

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



**AN ADEPTA SORORITAS STORY**

# **MARTYR'S END**

**ALEC WORLEY**

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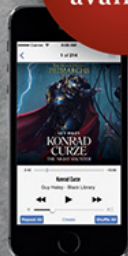
ALEC WORLEY

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An Extract from 'Requiem Infernal'

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# MARTYR'S END

*By Alec Worley*

It was like dancing with a wild animal. Her partner was a beast of noise and steel almost as tall as she. Its whizzing fangs were a hurricane. The purity seals stamped from tip to pommel were medals from a lifetime of shared adventure.

She twirled the colossal weapon, savouring its thunder. A brief snarl as it cleaved another sapling of meat and bone, then on again it roared, spitting blood and smoke. She spiralled after it, her armoured body sweeping perilously close to those whirring teeth, fearless as she guided the blade towards its next meal. Where the weapon led, she followed, breathless with delight.

Her streamlined power armour made the Eviscerator feel absurdly light in her hands. The bodyglove of servo-muscle and sensor relays she wore beneath her ceramite lent her a strength that felt like an everlasting miracle. Another xenos savage lunged at her, its serrated beak snapping at her face. She swept her attacker in half, and on she whirled. In days past, back when she was armoured in nothing but the crimson rags of the penitent, the shuddering weight of her chainsword would stitch agony into her shoulders. How she had welcomed that torment, let it feed her rage the way kindling fuels a fire. She had let her foes scream on her behalf.

Another spindly reptilian spun to face her, yellow eyes glaring, hair a thicket of rattling quills. She coiled, tightening like a spring, as the xenos threw out its spindly rifle in the futile hope of halting its execution. The chainsword came down in a guillotine stroke. She paused to let the blade feed. Dark green blood churned, washing her gauntlets up to the elbows,

warming her cheeks. Nothing else moved in her periphery as she spun back into a ready position. The monster in her hands growled like an empty belly.

Blood dripped from Sister Adamanthea's lashes as she sought another foe. She saw nothing left but a harvest of limbs and strewn viscera glistening along the shallow canyon. The sun strained to see through a haze of dust and ash, the miasma veiling a distant, glowing pattern of blue and yellow tracer fire. The endless volleys sounded like the burble of insects from up here, though the canyon still trembled with the boom of munitions. The tremors shook the banks of ash either side of the gully until the air smoked with powder.

Adamanthea's synthetic roar reverberated through the loud hailer fitted to her gorget, the device plugged into the augmetics that replaced her ruined larynx:

'Is that all you have for us?'

Though her metallic voice rang like drawn steel, her words sounded more like a plea. Her surviving Dominions looked up at her, startled. She felt her body sag once more inside her armour, until it felt as though it were the only thing keeping her standing. The baking air stifled her once again.

She snorted and spat a wad of blackened phlegm at the xenos' remains. They had descended like startled bats, a tide pouring over a shelf of black rock. Their ferocious ambush was a welcome change from the tactics of their masters, scurrying xenos cowards who favoured punishing volleys of plasma from as far away as possible. They had robbed Adamanthea of at least twenty Dominions in the past ten days alone. White-blue bolts would strike out of nowhere, lancing the lenses in their visors or joints in their armour, blowing skulls and bodies apart. And those damned drones. God-Emperor curse those blasphemous automatons, which seemed to throw themselves into the path of every volley, denying Adamanthea her prey.

Canoness Lydia had assured her that it would take only a few days to purge the colony. Adamanthea had been leading hunting missions for over thirty days now, endless sorties prowling the flanks in search of xenos walkers. Since undergoing the Rites of Restitution, her arms, armour and name officially restored, she had carried out the Emperor's will across several warzones. Those missions had resulted in swift, exultant victories, the troops inspired by her presence. For was she not a *Viventem*

*Miraculum*, a living symbol of the Emperor's will? Was she not the Repentia who had achieved the impossible by surviving her penance and earning forgiveness?

Adamanthea grimaced.

Iron clanked upon ceramite as her Dominions regrouped, hefting their meltas, visors clamped shut against the airborne ash. There were eight of them left. One of them kneeled to bestow a swift obsequy over their only loss. A more dignified end than most are afforded, thought Adamanthea. These past few weeks had been a carnival of blood and shredded flesh, of bodies blown inside out by molten plasma, every casualty offering some fresh variety of horror. Broken fingers, coils of offal, staring faces, all trodden underfoot.

The canoness had apologised for assigning her a squad so young for a mission of such importance. Though trained from girlhood and selected as Dominions for their bullish aggression, none among them had spent more than a year out of the convent. She reminded Adamanthea that the smell of the battlefield alone had a way of demoralising the inexperienced. The *Viventem Miraculum* must set them an inspirational example.

Adamanthea raised her Eviscerator in awkward salute.

'We are His blade.' Her metallic voice trembled. 'We are His will.'

The Battle Sisters responded in perfect synch, voices bright with obedience. 'And we shall not suffer the xenos to live! Whatever the cost, we shall afford it!'

Adamanthea turned away, leaning on her chainsword. Her leg still burned from the plasma blast that had breached her armour a week ago. A punishing rotation of missions left little time for flesh to heal. Not that her nightmares allowed her much sleep. Indeed, they had begun to follow her into the waking world. Familiar faces would smile up at her from among the dead, memories of a sin so mortal it defied forgiveness.

