

FAITH & FIRE

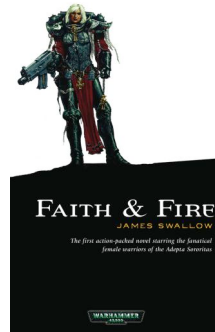
A Warhammer 40,000 novel

By James Swallow

Bane of heretics and traitors, the Adepta Sororitas is a zealous, all-female army that enforces the will of the holy Ecclesiarchy. Trained in all forms of combat, indoctrinated in the fanatical Imperial faith, Sister of Battle Miriya has been shaped and forged to be the ultimate warrior.

When a dangerous psyker named Torris Vaun escapes from her custody, Miriya is shamed and humiliated in the eyes of her superiors. To regain her honour, and the respect of her commander, she must track down and recapture Vaun. Accompanied by the Sister Hospitaller Verity, Miriya and her fellow Sisters set off on the trail of the heretic.

The planet Neva holds many dark secrets, and Miriya uncovers a terrible plot that could threaten the safety of the whole Imperium. When the forces of darkness step out of the shadows, will faith be enough to save Miriya and Verity?



About the Author

James Swallow's stories from the dark worlds of Warhammer 40,000 feature the Blood Angels books *Deus Encarmine* and *Deus Sanguinius*, as well as short fiction for *Inferno!* magazine. His other works include the Sundowners series of 'steampunk' Westerns, the Judge Dredd novels *Eclipse* and *Whiteout*, *Rogue Trooper: Blood Relative* and *The Butterfly Effect*.

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From his high vantage point, the Emperor of Mankind looked down upon Miriya where she knelt. His unchanging gaze took in all of her, the woman's bowed form shrouded in blood-coloured robes. In places, armour dark as obsidian emerged from the folds of the crimson cloth. It framed her against the tan stonework of the chapel floor. She was defined by the light that reflected upon her from the Emperor's eternal visage; all that she was, she was only by His decree.

Miriya's lips moved in whispers. The Litany of Divine Guidance spilled from her in a cascading hush. The words were such a part of her that they came as quickly and effortlessly as breathing. As the

climax of the declaration came, she felt a warm core of righteousness establish itself in her heart, as it always did, as it always had since the day she had discarded her novice cloak and taken the oath.

She allowed herself to look up at Him. Miriya granted herself this small gesture as a reward. Her gaze travelled up the altar, drinking in the majesty of the towering golden idol. The Emperor watched her over folded arms, across the inverted hilt of a great burning sword. At His left shoulder stood Saint Celestine, her hands cupped to hold two stone doves as if she were offering them up. At His right was Saint Katherine, the Daughter of the Emperor who had founded the order that Miriya now served.

She lingered on Katherine's face for a moment: the statue's hair fell down over her temple and across the fleur-de-lys carved beneath her left eye. Miriya unconsciously brushed her black tresses back over her ear, revealing her own fleur tattoo in dark red ink.

The armour the stone saint wore differed from Miriya's in form but not function. Katherine was clad in an ancient type of wargear, and she bore the symbol of a burning heart where Miriya wore a holy cross crested with a skull. When the saint had been mistress of her sect, they had been known as the Order of the Fiery Heart – but that had been decades before Katherine's brutal ending on Mnestheus. Since that date, for over two millennia they had called themselves the Order of our Martyred Lady. It was part of a legacy of duty to the Emperor that Sister Miriya of the Adepta Sororitas had been fortunate to continue.

With that thought, she looked upon the effigy of Him. She met the stone eyes and imagined that on far distant Terra, the Lord of Humanity was granting her some infinitely small fraction of His divine attention, willing her to carry out her latest mission with His blessing. Miriya's hands came to her chest and crossed one another, making the sign of the Imperial aquila.

'In Your name,' she said aloud. 'In service to Your Light, grant me guidance and strength. Let me know the witch and the heretic,

show them to me.’ She bowed once again. ‘Let me do Your bidding and rid the galaxy of man’s foe.’

Miriya drew herself up from where she knelt and moved to the font servitor, presenting the slave-thing with her ornate plasma pistol. The hybrid produced a brass cup apparatus in place of a hand and let a brief mist of holy water sprinkle over the weapon. Tapes of sanctified parchment stuttered from its lipless mouth with metallic ticks of sound.

