibrations possessed her, her bones trembling, gritted teeth chattering in her skull as she felt herself spiralling into rapture.

The daemons were almost upon her, two abreast, blocking the tunnel with the immensity of their bounding bodies. The foremost sprang at her, and a ribbed frill fanned from its collar like the wings of a dragon taking flight. The tunnel itself turned into a pair of gaping jaws, fangs bared to snatch off her head.

The Repentia danced aside, feeling the creature's bulk pass through the air as she spun, twirling her blade with lunatic dexterity, the weight of it lifting her off her feet as she launched an upward strike at the rearmost of the three daemons.

The Eviscerator cleaved the creature from its loins to its skull, parting the daemon's body like a pair of bloody drapes. Hot gore drenched her as she leapt between the two halves of its sundered flesh, pirouetting as she brought the weapon around and landed in a ready crouch. The daemon's remains liquefied as they fell, gushing like molten tallow, its body dissolving back into the blood that had summoned it from the warp.

'From the begetting of daemons, Lord Emperor deliver me,' she sang.

The other two daemon hounds had already skidded into a halt near the crumbled wall. They crouched, pawing aside broken bricks, the frills at their necks spreading and rippling as they snarled, daring her to charge them again.

The Repentia struck the first of the two daemons only a glancing blow, shearing a horn from its back, before her rage settled upon the second. She drove it up the slope of rubble, a grove of twisted rebar bristling like a phalanx of spears amid the broken rockcrete. The creature backed away, further up the slope, clashing its jaws at the droning blade, seeking an opening.

She stumbled, pain lancing her leg. Comprehension penetrated the adrenaline fog as she realised the other daemon had her armoured leg clamped in its jaws. She had let herself become flanked, though she was too consumed by rage to care. The creature's long fangs pierced metal and flesh as it chewed, but the flashes of pain only brightened the Repentia's wits. She thrust the Eviscerator's hilt down, denting its wrinkled snout with the heavy pommel, dislodging its jaws, breaking teeth. Its claws dragged a cloud of dust as it slid back down the slope under the force of her blow.

The Repentia went to swing the chainsword at the creature before it could recover, but felt the Eviscerator tugged from her grip. Her hands slid down the hilt, almost slipping from the pommel. The daemon above her had the blade in its jaws, its ragged frill flapping as it jerked and twisted, trying to wrest the weapon from her clasp.

The chainsword had been deactivated, the trigger guard dislodged when she struck the monster chewing at her leg. Now her fingers were too far down the hilt to reach the trigger. She clung to the pommel with both hands, trying to reach the switch as the hound behind her recovered, glowing eyes unblinking as it dashed back up the slope to kill her.

Clutching the hilt of her chainsword with one hand, the Repentia grabbed one of the protruding pieces of rebar, its stem still anchored in immovable rockcrete. Aiming the metal prong like a spear, she impaled the reckless monster through the hinge of its jaws, momentum driving the tip through the side of its throat, tearing a hole in its frill.

There was no yelp of pain, just a convulsion of rage as the daemon hound thrashed its head from side to side. It was trying to free itself but its fury served only to twist the metal pole and snare itself more securely. The daemon's snarls gurgled as its throat filled with ichor.

The daemon hound above her had finally retrieved the weapon and was now shaking it in its jaws, aggravated to madness by its owner's tenacity. The hilt of the Eviscerator slipped from the Repentia's grasp, dropping her onto the rubble. The other creature was pawing at the rebar wedged in its jaws, bending the rusted pole until it snapped at the stem with a twang. Too wild with bloodlust to consider its own injuries, the wounded monster sprang back up the slope. A spear of sharpened iron protruded from between its jaws as it charged at the Repentia, threatening to skewer her.

Consumed by an uncanny fury of her own, the Repentia caught the spear, the ribbed steel grinding her palms bloody as she stopped the tip inches from her eye. The daemon hound continued its charge undaunted, its vigour irrepressible as it clawed up the slope, chomping its way down the spear towards her hands.

The Repentia's chainsword clanged as it cartwheeled down the rubble, discarded by the daemon above her. The affront to her sacred weapon stimulated a fresh surge of rage.

Gripping the metal spear, she threw her weight to one side, lifting the hound's head as she wrenched the metal hooked in its jaws. She pulled, muscles screaming as the bar curved and she dragged the scrabbling monster aside, halting its advance.

The other daemon, charging at her from the side, collided with its snared twin. The impact shivered down the bar, which sheared off in the Repentia's hands. She fell back with a yelp as the daemons struggled to their feet, squirming heaps of reptilian muscle trying to claw themselves out of each other's way. But the

woman – lithe, nimble and crazed – recovered first. She threw herself on top of the wounded daemon, grabbing a horn to steady its head as she drove the broken spike in her hands deep into its molten eye, extinguishing whatever unholy spark of life lay beyond.