She found herself glaring at the severed head of one of the xenos fighters. A purple tongue protruded like a vast slug from its shattered beak. She felt her stomach tighten at the thought of such ugliness polluting His pristine galaxy.

*I shall not suffer the xenos to live. I shall strike it from Thy sight.*

As a little girl at the schola progenium she had been taught to think of that mantra as a nail in her skull. Every repetition was a hammer blow that

would drive the Emperor's wisdom deeper into her brain, extinguishing every doubt.

*Whatever the cost, I shall afford it.*

The creature's skull burst beneath her ceramite boot. This was her duty, to obliterate any such filth before it could offend His sight. She felt a rush of hatred so intense it left her dizzy. She tried to steady her mind with prayer, but her attention drifted like smoke. She felt hollow, a wraith haunting a suit of black armour, steering it into the next mission and the next, chasing the forgiveness that would finally lay it to rest.

'Get down!'

A cry brought Adamanthea out of her trance. Her Dominions were scrambling for the cover of the eastern slope. Sister Marianne was running towards her, her visor open, screaming. She crashed into Adamanthea, driving the Dominion Superior to the ground just as a pair of searing projectiles criss-crossed overhead with a vicious snap. Adamanthea heard the delayed thump of rifles firing. The snipers were close, surely closer than was wise. She grinned as she and Marianne scrambled to join the others huddled along the ridge.

There was fear in Marianne's eyes as she nestled beside her commander. Adamanthea had fallen into helpless laughter. Filtered through her hailer, it sounded like a blade sawing through metal.

'Reverend Mother?'

Adamanthea gritted her teeth. Her heart pounded. 'Thank you, Marianne.'

The girl's face brightened as if she had just received a blessing.

'They're retreating out of range,' someone called. It was Sister Iris, auspex in hand.

Those skirmishers were likely protecting the snipers' position, thought Adamanthea. And they must have expected their guardians to prevail. For only now were they retreating, pausing momentarily to take a shot of opportunity at Adamanthea as she stood gawping like a simpleton.

'Sister Iris,' she said. 'Patch me their position. Tell me the little bastards are still in range. Tell me!'

As she spoke, a familiar voice addressed her through her vox-bead. Adamanthea winced in annoyance. It was Canoness Lydia.

*'Sister Adamanthea. Your status, please.'*

'Still ascending east into the hills, Reverend Canoness. Taking sniper fire,

but have it under control.’

She heard the canoness splutter in disbelief. *‘You were supposed to have secured your position over an hour ago, Sister!’*

Adamanthea was studying a miniature hololith that had sprung to life on her gauntlet, auspex coordinates received from Sister Iris. A green wireframe described the terrain overlooking their position, a rocky hill crowned with towers of gnarled stone. The image shrank and revolved, focusing upon a cluster of dots flashing in retreat. They were following the base of the nearest column of rock, heading for the safety of the other side of the hill. A xenos sniper and its drones, all well within melta-range and moving tantalisingly slow.

*‘Have you forgotten you are hunting their commander, Adamanthea? Its death could end this battle within days.’*

‘I have not forgotten, Reverend Canoness.’ Adamanthea signalled the others to follow as she hunkered further along the canyon wall. ‘Their artillery overturned our Rhino. We were forced to advance on foot.’

Guided by the hololith at her wrist, Adamanthea was heading towards a break in the ridge. She could already see a slope of rocks and sand high enough to climb up onto the hill above.

*‘Yet field reports tell me that you have been deviating from your assigned objective.’*

Adamanthea smirked. She had indeed led her Dominions on a minor detour from their route since crawling from the wreckage of the transport. They had blindsided a squad of xenos rats. The action had cost four of her squad, but they had routed the enemy entirely. Adamanthea recalled shearing three of the fleeing creatures in half at a single stroke, sending ruptured limbs cartwheeling like fireworks. How the air had glittered with blood.

‘Target of opportunity, Reverend Canoness,’ she said, her voice a breathless wheeze.

*‘Casualties?’*

Adamanthea glanced back at the eight Battle Sisters lumbering behind her.

‘Acceptable,’ said Adamanthea, feeling the squad’s faith in her radiating like heat. She imagined the fleeing xenos sniper glancing at its own scanner, watching a queue of blips quickly drawing alongside its position.

*'I hope so, Sister,' said the canoness. 'We need a full squad intercepting that battlesuit. If the xenos abomination is allowed to penetrate our flank, it could tear a line straight across the field.'*

Adamanthea fancied she could sense the sniper's alien heart palpitating in terror, knowing it was moments away from suffering the Emperor's wrath.

She reached the slope and signalled for the others to halt. She dispelled the map, having committed its features to memory. There was minimal cover up there, just a few ridges of brittle rock. Their targets would open fire the second they advanced. This action would cost her. But what did it matter? Was this not the sacred purpose for which He had spared her? She knew as well as He that she was a Repentia still, that some sins were beyond forgiveness. The God-Emperor had granted her clemency only that she might know how unworthy she was to bear it. True forgiveness resided only in death. So why else would He have granted her a squad if not for them to join her in glorious martyrdom?