She turned away, and there in the shadows was Sister Iona. Silent, morose Iona, the patterned hood of her red robe forever deepening the hollows of her eyes. Some of the Battle Sisters disliked the woman. Iona rarely showed emotion, never allowed herself to cry out in pain when combat brought her wounds, never raised her voice in joyous elation during the daily hymnals. Many considered her flawed, her mind so cold that it was little more than the demi-machine inside the skull of the servitor at the font. Miriya had once sent two novice girls to chastisement for daring to voice such thoughts aloud. But those who said these things did not know Iona’s true worth. She was as devout a Sororitas as any other, and if her manner made some Sister Superiors reluctant to have her in their units, then so be it. Their loss was Miriya’s gain.

‘Iona,’ she said, approaching. ‘Speak to me.’

‘It is time, Sister,’ said the other woman, her milk-pale face set in a frown. ‘The witch ship comes.’

In spite of herself, Miriya’s hand tensed around the grip of her plasma pistol. She nodded. ‘I am prepared.’

Iona returned the gesture. ‘As are we all.’ The Sister clasped a small fetish in her gloved grip, a sliver icon of the Convent Sanctorum’s Hallowed Spire on Ophelia VII. The small tell was enough to let Miriya know the woman was concerned.

‘I am as troubled as you,’ she admitted as they crossed the chancel back towards the steel hatch in the chapel wall.

Iona opened it and they stepped through, emerging into the echoing corridor beyond. Where the stone of the church ended, the iron bones of the starship around it began. Once, the chapel had

been earthbound, built into a hill on a world in the Vitus system, now it existed as a strange transplanted organ inside the metal body of the Imperial Naval frigate *Mercutio*.

‘This vexes me, Sister Superior,’ said Iona, her frown deepening beneath her hood. ‘What is our cause if not to take the psyker to task for his witchery, to show the Emperor’s displeasure?’ She looked as if she wanted to spit. ‘That we are called upon to... to associate with this mutant is enough to make my stomach turn. There is a part of me that wants to contact the captain and order him to take that abomination from the Emperor’s sky.’

Miriya gave her a sharp look. ‘Have a care, Sister. You and I may detest these creatures, but in their wisdom, the servants of the Throne see fit to use these pitiful wretches in His name. As much as that may sicken us, we cannot refuse a command that comes from the highest levels of the Ecclesiarchy.’

The answer was not nearly enough to satisfy Iona’s disquiet. ‘How can such things go on, I ask you? The psyker is our mortal enemy—’

Iona’s commander silenced her with a raised hand. ‘The witch is our enemy, Sister. The psyker is a tool. Only the untrained and the wild are a threat to the Imperium.’ Miriya’s eyes narrowed. ‘You have never served as I have, Iona. For two full years I was a warden aboard one of those blighted vessels. On the darkest nights, the things I saw there still haunt me so...’ She forced the memories away. ‘This is how the God-Emperor tests the faithful, Sister. He shows us our greatest fears and has us overcome them.’

They walked in silence for a few moments before Iona spoke again. ‘We are taught in the earliest days of our indoctrination that those cursed with the psychic mark in their blood are living gateways to Chaos. All of them, Sister Superior, not just the ones who eschew the worship of the Golden Throne. One single slip and even the most devout will fall, and open the way to the warp!’

Miriya raised an eyebrow. It was perhaps the most passion she had ever seen the dour woman display. ‘That is why we are here. Since the Age of Apostasy, we and all our Sister Sororitas have

stood at the gates to hell and barred the witchkin. As the mutant falls, so does the traitor, so does the witch.’ She placed a hand on Iona’s shoulder. ‘Ask yourself this, Sister. Who else could be called forth to accomplish what we shall do today?’ Miriya’s face split in a wry smile. ‘The men of the Imperial Navy or the Guard? They would be dead in moments from the shock. The Adeptus Astartes? Those abhumans willingly welcome psykers into their own ranks.’ She shook her head ruefully. ‘No, Iona, only we, the Sisters of Battle, can stand sentinel here.’ The woman patted her pistol holster. ‘And mark me well, if but one of those misbegotten wretches steps out of line, then we will show them the burning purity of our censure.’

The sound of her voice drew the attention of Miriya’s squad as she approached. They did not exchange the curt bows or salutes that were mandatory in other Sororitas units. Sister Miriya kept a relaxed hand on her warriors, preferring to keep them sharp in matters of battle prowess rather than parade ground niceties.

‘Report,’ she demanded.

Her second-in-command Sister Lethe cleared her throat. ‘We are ready, Sister Superior, as per your command.’