‘By faith and fury,’ she gasped. *‘Mors sacrificiis servire daemonium.’*

The last of the three hounds barged through the thicket of rebar as the Repentia leapt down the slope towards her fallen Eviscerator. She lost her footing but tumbled within reach of the weapon’s saw-toothed tip. Grabbing the guide bar halfway up the blade’s casing, she dragged the weapon on top of her just as the daemon hound pounced, long fangs seeking her throat like fingers.

Holding the guide bar, she thrust the blade up into the creature’s jaws. It bit down, gouging its gums as it gnawed upon the inert blade. Its molten eyes blazed as it glared down at her, splattering her cheek with blood and slobber. She struggled to occupy the creature’s slavering jaws with one hand while straining to reach the weapon’s trigger with the other. The daemon pressed down on her, still chomping at the jagged blade, its monstrous weight crushing the breath from her chest.

*In weakness, the Throne shall sustain me. A spiritu dominatus.*

Claws raked her armoured belly, tore gashes down her thigh as her fingers reached the purity seals on the crossguard.

*Despite hopelessness shall I serve You.*

The Repentia wheezed, unable to breathe beneath the monster’s massive weight.

*Despite shattered limbs shall I strive for You.*

A blood-wet finger stroked the trigger, but the daemon was too heavy, its strength irresistible.

*Despite darkness shall I seek You.*

It threw a huge paw over the blade, threatening to push it down upon the Repentia’s breathless throat.

*By struggle shall I be forgiven.*

*By death shall I be absolved.*

Black spots bloomed before her eyes as her fingers curled around the trigger.

And squeezed.

The Eviscerator sprang to life between the daemon hound’s jaws, the weapon now a shuddering lance of noise and smoke that sawed off the top half of the creature’s skull in a fountain of black blood.

The Repentia released the trigger and hauled the blade aside, dragging air into

her starved lungs as the creature's weight lifted, its spilled blood and lifeless body thawing into red smoke. She lay there awhile, feeling the pulse of her wounds, the reeking water streaming around her. Her rage melted into exhaustion and she faltered into sobs.

Absolution had eluded her once again. The realisation seemed to empty her of strength. The awful fact that she was still alive meant the God-Emperor had further need of her.

The rhythmic thump of bolter fire echoed down the tunnels.

The Repentia sat up. Sister Eunice and her squad were in trouble. Had the Traitors found them? Dizzy with pain and fatigue, she dragged herself upright, leaning on her chainsword. She shook her head to clear it, trying to pinpoint the direction of the gunfire, then staggered down the nearest tunnel.

Voices battled in her head. She had obeyed the Oath, sought mortal combat the moment the possibility arose. But in doing so she had risked the safety of the squad, jeopardised plans more important than her vow of redemption. Guilt weighed cold in her chest as she realised the truth: she had hoped to die instead of facing the consequences of abandoning Eunice and her Battle Sisters.

The thunder of bolter fire grew more distinct as she entered another tunnel. She hoisted herself up a line of metal rungs bolted to the wall, shouldered aside the heavy iron lid in the ceiling, and peered onto the baking streets outside.

A huge avian reptile gazed back at her, the same species of winged creature she had fought in the cave that morning. Its dead amber eyes were level with the pavement, blood shining as it pooled in the sun. Gaping cavities lined its chest, unmistakable evidence of explosive bolter rounds. Above the creature's remains loomed a stout cylindrical tower bearing a weathered symbol of the Administratum, each floor a vast band of broken gothic windows.

Gunfire flashed within a cavity in the wall halfway up the side of the building.

Cursing, the Repentia hurried out from the drain and loped towards the tower. She sprinted for the cover of an arched doorway as the Traitors' gunship prowled into view. It was circling the building, low enough to raise hot clouds of grit from the ground. A pair of shattered doors lay on the floor within the doorway, covered in a stampede of enormous bootprints that led into an abandoned antechamber within.

The Repentia slid inside, following the footprints along a floor strewn with ledgers and coils of ancient parchment, everything dark with a layer of grit. She picked her way through the detritus, her chainsword heavy upon her aching shoulder as she approached the riot of yells and the intermittent clatter of bolter

fire coming from within the building's interior.

Through a half-open metal door at the far end of the antechamber, she saw a bearded thug standing on a metal balcony, his back to her. He wore a filthy vest and carried an autogun. With his other hand, he shook a flashing cleaver as he howled his approval at whatever drama blazed within. Hefting her Eviscerator, she slipped through the door, but her boot crunched the remains of a shattered servo-skull lying on the floor.

The cultist turned, eyes wide at the sight of the hooded spectre whispering towards him, pale limbs streaked with blood.

He lashed out with the cleaver, but the Repentia stopped the blade dead with the hilt of her chainsword. She grabbed his thick beard, yanking him forward as she slammed her forehead into the bridge of his nose with a damp crunch. The cultist staggered, his head tossed back, spouting blood as momentum sent him toppling over the guard rail.