*'I'm patching you a revised interception point, Adamanthea.'*

She felt almost weightless, her hunger for combat wrenching her from the mire of exhaustion in which she had languished for weeks. A headlong run at a xenos sniper was surely suicide, but the Emperor had preserved her against far greater odds. She was His living miracle, after all. She was part of a plan more infinite than any battlefield skirmish. She was His sacred executioner, the bane of all xenos. Why else had He spared her life, if not to carry out His will – perhaps even His alone?

The canyon shook again, casting grit into her eyes.

*'Your new objective is ten minutes from your current location, Adamanthea. I expect you to reach it within five, is that clear?'*

*'Yes, Reverend Canoness.'*

I shall not suffer the xenos to live, she thought. I shall strike it from Thy sight.

*'I am instructing you to secure that location and intercept their commander, not swat every xenos insect that buzzes your way, is that also clear?'*

*'Yes, Reverend Canoness.'*

Whatever the cost, she thought, I shall afford it.

*'Temper your aggression and honour your objective, Sister Adamanthea.'*

*The Throne's gaze is upon you.'*

Adamanthea looked up at the white eye of the sun peering down at this world through the grey fog.

'Ave Emperor,' she said. Canoness Lydia signed off.

Adamanthea turned to her Dominions. Most of them now had their visors raised, eyes tight and gleaming, ready to spend themselves at her command. She caught an adoring look from Sister Marianne, before the girl glanced away, snapping down her visor as if to hide her embarrassment. Adamanthea heard herself speak, startled by the ease with which the words came.

'Your Emperor wants that sniper dead.'

Spears of plasma fire beheaded two of the Battle Sisters as they raced up the slope, meltas thrumming. The headless bodies knelt and fell as the others returned fire, filling the air with a shimmering radius of heat. Dazzling white beams lanced the target zone, melting rock and liquifying one of the drones in mid-air. A patch of rock rippled beside it, spitting a flashing dart that demolished another skull.

Adamanthea triggered her Eviscerator as she bounded ahead of the advancing gunline. One of the Dominions cried out behind her.

'Blessed are we to die in the shadows of the saints!'

Another probing volley of melta fire reduced another drone to molten ruin. Adamanthea ran, eyes locked upon a ripple sliding across the rocks, like something worming its way beneath the blanket of reality. She would not allow this xenos vermin to scurry back to its masters, regale them with stories of escaping the Emperor's blade.

The air spat sparks just ahead of her as a cloaking device failed. The last of the drones revealed itself. One of its stabilising fins fluttered, spurting plasma left and right, its targeting sensors clearly damaged.

Adamanthea ran at it. The drone fired, almost blinding her as plasma sizzled past her ear. She registered a sliver of disbelief that she was still alive before flinging the chainsword end over end. She heard the weapon shear through sparking metal as she shouldered past the xenos' abandoned console.

She could see the iridescent outline of the sniper stumbling just ahead of her. It jumped down into a fissure in the rock. Without hesitation she leapt

after it, down a steep but shallow crevice, landing on top of the fleeing xenos like a pouncing tiger. The cloaking device peeled back, revealing her struggling prey, a stocky humanoid wearing the domed helm and armour of the xenos foe.

The creature grunted as she threw it back against the wall. She withdrew, giving it time to recover. It stood wavering, momentarily dazed, the lens in its helm glinting. She let it fumble with the pistol at its hip then smacked it away. It unsheathed a long silver knife, which she twisted from its grip and discarded before slamming the xenos back against the sheet of rock. She felt the creature shrink in her grip as she bellowed down at it, her hailer on full blast.

‘Is that all you have for me?’

She had sought glorious martyrdom and now faced only this pitiful challenge? She tore off the xenos’ helm, as if demanding an answer. A gaunt, powder-blue face stared up at her. Dark blood bubbled from the nasal slit between its black eyes. The creature frowned and spat in her face.

She seized it by the throat, hauling the creature up off its feet, its shoulder plates grinding against the wall. It pawed at her gauntlets, kicked at her like a child. Adamanthea relished the weight of its body, an entire life struggling and choking in her grip. This xenos soldier belonged to her now, its very existence hers to preserve or extinguish as she saw fit. Its sour breath fanned her face, huge black eyes now wide in entreaty. It was weaponless, helpless, alone.

She felt her grip loosen about its throat. This was no death for a soldier, she thought. Not even xenos.

The obscenity of this notion dawned on her, staggered her. Heresy had encroached upon her mind, triggering a single line of scripture that now screamed in her head.

*I shall not suffer the xenos to live.*

Black spots blistered her vision. Blood roared in her ears.

*I shall strike it from Thy sight. I shall strike it from Thy sight. I shall strike it from Thy sight.*

‘Reverend Mother?’

She looked up in surprise. One of her Dominions stood above her at the edge of the fissure. Adamanthea had no idea how long she had been

pinning the xenos' body to the wall. It now hung limp in her hands, throat crushed to a stalk. She dropped the carcass. It clattered at her feet. Adamanthea steadied herself, wondering for a moment where she was. The clamour of one battlefield sounded so very much like another.

The Dominion raised her visor. It was Sister Iris, frowning with concern. 'Are you wounded?'

Adamanthea yearned to rest among these crags, a pile of ash for a pillow, sleep until the weariness finally left her bones. She shooed the Battle Sister away and glanced at the broken body of the xenos sniper. Alone and unmourned, it would provide a feast for whatever vile scavengers roamed these Throne-forsaken rocks.