‘Good,’ Miriya snapped, forestalling any questions about their orders before they could be uttered. ‘This will be a simple matter of boarding the ship and securing the prisoner.’

Lethe threw a look at the other members of the Celestian squad. Usually deployed for front line combat operations, the Celestians were known as the elite troops of the Adepta Sororitas and such a simple duty as a prisoner escort could easily be considered beneath them. Celestians were used to fighting at the heart of heretic confrontations and mutant uprisings, not acting like mere line officer enforcer.

Miriya saw these thoughts in the eyes of Lethe and the other Sisters. She knew the misgivings well, as they had been her own after the orders had first been delivered by astropathic transfer from Canoness Galatea’s adjutant. ‘Any duty in the Emperor’s name is

glorious,' she told them, a stern edge to her words, 'and we would do well to remember that.'

'Of course,' said Lethe, her expression contrite. 'We obey.'

'I share your concern.' Miriya admitted, her voice lowered. 'Our squad has never been the most favoured of units-' and with that the other women shared a moment of grim amusement, '-but we will do as we must.'

'There,' Sister Cassandra called, observing through one of the crystalline portholes in the corridor wall. 'I see it!'

Miriya drew closer and peered through the thick lens. For a moment, she thought her Battle Sister had been mistaken, but then she realised that the darkness she saw beyond the hull of the *Mercutio* was not the void of interstellar space at all, but the flank of another craft. It gave off no light, showed no signals or pennants. Only the faint glow of the frigate's own portholes and beacons illuminated it - and then, not the whole vessel but only thin slivers of it caught in the radiance.

'A Black Ship,' breathed Iona. 'Emperor protect us.'

In two by two overwatch formation, their bolters at the ready, Miriya's squad made their way up the corded flex-tube that had extended itself from one of the *Mercutio*'s outer airlocks. At their head, the Sister Superior walked with her own weapon holstered, but her open hand lay flat atop the knurled wood grip. The memories spiked her thoughts again, taking her back to the first time she had stepped into the dark iron heart of an Adeptus Telepathica vessel.

No one knew how many craft there were in the fleets of the Black Ships. Some spoke of a secret base on Terra, sending out droves of ebon vessels to scour the galaxy for psykers. Others said that the ships worked in isolation from one another, venturing back and forth under psychic directives sent by the Emperor himself. Miriya did not know the truth, and she did not want to.

Whenever a potent psyker was discovered, the Black Ships would come for them. Some, those with pure hearts and wills strong enough to survive the tests the adepts forced upon them, might live

to become servants to the Inquisition or the astropathic colleges. Most would be put to death in one manner or another, or granted in sacrifice to the Emperor so that he might keep alight the great psychic beacon of the Astronomicon.

The Battle Sisters entered an elliptical reception chamber carved from iron and whorled with hexagrammic wards. Strips of bioluminescence cast weak yellow light into the centre of the space and hooded figures lingered at the edges, orbiting the room with silent footsteps. Lethe and the others automatically fell into a combat wheel formation, guns covering every possible angle of attack. Miriya watched the shrouded shapes moving around them. The Adeptus Telepathica had their own operatives but by Imperial edict they were not allowed to serve as warders upon their own vessels; it was too easy for a malignant psyker to coerce another telepath. Instead, Sisters of Battle or Inquisitorial Storm Troopers served in the role of custodian aboard the Black Ships, their adamantine faith protecting them from the predations of the mind-witches they guarded.

Footsteps approached from the gloomy perimeter of the chamber. Her eyes had grown accustomed to the dimness now, and she quickly picked out the figures filing from an iris hatch on the far wall. Two of them were Sister Retributors, armed with heavy multi-meltas, and another a Celestian like herself. The other Battle Sisters wore gunmetal silver armour and white robes, with the sigil of a haloed black skull on their shoulder pauldrons. There were more behind them, but they remained in the shadows for now.

The Celestian saluted Miriya and she returned the gesture. 'Miriya of the Order of our Martyred Lady. Well met, Sister.'

'Dione of the Order of the Argent Shroud,' said the other woman. 'Well met, Sister.' Miriya was instantly struck by the look of fatigue on Dione's face, the tension etched into the lines about her eyes. Her fellow Sororitas met her gaze and a moment of silent communication passed between them. 'The prisoner is ready. It is my pleasure to have rid of him.' She beckoned forward hooded men and the two Retributors turned their guns to draw a bead on them.