The Repentia watched him tumble head over heels down a seemingly bottomless well that gaped beneath the balcony. The pit spanned the circumference of the tower, tiered with circular balconies as it descended a dozen storeys below ground.

She blinked the cultist's blood from her eyes and looked up. A dozen more circular tiers ascended the tower's interior, a defunct servo-crane built into the ceiling trailing chains above the abyss.

The daemonkin were scattered over several levels. She saw the hulking Traitor Space Marines striding among the pipes and upturned auto-trolleys, contemptuous of the explosive gunfire raining down on them. Their gibbering acolytes swarmed about them like rats, yelling, laughing, firing about them seemingly at random with a jumble of low-calibre pistols and carbines.

The Battle Sisters were huddled a few balconies from the roof, the bloody carcass of another winged reptile draped nearby. The Repentia winced as she realised that Sister Eunice must have stumbled upon the creature's nest in her search for safer ground. The ensuing gunfire had clearly alerted the heretics.

The Sisters were now huddled among a stack of broken cogitators, three of the warriors struggling to provide covering fire for the rest of the squad to advance up a ramp onto the level above. But the heretics' fire was relentless in its ferocity, allowing the squad no quarter.

'In Lucia's name,' the Repentia sang, invoking *The Dirge of the Martyr*, the prayer that would be her elegy. 'Spirits of Sisters fallen, I call upon thee.'

She snapped down the trigger lock and her Eviscerator rang a dirge of its own,

declaring the arrival of its mistress.

The Repentia bolted from her hiding place and raced across the ground-floor balcony, swooping her blade through both a cultist and the pipe behind him. Both her cut and her timing were perfect, as the severed column crushed a charging heretic. She vaulted over the fallen pipe as it rolled beneath her, boots splashing through the Traitor's blood before ascending the first set of stairs.

She saw one of the Battle Sisters high above peek through the railings of the balcony. The warrior administered a precise shot through the eye of a whooping cultist on the level below, detonating his skull. Another bolter shrieked from elsewhere, its wail dominating the Traitors' clamour like the growl of an alpha predator cowing the rest of the pack. The shot drilled through the Battle Sister's cover and blew her apart, drenching the walls in her blood.

The heretics bayed like dogs, their chant echoing about the tower's interior.

'Blood! Blood! Blood for the Blood God!'

The Repentia curdled with rage as she glared up at the bareheaded monster that had fired the shot. The heretics' champion was a walking monolith, strong enough to steady the recoil of his bolter with a single hand. In his other paw, he carried a grotesque two-handed axe. He swung it idly as he trudged up a ramp, climbing another balcony closer to the Battle Sisters and the holy book they would give their lives to protect.

'Replenish my limbs,' sang the Repentia as she sprang onto the next balcony. 'Guide my onerous blade.'

She sighted three more enemies and twisted the hilt of her chainsword, shielding herself as their autogun fire sparked against the flat of her whirring blade. She heard a stray round thump through her hood, punching off part of her ear as she closed on the shooters. The bodies of the three cultists offered her blade no resistance, as if her stroke had passed through nothing more than smoke. Drenched in their blood, the Repentia pounded up the next set of metal stairs, indifferent to the hiss of bullets in the air, the clang and whine of their impact upon the pipes and walls around her.

'Restore my faltering spirit with hymns of glorious wrath.'

As she emerged onto the next balcony, she saw the heretic champion bellowing at her from the level above, directing his troops towards her.

The Repentia ducked as the sword of a Traitor flashed overhead from behind. Uncoiling herself, she drove the hilt of her chainsword into his chin, opening the brute's stance just enough for her to cartwheel the blade down onto his neck. It sawed hungrily from shoulder to waist.

The two halves of her attacker parted to reveal another Traitor Space Marine standing behind him. He raised his bolter, but her blade was already snarling towards his wrist. The heretic's gun somersaulted through the air. His own severed hand convulsed against the trigger, driving three explosive rounds into its owner's chest.

'Clothe me in the armour of faith,' she screamed. 'Let grievous wounds touch my naked flesh as naught but falling snow.'

Breathless, she stumbled onto the balcony where she had seen the Traitor champion. Her head felt like air, her chest tight, an ominous numbness seeping into her left arm.

Someone leapt onto her back from behind a stack of parchment caskets. Sharp teeth found the side of her throat. The pain electrified her. Kicking the balcony railing, she shoved herself back, slamming the crazed cultist into an office door. She felt his skull ring against metal, tearing the teeth from her throat. She spun around, wild with rage, and threw her elbow deep into his jaw, smashing it askew. The cultist went limp and she caught him by the jacket, hauling him around to face two more heretics now firing at her from further around the balcony.

She ran at them, trusting speed and fury would give her force enough to hold the cultist's body aloft for the few seconds she needed.

'Yet should I fall, my blood in martyrdom shall flow everlasting and drown the heretic foe.'

She felt bullets thudding dead flesh, soaking up the barrage as she closed on them in seconds. Hurling the corpse aside, she revealed herself with a horizontal slash.