*I shall not suffer the xenos to live.*

She scrambled up the rocks to rejoin the others. Another of her Dominions had retrieved her Eviscerator and presented the weapon to Adamanthea hilt first. She snatched it and mag-locked it to her back, wishing the girl would stop staring at her.

Only four of her Dominions remained. Four troopers against the lethal robotic monster they had been sent to destroy. To fail in this duty would cost a thousand Imperial lives.

*Whatever the cost, I shall afford it.*

She halted, reeling on the spot. A Battle Sister lay sprawled upon the rocks a short distance from where Adamanthea had flung her Eviscerator at the final drone. The dead woman's torso was a crater of molten ceramite. Adamanthea could smell her innards roasting. The girl's visor was up. It was Sister Marianne. Her eyes gazed into bliss, lips parted as if beholding some ineffable wonder, as if she had just received a blessing.

'She broke from the gunline,' said Sister Iris. 'Followed your charge.'

Marianne's melta lay beside her, steaming and spent. The drone's threat protocols must have deemed her the priority target. Once again, the girl had saved Adamanthea's life.

'Blessed are we to die in the shadows of the saints,' said Iris, commencing a line of prayer. 'Praise unto the martyrs. By their strength shall we be guided.' Adamanthea felt something twist in her gut, like a fish flopping in her belly. Shadows rumbled in the sky. Las-fire flashed.

'Enough,' said Adamanthea. She stumbled past Marianne's body, snatching an envious glance at those dead eyes.

‘Reverend Mother, are you all right?’

An explosion bloomed above them, rattling Adamanthea’s armour. She turned to issue an order, but none came to mind. All she could see was Marianne’s eyes, wide open and clotted with dirt. Her grateful smile. That reeking wound, blackened insides still sizzling with heat. A sudden wind lashed Adamanthea’s cheeks with grit, winding her tabard about her legs.

The remaining Dominions glanced at each other, uncertain. Sister Iris approached.

‘Reverend Mother, we need to find cover.’

Something above them roared, fast approaching. Adamanthea stood swaying as she watched coils of dust play about the rocks. Sister Iris took her arm. ‘Reverend Mother, we need to leave.’

Adamanthea remembered the interception point, their revised objective lost in a void of lies and madness. She nodded to Iris, motioning the others to follow before hurrying away. More detonations bubbled overhead. Jets screamed.

Adamanthea fumbled with the map on her gauntlet, struggling to decipher its meaning as she headed for the slope that led back into the canyon. Her route was marked by the bodies of the other three Battle Sisters.

*Blessed are we to die in the shadows of the saints.*

A sob rose in Adamanthea’s chest like vomit. In the course of seeking her own death, the *Viventem Miraculum* had led these women to their own.

The air tightened, whizzing ash almost blinding Adamanthea as she broke into a stumbling run, every step taking her further into a nightmare of her own creation. Scarce footsteps crunched in her wake. A voice was screaming in her head. *Too late!*

Adamanthea realised it was Canoness Lydia calling through the vox-bead.

*‘Adamanthea! Their commander has already launched! You’re too late! Fall back!’*

A dying monster fell from the sky, its wings torn and burning. The ruined Valkyrie careened overhead bleeding smoke and flames. Something had stabbed a line of plasma across its flank, obliterating one of its engines. The aircraft thundered into a pillar of rock, smashing it in half. The concussive tremor threw the Battle Sisters off their feet as a cloud of dust engulfed them.

Adamanthea scrambled towards the figures she could see blundering through the fog. A shuddering column of white-blue fire hammered the ground from above. The figures scattered through the murk. A melta-beam shot skywards in reply, probing the grey blizzard for a target. Another flurry of plasma fire drilled down, filling the air with screams. Adamanthea roared through the storm, calling to her squad. Sister Iris stumbled into view with the last two Dominions at her back.

‘Reverend Mother?’

‘Fall back to the canyon.’

Iris looked confused. ‘But—’

‘We cannot make a worthy stand with only three guns, Iris.’

A bulky, hovering figure fired a stuttering line of plasma through the thinning dust, driving them back. One of the Dominions replied with a snap shot from her melta. Adamanthea pulled her out of the way as another furious volley tore at the ground, spraying the retreating Battle Sisters with shards of scorched rock.

‘Over here,’ Adamanthea yelled as she shoved each of them behind a ridge in the earth. The shooting ceased, the wind clearing the air of dust and smoke. The xenos war machine hovered some distance away, a hulk of white and crimson, jets humming on its back as an immense burst cannon whirred to a halt beneath its fist. It surveyed its surroundings with the majesty of an angel. Two stout drones with twin sensor vanes attended it, a king and his equerry lingering in the smoke above the conquered Valkyrie.

‘Fall back, all of you.’ Adamanthea’s words wheezed through her hailer. ‘Return to command. Iris, you will deliver a full report of this mission’s failure.’

Iris watched her commander unhook the Eviscerator from her back. ‘Reverend Mother, we swore oaths that we would die by your side.’

‘Save your pledges for a commander worthy of them, Iris.’

The xenos battlesuit turned to gaze into the distance, its sensors no doubt capable of penetrating the miasma of ash that veiled the battle raging below. Perhaps it was contemplating the havoc it was about to wreak upon the Imperium.