The adepts brought a rack in the shape of a skeletal cube, within which sat a large drum made of green glass. There was a man inside it, naked and pale in the yellow illumination. His head was concealed beneath a metal mask festooned with spikes and probes. 'Torris Vaun,' Miriya said his name, and the masked man twitched a little as if he had heard her. 'A fine catch, Sister Dione.'

'He did not go easily, of that you can be sure. He killed six of my kith before we were able to subdue him.'

'And yet he still draws breath.' Miriya studied the huge jar, aware that the man inside was scrutinising her just as intently with other, preternatural senses. 'Had the choice been mine, this witch would have been shot into the heart of a star.'

Dione managed a stiff nod. 'We are in agreement, Sister. Alas, we must obey the Ministorum's orders. You are to deliver this criminal to Lord Viktor LaHayn at the Noroc Lunar Cathedral on the planet Neva.' A hobbling servitor approached clutching a roll of parchment and a waxy stick of data-sealant. Dione took the paper and made her mark upon it. 'So ordered this day, by the authority of the Ecclesiarchy.'

Miriya followed suit, using the sealant to press her squad commander signet into the document. From behind her, she heard Lethe think aloud.

'He seems such a frail thing. What crime could a man like this commit that would warrant our stewardship?'

Dione took a sharp breath. Clearly she did not allow her troops to speak without permission as Miriya did. 'The six he murdered were only the latest victims of his violence. This man has sown terror and mayhem on a dozen worlds across this sector, all in the name of sating his base appetites. Vaun is an animal, Sister, a ruthless opportunist and a pirate. To him, cruelty is its own reward.' Her face soured. 'It disgusts me to share a room with such an aberrance.'

Miriya shot Lethe a look. 'Your candour is appreciated, Sister Dione. We will ensure the criminal reaches Neva without delay.'

More servitors took up the confinement capsule and marched into the tunnel back to the Mercurio. As Vaun was taken away, Dione relaxed a little. 'Lord LaHayn was most insistent that this witch be brought to his court for execution. It is my understanding the honoured deacon called in several favours with the Adeptus Terra to ensure it was so.'

Miriya nodded, recalling the message from Galatea. The Canoness would be waiting in Noroc City for their arrival with the criminal. 'Vaun is a Nevan himself, correct? One might consider it just that he be put to the sword on the soil of his birthworld, given that he created so much anarchy there.' She threw a glance at Lethe, and her second marshalled the rest of the Celestians to flank the prisoner as he vanished into the docking tube. Miriya turned to follow. 'Ave Imperator, Sister.'

Dione's armoured gauntlet clasped Miriya's wrist and held her for a moment. 'Don't underestimate him,' she hissed, her eyes glittering in the murkiness. 'I did, and six good women paid the price.'

'Of course.'

Dione released her grip and faded back into the blackness.

From the rendezvous point, the Mercurio came about and made space for the Neva system. The Black Ship vanished from her sensorium screen like a lost dream, so quickly and so completely that it seemed as if the dark vessel had never been there.

The frigate's entry to the empyrean went poorly, and a momentary spasm in the warship's Geller Field killed a handful of deckhands on the gunnery platforms. The crew spoke in hushed tones behind guarded expressions, never within earshot of the Battle Sisters. None of them knew what it was that Miriya's squad had brought back from the Black Ship, but all of them were afraid of it.

Over the days that followed, prayer meetings in the frigate's sparse chapel had a sudden increase in attendance and there were more hymns being played over the vox nets on the lower decks. Most of the crew had never seen Battle Sisters in the flesh before. In

dozens of ports across the sector they had heard the stories about them, just like every other Navy swab. There were things that men of low character would think of women such as these, thoughts that ran the spectrum from lustful fantasy to violent distrust. Some said they lived off the flesh of the males they killed, like a jungle mantis. Others swore they were as much concubines as they were soldiers, able to bring pleasure and damnation to the unwary in equal measure. The crewmen were as scared by the Sororitas as they were fascinated by them, but there were some who watched the women wherever they went, compelled by something deeper and darker.

Lethe glanced up as Miriya entered the cargo bay, stepping past the two gun servitors at the hatch to where she and Cassandra stood on guard by the glass capsule.

‘Sister Superior,’ she nodded. ‘What word from the captain?’

Miriya’s frown was answer enough. ‘He tells me the Navigator is troubled. The way through the warp is turbulent, but he hopes we will arrive at Neva in a day or so.’

Lethe glanced at the capsule and saw that Cassandra was doing the same.