Two headless bodies dropped to their knees as she dashed towards the Traitor champion waiting behind them.

The bareheaded monster raised his bolter.

'In Lucia's name,' she shrieked.

She smashed the bolter aside with her chainsword and crashed into him with bone-breaking force, determined to drive him off the edge of the balcony and into the great pit beyond.

It was like hitting a wall, the impact snapping something in her shoulder. But it was enough.

Unbalanced by the ferocity of the Repentia's attack, the Traitor champion lost his footing. The guard rail broke, bending as it gave way behind him, ushering them both into the abyss below.

*‘Absolvo me in mortem.’*

No sooner had she spoken the words than her face slammed into the Traitor’s chest, the impact whipping the breath from her body. The tower’s pit had not claimed them. The Repentia rolled onto a floor that should not have been there. She snorted blood through a broken nose, her vision shimmering with tears of pain as she tried to comprehend what had happened. She lay on a large platform, knotted with bolts and rivets. A rack of cables reached far to the ceiling, strung against the wall, wound around a winch seized with rust.

By the Throne! She had landed on top of a cargo lift, the tower’s great pit still spiralling twenty storeys beneath the ledge upon which she stood.

Through the chains swaying and clinking overhead, she could see the Battle Sisters now manoeuvring towards the roof. The heretics’ gunfire had diminished enough to allow the squad to retreat. The Repentia had bought them a chance for survival. As a reward, the Emperor had preserved her, for reasons made gloriously clear as the Traitor champion rose behind her. The heretic growled with laughter as he hefted his two-handed axe.

The Repentia grinned up at him, wincing as she retrieved her Eviscerator, her muscles tightening around fractured ribs.

She looked upon her foe with horrified awe. The Repentia was a tall, powerful figure, but even she barely reached this monster’s chest, its warped armour a profanity of spikes and brass. The Traitor’s bald head was the colour of drowned flesh, his dark eyes gleaming like beads of blood. He leered at her, fingering a long boning knife at his belt.

‘A skull,’ he hissed through several rows of needle-teeth. ‘A skull for Carvax.’

The Repentia sprang at him, feeling polluted by receipt of his name. But Carvax moved with that deceptive swiftness of the Space Marines, lightning-fast for all his bulk. He kicked her in the chest before she could strike.

A shock wave of pain blew through her body and she landed upon the platform several feet away, a wheezing wreck. She felt the elevator cabin shake as he ran at her. Rage alone animated her in time to snatch her chainsword and roll to one side as the axe cleaved the air behind her. Carvax growled with frustration.

Acting on pure reckless instinct, the Repentia thrust the hilt of her Eviscerator under Carvax’s wrist. The manoeuvre sought to lever one of his hands from the axe as he turned, opening his guard for a counter-strike. But the Traitor’s grip was impossibly strong, forcing her to disengage before she was dragged off her feet. This grinning, drooling heretic was a thing of savage force, yet might be as susceptible to an opponent’s cunning as any beast.

He chortled. ‘You think battlecraft can aid you against the favoured of Khorne?’

The Repentia bridled her rage as she darted out of reach of another murderous stroke.

‘In Lucia’s name,’ she chanted. ‘Spirits of martyrs fallen, I call upon thee.’

She twirled her Eviscerator, riding the momentum of her retreat.

‘Replenish my limbs,’ she continued. ‘Guide my onerous blade.’

Carvax’s eyes glittered with interest.

‘Your rage is transcendent,’ he crooned. ‘Summon it all. I want every ounce of it. Throw it at me. Show me the power of your rotting saviour.’

She fought to restrain her fury as he taunted her, willing her body into obedience as she made a feint. Carvax took the bait eagerly. His axe swooped down, but the Repentia had already spun aside, slashing his vulnerable flank. Her chainsword snarled off a slice of his pauldron, revealing succulent rings of muscle, bone sheared to the marrow.

Carvax bellowed as the Repentia spun again and again, lashing him left and right, screaming, possessed, her rage unleashed.

‘Restore my faltering spirit with hymns of glorious wrath,’ she sang, breathless.

Sparks burst about the Traitor, fireworks in miniature, as he struggled to parry her barrage of blows. But the Repentia’s frenzied brain warned her too late to vary the pattern of her onslaught. With a skilful twist of his axe, Carvax caught her weapon at the crossguard. He paused to let her struggle, smirking to see her feet slipping upon the floor as she fought to move him, his strength incontestable.

‘That’s it, little sister,’ the Traitor Space Marine said. ‘Rage for me. Warm your blood for Khorne.’

Carvax swung the tangled weapons as one, driving the whirring tip of her Eviscerator deep into the metal floor, twisting the weapon until its teeth jammed in the dense layers of plasteel under their feet. The chainsword’s gears whined; its motor convulsed and smoked. The Repentia’s weapon was stuck.