‘This ruination is of my making. Now go!’ Adamanthea shoved Iris back towards the canyon, but the young Dominion caught her arm.

‘You are the living miracle,’ she said, imploring. ‘We cannot let you die

alone.’

The other two Dominions raised their visors, nodding in accord, eyes gleaming with zeal. Adamanthea could feel their conviction, their huddled bodies seeming to close in on her, to cling to her like children. She felt a surge of revulsion, her mouth dry as she spoke.

‘I am the mother of calamity, an exhausted madwoman unfit to lead you. I shall spend no more lives in pursuit of ending my own.’

Adamanthea stood.

‘Now honour my final order and spare yourselves. Retreat. All of you!’

Iris closed her visor, shutting away a scowl of frustration. Adamanthea heard them depart as she stepped from cover, her Eviscerator heavy across her shoulders. The two drones swivelled, then the battlesuit itself deigned to face her. It hung suspended several feet above the ground as it watched her approach. The drones floated behind it, humming furiously. Adamanthea felt the air buzz with static as she sauntered towards the xenos war machine. She looked up at the sun and bellowed an entreaty.

‘God-Emperor! What else would you have me do?’

The battlesuit’s little red box of a head peered down over its chest as Adamanthea circled it, ranting as she tested the air with her dormant chainsword.

‘You know I seek forgiveness still, my lord! You know I seek death!’

The battlesuit flexed its jets, rudders flaring as it adjusted its position, intent on the curious spectacle unfolding before it.

‘Yet by allowing me to live you have made me a paragon, your living miracle.’ She laughed bitterly. ‘Would you have a madwoman inspire the Adepta Sororitas to throw their lives away on her account?’

She gripped the Eviscerator in both hands and locked the trigger. The weapon roared and the battlesuit edged away, jets purring, its huge cloven feet already a good yard out of Adamanthea’s reach. Its lens gleamed as it adjusted focus, absorbed in its examination of this specimen. It watched Adamanthea pause to take the helmet from her hip.

‘God-Emperor, forgive me. Weariness has bested me today, driven me to this madness.’

She fastened the helm over her head. Targeting runes skittered and settled about her vision.

‘But would you have me live to wreak such havoc again?’

The battlesuit straightened, its curiosity evidently satisfied. Adamanthea swung her chainsword into a ready stance as the war machine levelled its burst cannon at her face, its quad-barrels already spinning.

As Adamanthea braced herself for the charge, the battlesuit spun in the air and fired a burst of plasma at something behind it.

Three streams of melta fire answered its volley. The searing white beams stopped short of the battlesuit, flaring against a semi-sphere shield of energy that materialised before it. Adamanthea screamed at her three Dominions as they hunkered towards the battlesuit.

‘In Lucia’s name! Get back!’

They ignored her, the intensity of their weapons relentless, their wielders heedless of the risk of overheating. The beams lashed the shield-sphere encasing the battlesuit and its drones, shoving them towards looming crags that thwarted any immediate hope of escape. It returned fire, ripping one of the Battle Sisters in half at the waist, dowsing one of the three melta-beams. The plasma volley caught another Dominion, almost tearing off her arm at the shoulder. She sagged in agony, but thundered on.

‘Get back, I said!’ Adamanthea drew her bolt pistol and fired at one of the humming drones. It ignored her, each round sparking harmlessly off its shields. She howled in frustration as her lenses darkened, shielding her eyes as the Dominions’ volley intensified, pressing the battlesuit’s shield to breaking point. One of the drones erupted into sparks and smoke, its generators driven into meltdown. The shield-sphere faltered. A melta-beam obliterated the last drone and another caught the battlesuit in its side. One of its jets shrivelled into a glowing mess before it could spin away and right itself. The war machine wavered in the air, the stabilising fin on its surviving thruster buckled by the superheated blast.

Adamanthea watched, helpless, as the battlesuit ran a line of blue fire across the last two Dominions, as briskly as if it were striking a quill through a line of misspelt script. Dust swirled over three armoured corpses.

The battlesuit eventually staggered onto the ground, plumes of smoke churning behind it like useless wings. Adamanthea charged, her targeting runes shrinking onto the xenos’ burst cannon. But she knew too well how fast those limbs could move. It would shoot her before she could exact her vengeance upon it. The battlesuit faced her, raising its cannon. She

squeezed the Eviscerator's brake, halting the blade. Stabbing the chainsword into the dirt, she used it to launch herself into the air as her enemy opened fire. Her feet cleared the blinding volley and landed on the war machine's chest with a boom.

She had hoped her armoured weight would shove the thing onto its back, but it shuffled quickly to support her. The machine rose to its full height, and her feet threatened to slip as she clung to its collar. Hefting her chainsword single-handed, she tried to reach the trigger, hoping to stab the whirring tip through the viewing slit in its chest. A robotic hand snatched the blade before it could activate, wrenching the weapon from her grip and flinging it to the ground.

Its other hand went to grab her, but she managed to kick it away and scramble over the battlesuit's shoulder. It seized her ankle, almost crushing her foot as it dragged her back. Her fingers caught a ridge in the war machine's armour, stalling her long enough to unholster her bolt pistol. Fired in rapid succession at point-blank range, her bolts blew ragged holes in metal arms and hands, scattering enough fingers to pull herself free.