‘The prisoner cannot be the cause,’ Miriya answered the unspoken question. ‘I was assured the nullifying mask prevents any exercise of witchery.’ She tapped her finger on the thick glass wall.

Sister Lethe fingered the silver rosary chain she habitually wore around her neck. She was not convinced. ‘All the same, the sooner this voyage concludes, the better. This inaction chafes at my spirit.’

Miriya found her head bobbing in agreement. She and Lethe had served together for the longest span among this squad and often the younger woman was of one mind with her unit’s commander. ‘We have endured worse, have we not? The ork raids on Jacob’s Tower? The Starleaf purge?’

‘Aye, but all the same, the waiting gnaws at me.’ Lethe looked away. ‘Sister Dione was correct. Being in the presence of this criminal makes my very soul feel soiled. I shall need to bathe in sanctified waters after this mission is at an end.’

Cassandra tensed suddenly, and the reaction brought the other women to attention. 'What is it?' Miriya demanded.

The Battle Sister stalked towards a mess of metal girders heaped in one corner of the cargo bay. 'Something...' Cassandra's hand shot out and she dragged a wriggling shape out of the darkness. 'Intruder!'

The gun servitors reacted, weapons humming up to firing position. Miriya sneered as Cassandra hauled the protesting form of a deckhand into the centre of the bay. 'What in the Emperor's name are you?' she demanded.

'M-Midshipman. Uh. Vorgo. Ma'am.' The man blinked wet, beady eyes. 'Please don't devour me.'

Lethe and Cassandra exchanged glances. 'Devour you?'

Miriya waved them into silence. 'What are you doing here, Midshipman Vorgo? Who sent you?'

'No one!' He became frantic. 'Myself! I just... just wanted to see...' Vorgo extended a finger toward the glass capsule and just barely touched its surface.

The Sister Superior slapped his hand away and he hissed in pain. 'Idiot. I am within my rights to have you thrown into the void for this trespass.'

'I'm sorry. I'm sorry!' Vorgo fell to his knees and made the sign of the aquila. 'Came in through the vent... By the Throne, I was only curious—'

'That will get you killed,' said Lethe, her bolter hovering close to his head.

Miriya stepped away and made a terse wave of her hand. 'Get this fool out of here, then have the engineers send a helot to seal any vents in this chamber.'

Cassandra hauled the man to his feet and propelled him out of the cargo bay, his protests bubbling up as he went. Lethe followed, hesitating on the cusp of the hatch. 'Sister Superior, shall I remain?'

'No. Have Isabel join me here forthwith.' Vorgo's protesting form between them, the Battle Sisters closed the hatch behind them.

The cargo bay fell quiet. Miriya listened to the faint, irregular tick of metal flexing under the power of the frigate's drives, the humming motors of the servitors, the murmur of bubbles in the tank. A nerve in her jaw twitched. She smelt a thick, greasy tang in the air.

'Alone at last.'

For a moment, she thought she had imagined it. Miriya turned in place, eyeing the two gun slaves. Had one of them spoken? Both of them peered back at her with blank stares and dull, doll-like sensor apertures, lines of drool emerging from their sewn lips. Impossible: whatever intelligence they might have once possessed, the machine-slaves were nothing but automatons now, incapable of such discourse.

'Who addresses me?'

'Here.' The voice was heavy with effort. 'Come here.'

She spun in place. There before her was the capsule, the ebony metal frame about it and the spidery, hooded man-shape adrift within. The Battle Sister drew her pistol and thumbed the activation rune, taking aim at the glass tank. 'Vaun. How dare you touch me with your witchery!'

'Have a care, Sister. It would go badly for you to injure me.' The words came from the air itself, as if the psyker was forcing the atmosphere in the chamber to vibrate like a vox diaphragm.

Miriya's face twisted in revulsion. 'You have made a foolish mistake, criminal. You have tipped your hand.' She crossed to a pod of arcane dials and switches connected to the flank of the glass container. Rods and levers were set at indents indicating the amounts of sense-deadening liquids and contrapsyche drugs filling Vaun's cell. The Battle Sister was no tech-priest, but she had seen confinement frames of this design before. She knew how they worked, pumping neuropathic philtres into the lungs and pores of particularly virulent psykers to stifle their mutant powers. She adjusted the rods and fresh splashes of murky fluid entered the tank. 'This will quiet you.'

‘Wait. Stop.’ Vaun’s body jerked inside the capsule, a pallid hand pressing on the inside of the thick glass. ‘You do not understand. I only wanted... to talk.’