As she struggled to free it, Carvax swatted her aside with a contemptuous laugh. The blow caught her jaw, stars dazzling her as she reeled. Her vision cleared and she saw the heretic untangle his axe.

Spitting aside blood and the crumbs of a tooth, the Repentia ran at him. He looked bemused as he pulled his weapon free only to find the woman ducking at his waist, as if she meant to somehow wrestle him into submission.

The Repentia unsheathed the boning knife from among the tools of butchery

clattering at his belt. Before Carvax could stop her, she had slithered through the columns of his legs and stabbed the blade up to the hilt in the back of his knee.

Black blood burst over the Repentia's fist as Carvax bellowed like a wounded bull. She thought she could feel the hilt of the Chaos weapon squirm in her grip, like a huge maggot striving to burrow deeper into its master's flesh. The Traitor Space Marine plunged to one knee and the blade broke off in her hand.

She cast the hilt away, repulsed, and returned to her half-buried Eviscerator. She tugged desperately at the immovable hilt. Carvax rose, favouring his good leg as he fingered the awful wound in the other. He let out a warbling sigh, seemingly enthralled by the sight of his own blood dripping from his armoured fingers.

The Repentia screamed in frustration as she threw her weight down on the chainsword's hilt. The weapon shifted, the teeth shook, straining to run, but it was not enough.

They both looked up as a storm of heavy bolter fire strafed the uppermost balcony, releasing dust and debris from the crane, swaying the chains beneath it. A huge, predatory shadow swept along the windows of the upper levels. The Repentia's heart leapt at the thought of the reinforcements promised by Sister Eunice. But the blasts were intermingled with female cries of alarm and rage.

'Behold,' purred Carvax. 'Our gunship has caught your sisters trying to escape.'

It was true. The Repentia could see a handful of armoured figures re-emerge onto the topmost balcony, hurrying behind meagre cover as the remaining heretics ascended the levels beneath them. Once again, they were trapped.

Carvax approached, limping as he swung his axe in anticipation.

'Soon the book shall be ours,' he said. 'Its scriptures shall be reconsecrated in the name of the Skull Throne, and your captured sisters shall administer that blessing with their gushing throats.'

The Repentia finally abandoned her weapon. Carvax called to her, his hand extended.

'Join us, little sister,' he said. 'You have renounced your sisterhood already. Now let your wrath win you glories undreamed.'

The Repentia fled for the edge of platform. The Traitor limped after her, the entire cabin shuddering beneath his loping gait.

'Nowhere to run, little sister,' he snarled. 'Give yourself to Khorne.'

The Repentia dived off the platform.

The immense pit yawned to receive her.

Carvax strained to reach her, slicing the air, desperate to obliterate his opponent

before gravity could do it for him. But suicide was not the Repentia's intention.

She caught one of the smaller chains suspended from the crane high above, flinging her legs to steer herself in a wide arc. Though starved, her body remained dense with muscle, the Repentia's weight providing more than enough impetus to swing her back towards the other side of the cabin roof.

Carvax's frantic pursuit had almost carried him over the edge of the platform. He was pulling himself back from the ledge as the Repentia's feet hit the wall. Her powerful shoulders bunched as she pulled the chain taut and ran several paces along the wall.

When the cabin was in range, she leapt down, concentrating her weight as she landed feet first on the hilt of her Eviscerator.

The impact levered the weapon free with a screech of torn metal and the blade resumed its roar. The Repentia scooped up the hilt, but Carvax was already upon her, too enraged to toy with her any longer. His ghoulish face was aghast with bloodlust, his strokes relentless. The Repentia could only parry every strike, each heavier and more resounding than the last. She felt herself buckle a little further with each successive blow.

*Yet should I fall, my blood in martyrdom shall flow everlasting and drown the heretic foe.*

She angled her weapon and braced herself. His axe struck her blade, hurling her into the cables embedded in the wall beside them.

The Repentia raised herself, each breath a torment. She could hear the cries of the Battle Sisters along the balconies near the roof. Did they even know she was down here?

Her muscles were torn and spent, exhaustion draining even her rage. She had one strike left in her dwindling core. This last, defiant spasm of violence would see the Oath satisfied, her destiny fulfilled. She could never land a killing blow against the Traitor champion, but striving regardless was all that mattered. The Emperor demanded that she earn her repentance by battling until her last quantum of strength had been spent. Only then would He grant her absolution for her sins.

She glimpsed the lurking shadow of the Traitors' gunship, flashing heavy bolter fire through the windows high above, blocking the Battle Sisters' escape across the roof.

Carvax gathered himself, drool trailing from his needle-teeth as he raised his axe over his shoulder.

The Repentia saw blades flashing in the sun as the mob of Traitor Space

Marines and cultists closed in on the last of the squad.

The Repentia revved her chainsword and Carvax charged, red eyes bulging with eagerness, finally set to annihilate his prey.

Expelling the last of her vigour, the Repentia swung her Eviscerator into the rack of cables beside her. Sparks gushed as she buried the blade in the wall.