She dropped the pistol the second it clicked dry, grabbing the battlesuit's head as she boosted herself up and over its shoulder. A pair of shredded hands came after her as she hung down its back, using her weight to pull its head backwards. The machine staggered several paces, wearing her like a cloak. She was blinded by the smoke still churning from the melted engine beside her. The glowing metal of its back felt soft as wet sand beneath her knees and boots as she struggled for purchase. She felt the head give at the throat, its socket no doubt warped by the melta-blast. It was scrabbling at her gauntlets with its broken fingers as it lurched violently from side to side. Adamanthea managed to plant first one foot, then another in the small of its back and pulled, determined to rip the battlesuit's head from its shoulders.

Warning runes flashed crimson in her visor display. The battlesuit had ceased thrashing. She realised veins of energy were now coursing over her gauntlets, slithering up her arms. The xenos war machine had deployed some kind of anti-personnel charge, reserved for discouraging infantry and saboteurs. Adamanthea knew her power armour was not like that of the Adeptus Astartes and would provide only limited insulation. Already she

could feel her bodyglove overheating.

She ignored it and kept pulling at the battlesuit's head, encouraged by the strain she could feel in its mechanical throat. The electricity hummed through her armour, intolerable heat burrowing into the servo-muscles beneath, searing her flesh. Something blistered against her ribs, a bundle of overheated nanofibres erupting under pressure. She yelled in surprise more than pain, and a foot slid out from under her as the machine bucked again.

She maintained her grip on the battlesuit's head, her fingers clinging to its hood. Her lenses obscured with smoke as the smell of roasting flesh filled her helm. She could see nothing outside but white flashes that snapped like a swarm of carnivorous fish, seconds from eating her alive. The last of her warning runes shivered and vanished.

*Whatever the cost, I shall afford it.*

The agony in her ribs screamed at her to let go, but the deeper the pain seared, the tighter her grip became. A single invading snap of electricity sent a shiver of lightning through her nervous system. Her body spasmed, hot blood bursting in her mouth as she bit her tongue. But she held on, clinging through the chaos, determined to put an end to the madness she had created. She welcomed the agony as a blessing and gave the head a savage twist. It finally came free, tethered by a length of sparking wires.

The web of lightning sheathing the battlesuit's body abruptly vanished into smoke. The xenos war machine staggered forward, groping blindly. Adamanthea crawled onto its shoulders and unclasped her helmet, releasing smoke from within as she gasped. The battlesuit shuddered beneath her as a section of its chest shunted forward at an awkward angle, smoke escaping. Tortured mechanisms screamed within. Something had jammed. Had the pilot attempted to eject?

She punched her gauntlet through the aperture where the battlesuit's head had once sat, thrusting her arm down to her pauldron. She felt something squirming inside. Hands. A blade jabbing at her gauntlet. She swatted it aside and caught something else. A head. Her fingers crawled into a pair of eyes and muffled screams suddenly rose from within. The sight of her valiant Dominions sprawled in the dust nearby purged Adamanthea of pity. She squeezed, wishing she could drag the xenos' commander up through the neck of its battlesuit. If only she could hurl the creature into the dirt,

leave it blind and dying amid the devastation they had wrought together.

The battlesuit shuddered and froze in place as Adamanthea extinguished its heart. She withdrew her dripping hand, wondered at it a moment, then slipped and fell with a crash at the statue's feet.

She gathered herself, crawling and wheezing through the dust as she retrieved her Eviscerator. She clung to its hilt for a moment, hugging it like a child. The sun peered down. Her synthesised voice was cracked.

‘What else would you have me do, my lord?’

She paused, awaiting an answer.

Someone groaned nearby.

One of her Dominions stirred. She was struggling to sit up, a row of wounds punched across her chest. Adamanthea wrenched open the girl's visor. Sister Iris coughed. Her eyes blinked into a smile.

Darts of plasma fire sailed overhead. Several more followed. Adamanthea scooped up Iris' melta and fired at the nearest target: a drone armed with two guns, one of several now rising from among the rocks on the eastern side of the hill. Adamanthea dragged Iris into cover behind the battlesuit's armoured legs. The wounded Dominion grunted, blood drooling from a hole in her breast-plate. Adamanthea touched her vox-bead.

‘Reverend Canoness, the target is down. Repeat, target down.’

*‘Understood, Sister Adamanthea. Aerial support confirm xenos infantry closing on your position. Fall back immediately. I'll send a flyer to cover your retreat.’*

Adamanthea hesitated in her reply. She could see xenos helmets bobbing among the rocks to the east, hear the clatter of their rifles. Her fingers strayed to the trigger of her Eviscerator.

‘Forgive me, Reverend Mother,’ Iris whispered. ‘But I would follow you as though you were Celestine herself.’

Adamanthea shuddered. Mention of that name stirred a swarm of evil memories.

Iris gripped Adamanthea's armour, her stare unblinking, pleading. ‘Has the Emperor not spared me so that I might follow you into martyrdom?’

Plasma bolts whizzed, ricocheted off the battlesuit's sturdy armoured legs.

‘I would follow you anywhere, *Viventem Miraculum.*’

‘I am glad to hear it,’ said Adamanthea, slinging the girl’s arm over her shoulder. ‘Then you will have no objection to my leading you home.’