The cabin tipped forward, unbalancing Carvax, his stride faltering as the chainsword's teeth sheared through the first of the metal ropes, sending it wriggling up towards the ceiling. The Repentia left her weapon lodged in the wall, chewing its way through the rest of the cables as she dived again at the dangling chains. Her sweat-slicked hands caught one of the huge iron links as her keening chainsword finally released the elevator cabin. Both the cabin and Carvax plunged howling into the pit below.

The Repentia climbed, dazed, astonished by what she had just done. She eventually heard a resounding crash from a dozen storeys below, followed by the discrete crunch of sundered meat and crimson power armour.

She felt nothing, absorbed in watching her own hands gripping link after link, her body seeming to move of its own volition. The immensity of the chain concealed her as she ascended, unnoticed by the heretics and the Battle Sisters exchanging fire around her. She perceived the combatants as ghosts, beings from a dimension beyond her comprehension or concern. Reaching the crane, she crept along its frame and squeezed up through its mouldering cockpit.

The Repentia eventually tumbled out onto the roof, finding herself surrounded by the broken buildings of the manufactorum, beyond which lay the jungle. The gunship rumbled below, bringing thunder to an empty blue sky. A walkway led into a neighbouring ruin. Nearby, the corpse of a Battle Sister lay sprawled upon a sheet of her own blood, the metal floor chewed by heavy bolter fire where the squad had tried to make their escape.

Moving to the body, she was beyond rage, tranquil in her emptiness. Her consciousness had been stripped, every thought and emotion evaporated, revealing the naked circuitry of battle protocols indoctrinated by a lifetime of prayer and ritual.

The dead Battle Sister's Godwyn-De'az-pattern bolter lay nearby, its casing white, splashed with blood. The Repentia had not touched such a weapon since speaking the Oath. A nameless exile taking up such a holy item would be tantamount to sacrilege. She lifted the weapon anyway, reciting the words of a combat blessing she had not spoken in years.

‘Praise unto Him who bestows this weapon, woe unto them who oppose Him.’

The bolter's incredible weight reminded her that the weapon's recoil would likely break her arm without the protection of power armour.

'Blessed be this weapon's purpose, blessed be she who serves it.'

She released the sickle-shaped clip – over half a load remained – then moved as though hypnotised towards the edge of the roof.

*'Servitio ad mortem.'*

The Traitors' gunship nosed at the windows two storeys below. Its hull glistened red as it floated on its jets like the carcass of sea monster.

Bracing the bolter upon the tower's parapet, she lined up a probing shot at the cockpit roof. The weapon's recoil knocked her backwards, almost to the floor. She recovered immediately, settled again and fired several more shots, each sparking harmlessly off the hull. The gunship eventually lifted its nose, irritated. She let it see her, then backed away, switched the weapon to burst mode and waited for the gunship to rise into view, her face expressionless.

Broken bone grated in her shoulder as she cradled the bolter and assumed a ready stance. She would empty the clip the second the cockpit rose into view.

This would achieve nothing, but it mattered not.

If she somehow avoided obliteration when those heavy bolters returned fire, then she would leap from the wall, onto the ship and attempt to club her way through the cockpit window with the butt of the bolter.

This too would achieve nothing, but it mattered not.

Relentless violence was her sole recourse, futility and death her only rewards.

The gunship rose into view, the ship's power-armoured pilots peering curiously at her through the scarred glass of the cockpit.

'I stand before you a Sister Repentia,' she croaked as she levelled the bolter. 'Until absolution finds me once more.'

The gunship exploded before she could fire.

The Repentia was hurled backwards as her world filled with a billowing cloud of fire and smoke, the blast reverberating through her bones and pulling the bolter from her hands.

She blinked to find herself on her back, gargling blood as she stared into a smoking sky. Her ears sang a shrill monotonous tune. A length of twisted metal stood in her throat. She willed her hands to paw the thing away, but her limbs ignored her.

The smoke parted to reveal the majesty of an Imperial Thunderhawk, the draught of its thrusters spraying waves of blinding dust as it lowered to land beside her.

The Repentia's eyelids drooped, her body pulsing in synch with her fading heartbeat. She felt herself sinking into the floor, melting into blackness.

*Absolvo me in mortem.*

The ambient hum of engines told her she had woken aboard a warship. The white figures of the Sisters Hospitaller drifted like ghosts in the gloom. They attended a row of beds, each ensconced within a steel archway. Candles glimmered in alcoves, the air filled with medicinal incense and the murmur of prayer. The Repentia's hands went to her face, shocked to find she had been stripped of her hood. Her fingers found long hair. Her shaven bristles had grown almost down to her eyes. As her thoughts regained focus they coalesced into a single, devastating question: why was she still alive?

'You're awake,' said a voice beside her. 'Praise the Throne.'

Sister Eunice was seated beside her, clutching a rosary, stirred from her prayers.