The two women clung to each other as they retreated into the canyon, leaving the dead behind them.

## 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 has recently forayed into Black Library Horror with the audio drama *Perdition's Flame* and his novella *The Nothings*, featured in the anthology *Maledictions*. He lives and works in London.

An extract from *Requiem Infernal*.



‘It’s no way for a Breacher to die,’ Feizt hissed, scowling at the rain-spattered porthole by his bunk. ‘Better the Razor had finished us than this groundrat’s death.’

There were mutters of agreement from the Guardsmen gathered around him in the makeshift infirmary. There were *always* Guardsmen gathered around Toland Feizt, even now, when so few remained alive. Over half the company’s survivors lay in their beds, unconscious or close to it, strapped down to stop them rolling out in the turbulence. Some of the walking wounded were hunched on their bunks, riding out the storm with prayers or meditation as their guts churned about in the tempest, but most had gravitated to their sergeant, clutching whatever handholds they could find as they listened to his latest invective against their fate. In their baggy, white convalescent coveralls they looked more like a band of angry phantoms than soldiers of the Astra Militarum.

‘If I’m going to drown, make it clean!’ Feizt railed. His voice had thinned to a fever-strained rasp, but its anger was undiminished. ‘Drown me in the honest void!’

Even among a company of big men the breach sergeant was a giant, just short of seven feet and sporting a top-heavy frame that wouldn’t have looked out of place on a gladiatorial servitor. All Void Breachers bulked out their bodies with vat-grown muscles and metabolic enhancements, but the process had gone awry in Feizt, twisting his form into a brutish parody of humanity. The accident would have left a lesser man an outcast or at best a prized regimental freak, but Toland Feizt had used it to become a legend.

‘That storm’s hungry,’ he continued. ‘It wants to take us down, brothers.’

Nobody else in the company used the term *brothers*. Nobody else had the right.

*They have always been his*, Lemarché thought, watching the group from his bunk by the infirmary door. *Even when Captain Froese commanded them, they belonged to Feizt. And they still do, though he is fading fast.*

‘We’re not meant... to be here,’ Feizt was saying, forcing the words out between increasingly ragged breaths. His torso was naked save for a swathe of bandages around his midsection. ‘We’ve been *had*. Cast... down.’

His comrades met this with an uneasy silence.

‘Sister Asenath says there’s a hospital at the Ring,’ Specialist Schroyder offered tentatively. ‘The Last Candle’s healers will fix us up, breach sergeant.’

‘So they say, brother,’ Feizt replied darkly.

‘She wouldn’t lie, sergeant,’ Schroyder insisted.

‘She is *Sororitas*, yes,’ Breacher Zevraj added, as if that settled the matter.

‘No, *she* wouldn’t...’ Feizt turned from the porthole, his deep-set eyes glittering in his craggy face. ‘But what if they lied to her?’

‘Who, sergeant?’ Blast Breacher Hörka asked, frowning over his green-dyed beard. After Feizt, he was the biggest man in the company and a fierce fighter, but his talents didn’t extend to more abstract matters. Like thinking.

‘Don’t know,’ Feizt wheezed. ‘But who sticks a hospital in the middle of an ocean... days from the nearest space port?’ He shook his head. ‘It don’t... add up.’

Lemarché considered reprimanding him, but dismissed it. Feizt would be dead before they reached their destination and his ravings would die with him. It was a miracle he’d lasted this long – one Feizt owed as much to their guardian hospitaller as his own outrageous stamina – but he wouldn’t last much longer. There was nothing to gain from disciplining a dying man and perhaps much to lose.

*He might even try to kill me for it*, Lemarché mused dryly. *They all might.*

Exordio Void Breacher companies were composed entirely of veteran Guardsmen drawn from regular regiments of the Astra Militarum. They were more akin to the elites of the Tempestus Scions than the common

soldiers Lemarché had overseen previously. As their name implied, they specialised in void-based actions – ship-to-ship boarding assaults or engagements in the vacuum of space, where up and down became mere abstractions and violence was wrought in near silence.

*Blood-tight and void-sealed*, the Breacher credo went. *Spirit-locked to purge!*

In the two years he had served with the men of Darkstar Company, Commissar Ichukwu Lemarché had experienced the strangest, most lethal battles of his long career. He had skirmished with aeldari raiders in the airless pits of a hollow moon as it disintegrated around them, and cleansed an infestation of arachnoid vermin from a warship's hull, trusting his magnetised boots to keep him from falling into the abyss overhead. On one occasion the company had cut through the hull of a pirate cruiser's bridge, slaughtering the crew without a shot being fired. Lemarché had been entranced when the bodies vented from the breach, writhing and haemorrhaging blood as they spun past him, each telling its own tale. They had been remarkable conflicts and Lemarché cherished every one, even the last, though it had cost him a leg and effectively killed the company.

*The Razor...*

Of the two hundred and fifty Breachers who had assaulted that crystalline meat grinder only seventy-seven had survived, and many of those had succumbed to their wounds within hours. The men crowded into this seaborne infirmary were the last of them.

Of *us*, Lemarché corrected himself, though he knew the Breachers would never see it that way. He had mastered their way of war and fought alongside them in a score of rarefied hells, yet he would always be an outsider.