Too weak to sit up, the Repentia turned her head away, feeling something catch in her throat. She felt some kind of metal plug installed at the base of her neck, its surface meshed like the grille of a vox-caster. She tried to speak, but managed only a strangled choke.

'Shrapnel,' said Eunice gently. 'From the Traitors' gunship. But fear not. The medicae have been instructed to restore your voice. You shall have need of it soon enough.'

The Repentia was confused. Why restore the voice of a doomed penitent?

'You abided by the Oath,' said Eunice. 'You sought death above all else, rightly disobeyed an order I was wrong to ask of you. I see that now. Forgive me.'

The Repentia shook her head, held her ears, trying to shut out the madness she was hearing. Sister Eunice was wrong, so terribly wrong.

Eunice rose, impassioned. 'If you had not battled the daemon hounds, killed the heretic champion, distracted their gunship, then I would have been slaughtered along with the rest of my squad and the scriptures would have been perverted to the advantage of the Ruinous Powers.'

She took the Repentia's hand.

'Your life has been touched by the Emperor's grace,' said Eunice. 'Canoness Ingrid agrees. We have prayed several weeks for guidance and are now in agreement. Your survival has been classified a miracle. The Emperor has tested you and clearly deemed your journey of repentance to be at an end. *Domine, libra nos.*'

Eunice bowed her head and the Repentia was horrified to hear her speak the

opening canto of *The Absolution of the Penitent*.

‘Before the Emperor you sinned,’ she said, still gripping the Repentia’s hand. ‘Beyond forgiveness. Beyond forbearance. Beyond mercy.’

The Repentia struggled, trying to cry out, but her mutilated throat stifled her protestations. Eunice continued, unmoved.

‘We turned our backs upon you. We cast off your armour and your arms. You left our company of your own free will and by your will you have returned.’

The Repentia kicked weakly beneath the sheets, failing to summon strength enough to free herself from Eunice’s grasp. One of the Hospitallers appeared by her side and needled a sedative into the Repentia’s arm. A softening warmth spread through her body, but did nothing to quieten her raging heart.

‘You have found the Emperor’s forgiveness in the darkest places of the night.’

Paralysed, the Repentia felt tears flooding either side of her skull, pooling in her ears.

*You are wrong, mistress. I was weak. I should have stayed, fallen beneath the heretic’s axe as the Oath demanded. But I didn’t. I saved myself instead. I broke my vow to save you and your Sisters.*

The Repentia silently screamed her confession.

*I knew, mistress. Deep down, I knew as I climbed that chain towards the rooftop. I knew that I was obeying not the Oath, not the Emperor, but my own heart. God-Emperor, forgive me, but I yearned to stand once more among the Adepta Sororitas. I tired of exile, of loneliness. Better to live and fight beside the Sisters of Battle – even for a fleeting moment of glory – than to die a filthy, nameless pariah. Such is my blasphemy, God-Emperor. Throne of Earth, forgive me.*

‘You lay before me a Sister of Battle once more,’ continued Eunice. ‘By the grace of the God-Emperor, absolution has found you.’

*Mistress, no. No! I am but a craven coward. This is a mistake, a travesty. I have yet to submit myself entirely to the will of the Emperor. I am weak, selfish, corrupt. These sins are as dire as those that saw me exiled.*

*God-Emperor, heed my words! Is this to be my punishment? Absolution undeserved? Am I to endure life knowing that loneliness was too great a burden for me to bear? Give me a sign, my lord. A sign!*

Sister Eunice leaned to kiss her forehead.

‘You are nameless to us no longer, Sister Adamanthea.’

Her mechanised speech roared over the din of bolter fire, reverberating through

the compact loudhailer fitted within her gorget as she read aloud a field-translation of *The Scriptures of Arch-Confessor Maxus Hurn*. A shot ricocheted off the pauldron of her black power armour yet she continued.

‘For ye are likened to the reapers of the harvest,’ she sang, her brazen voice galvanising the hearts of all who heard her. ‘Ye blessed few are sworn to shear a vast and bitter field so that the soil may sprout anew.’

The Dominions chorused the words of their Sister Superior as they marched through the boiling smoke to see a line of crimson hounds galloping towards them.

‘In His name,’ she yelled. ‘*Perdere illos.*’

The Battle Sisters’ blessed bolters shuddered in their hands, blazing streams of spent shell casings as the reptilian beasts burst open before them.

Sister Adamanthea recalled a battle with three such creatures long, long ago. Her recitation faltered as a familiar preoccupation returned to haunt her. She had once failed the Emperor, rejected the glorious death in battle that she had sworn to find. The shame of it pained her like a wound. Her canoness had dismissed her every confession on the subject, praising her humility while prevailing upon her the need to accept absolution and move on.

Stone-faced, Sister Adamanthea and her Dominions crested the scorched hill and surveyed yet another benighted battlefield. Word of her arrival with the sacred book had spread along every front in the Abrogatum Campaign. Packs of revived Astra Militarum were now driving back the heretic foe, red las-fire stitching the smoking darkness for miles.

Another force emerged from the murk nearby: Traitor Space Marines, trampling the smouldering remains of the flesh hounds, bellowing promises of pain and devastation as they charged the Battle Sisters.

The Dominions looked to Sister Adamanthea, impatient for her signal to fire. Their commander said nothing, her face betraying not a glimmer of the rage she felt boiling within her. She calmly stowed the book at her hip, feeling a familiar surge deep in her belly as she retrieved the Eviscerator from her back.

Disappointed that the Emperor had sent her a mere dozen heretics to kill, she leapt alone into their midst with a private prayer.

*Until absolution finds me.*

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Alec Worley** is a well-known comics and science fiction and fantasy author, with numerous publications to his name. He is an avid fan of Warhammer 40,000 and has written many short stories for Black Library including 'Stormseeker', 'Whispers' and 'Repentia'. He lives and works in London.

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



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.'

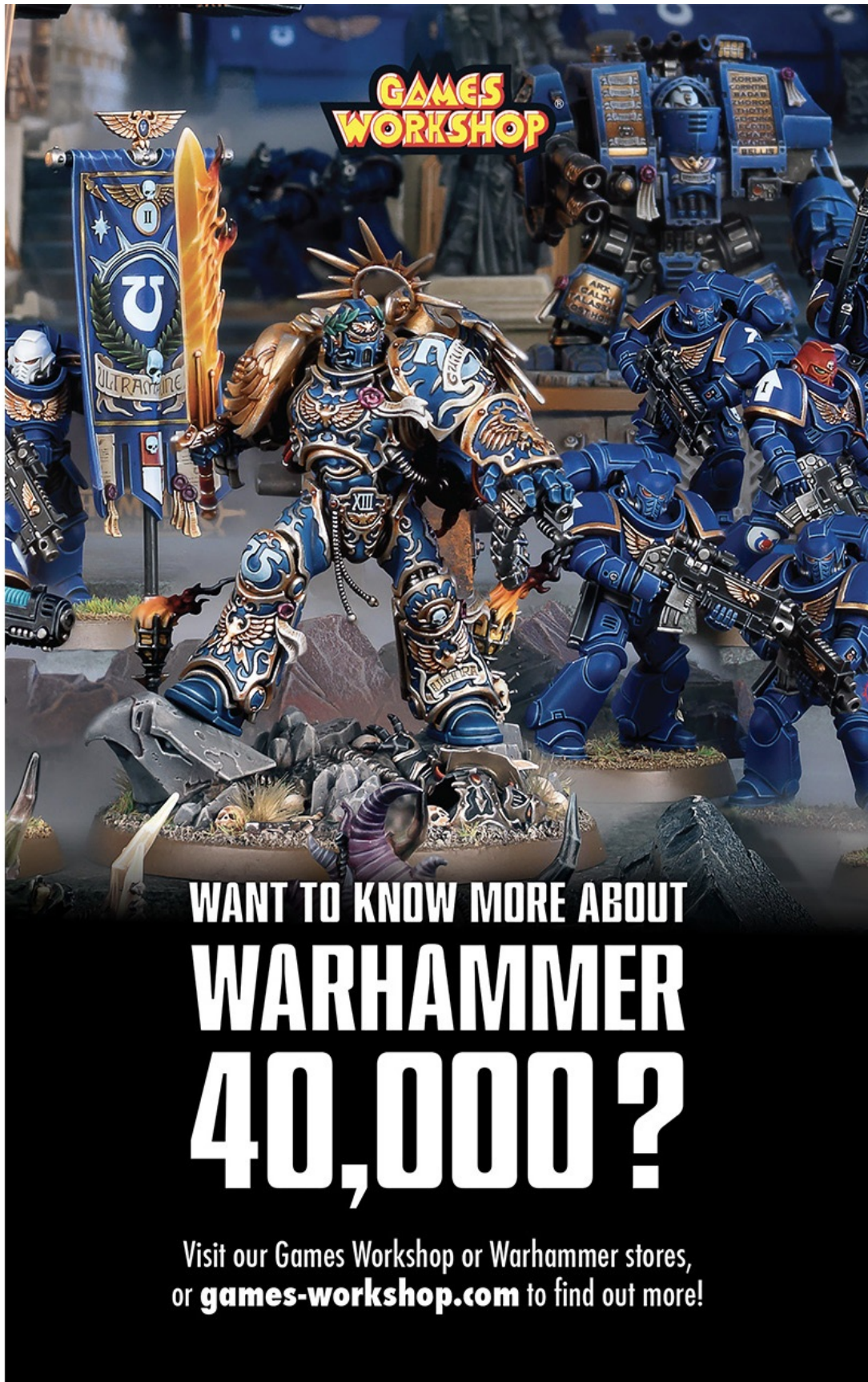
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Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.

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ISBN: 978-1-78030-909-5

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