It would have been the same in any regiment, of course, for how else could a commissar fulfil his duty as judge, jury and executioner over his charges? The men and women who wore the scarlet sash *had* to be outsiders. It was a sacrifice he had accepted without qualms until his assignment to Darkstar Company, where he had finally found warriors worthy of him – men he'd be proud to call equals. In return they hated him, not out of fear, but because his presence implied they were capable of it. He shamed them.

'You look troubled, commissar. Does your wound still pain you?'

Covering his surprise with a smile, Lemarché turned to the woman standing beside his bunk. As always, her lightness of step impressed him. When had she entered the room?

‘My phantom will haunt me until a new leg puts it to rest, Sister,’ he answered, gesturing at the empty space below his left knee. ‘But I stopped paying attention long ago. It is the boot that went with it that aggrieves me. It was a fine boot.’

To his surprise she returned the smile. It was the first time he’d seen anything except a frown on that pale, serious face. Some men might be inclined to think it made her look younger, perhaps even attractive, but Lemarché felt it only accentuated her severity. Sharpened it.

It wasn’t that Sister Asenath’s face was ugly – too long, too hard and marked by one too many scars for conventional beauty perhaps, but her high cheekbones and dark eyes were undeniably striking. No, it was simply that smiles didn’t belong there.

*And most especially not for me*, Lemarché added. He knew she despised him, though she was always studiously polite. Her kind often struggled to accept men of his calling.

‘The storm pleases you, Sister?’ he ventured.

Her smile vanished. ‘I merely welcome the God-Emperor’s judgement.’

‘This so-called Exodus?’ Lemarché asked with a nod.

‘You are familiar with the Rite of Crossing?’ She sounded surprised.

‘It is my duty to appraise myself of *all* the hazards my men face, Sister. Yes, I read the orientation tract before we landed.’

‘And what are your thoughts, commissar?’

‘It is a uniquely... *impractical* custom,’ he answered. ‘Especially when the travellers are gravely wounded.’

‘Visitors to the holy archipelago are not encouraged,’ Asenath said solemnly, ‘nor is its hospital intended for outsiders.’

‘Yet here we are, Sister.’

‘The Eternal Candle has petitioned your cause, commissar. Both your troops and their injuries are exceptional, hence an exception was made. You are truly blessed.’

‘Indeed, Sister,’ he agreed. ‘Moreover, I was born on a world with equally *irregular* customs.’ Lemarché indicated the ritual scars etched into his cheeks. He had received them when he turned six and proved himself a

warrior. ‘I am not one to judge such things.’

‘An open-minded commissar?’ *A hint of mockery in her voice, perhaps?*

‘Not at all, merely focused. My jurisdiction lies elsewhere.’ He smiled again, but this time it was the broad, mirthless grin he bestowed upon wayward troopers when he was about to perform his gravest duty – not because he enjoyed the executions, but so the sinners would go to their final judgement fully aware of their absurdity. ‘And you, Sister? What do you make of our hosts?’

‘Their hospitallers are highly skilled,’ Asenath replied. ‘I am certain the Sisters of the Bronze Candle shall furnish you with a fine augmetic to address your injury.’

*That isn't what I asked, Sister.*

‘All these *candles* they have,’ Lemarché said lightly. ‘Silver and bronze and iron, yet they always talk of the *last* one. And then there is the *eternal* candle of your own order.’ He indicated the sigil embroidered on Asenath’s white tunic. ‘I confess I cannot untangle one from the other.’

‘All are aspects of the same vessel, for all bear the God-Emperor’s divine fire.’

‘But our hosts are not part of your order?’ he pressed.

‘The Last Candle was lit from the flame of the Eternal, but it casts its own light.’ Asenath bowed her head. ‘If you will excuse me, commissar, I must attend to the others.’

*You are not what you seem, Sister,* Lemarché mused as she crossed to the bed opposite. He had seen it months ago – within the first moments of meeting her in fact. She and her fellow hospitallers had been waiting on the *Asclepius* when the remnants of Darkstar Company had come on board, mangled by their encounter with the Razor. During their voyage through the void Asenath had proved to be the most skilled and compassionate of their nurses, though she had always cloaked her kindness in severity. By the time the *Asclepius* reached its destination the Breachers had come to see her as part of the company. A few even called her Sister Darkstar, though never to her face.

*They love you,* Lemarché thought, watching the troopers’ faces light up as Asenath made her rounds. She glided through the shuddering room with the lightness of a spirit, stopping beside each wounded man to give what comfort she could.

*They love you and they are right to, but they do not really see you, Asenath Hyades.*

Their adopted guardian might be walking the path of a healer now, but her bearing and scars spoke of other, harsher roads once travelled. Under that prim white tunic and wimple, Lemarché saw a warrior. That wasn't unusual in itself, for the women of the Adepta Sororitas moved between the various branches of their organisation as duty demanded, but there was a *secrecy* about their nurse that troubled him. He saw it behind her every word and gesture, like a shadow trail he couldn't quite follow, but nothing had disturbed him quite like the storm-born smile she'd let slip tonight. He hadn't recognised the look immediately, but it had come to him while they talked. It wasn't the smile of a healer or a fighter.

It was an executioner's smile.


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Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.

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ISBN: 978-1-78999-751-4

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