Another dial turned and darts of electricity swam into the liquid. ‘No one here wants to listen, deviant.’

The words became vague, laboured, fading. ‘You... mistaken... will regret...’

Miriya rested the barrel of her plasma weapon on the glass. ‘Heed me. If one breath more of speech comes from that cesspool you call a mind before I deliver you to Neva, I will boil you in there like a piece of rotten meat.’

There was no reply. Torris Vaun hung suspended in the foggy solution, slack and waxy.

With a shudder, Sister Miriya muttered the Prayer of Virtue and fingered the purity seals on her armour.

Mercutio fell from the grip of the warp and pushed into the Neva system at full burn, as if the ship itself were desperate to deposit the cargo it carried. As the capital planet orbiting fourth from its yellow-white star swelled in the frigate’s hololiths, a small and quiet insurrection began on Mercutio’s lower decks.

Men from the labourer gang on the torpedo racks came to the brig where Midshipman Vorgo was confined, and in near silence they murdered the armsmen guarding him. When they freed Vorgo, he didn’t thank them. In fact, he said hardly anything but a few clipped sentences, mostly to explain where the gun servitors were placed in the cargo bay, and how the Battle Sisters had behaved toward him.

Vorgo’s liberators were not his friends. Some of them were men who had actively disliked him in the past, picking on him in dark corridors and shaking him down for scrip. There was a common denominator between them all, but not one of the men could have spoken of it. Instead, they went their separate ways, each moving with the same hushed purpose and blank expression.

In the generarium where the Mercurio's reactor-spirits coiled inside their cores and bled out their power to the vessel's systems, some of the quiet men walked up to the service gantries over the vast cogwheels of the coolant arrays. They waited for a count of ten decimals from the turning discs and then leapt in groups of three, directly into the teeth of the mechanism. Of course, they were crushed between the cogs, but the pulpy mess of their corpses made the workings slip and seize. In moments, vital flows of chilling fluid were denied to the reactors and alarms began to wail.

Vorgo and the rest of the men went to the cargo decks, meeting more of their number along the way. The new arrivals had cans of chemical unguent taken from the stores of the tech-priests who ministered to the lascannons. Applied in a vacuum, the sluggish fluid could be used to keep the wide glassy lenses of the guns free from micro-meteor scarring and other damage, but on contact with air, the unguent had a far more violent reaction.

After the incident with the midshipman, Sister Miriya had demanded and been given a third gun servitor from the ship's complement to guard the prisoner. Miriya made sure that no member of her squad was ever alone again with Vaun, pairs of the Celestians watching him around the clock in shifts.

Lethe and Iona were holding that duty when the hatch exploded inward. The machine-slaves stumbled about, their autosenses confused by the deafening report of the blast. The muzzles of weapons dallied, unable to find substantial targets to lock on to.

The Battle Sisters had no such limitations. The men that pushed their way in through the ragged hole in the wall, heedless of the burns the hot metal gave them, were met with bolter fire. Lethe's Godwyn-De'az pattern weapon chattered in her gloved grip. The gun's fine tooling of filigree and etching caught the light, catechisms of castigation aglow upon its barrel and breech. Iona's hand flamer growled as puffs of orange fire jetted across the bay, licking at the invaders and immolating them, but there were many, clasping crude clubs and metal cans. She spied Vorgo among them, throwing a jar

of thick fluid at a servitor. The glass shattered on the helot's chest and the contents flashed magnesium-white. Plumes of acrid grey smoke spat forth as acids chewed up flesh and implanted machinery alike.

'Sisters, to arms!' Lethe shouted into the vox pickup on her armour's neck ring, but her voice was drowned out by the keening wail of the *Mercutio's* general quarters klaxon. She couldn't know it from here, deep inside the hull, but the frigate was starting to list as the heat build-up in the drives baffled the ship's cogitator systems.

A scrum of deckhands piled atop another gun servitor, forcing it down, choking the muzzles of its guns with their chests and hands, muffling shotgun discharges with the meat of their bodies. Lethe's face wrinkled in grim disgust and it was then she noticed that the men did not speak, did not cry out, did not howl in frenzy. Doe-eyed and noiseless, they let themselves die in order to suffocate the prisoner's guardians.

Another chemical detonation signalled the destruction of the last servitor and then the attackers surged forward over the bodies of their crewmates, ten or twenty men moving in one great mass. Sister Lethe saw Iona reel backwards, choking and strangling on clouds of foul air from the makeshift acid bombs. The bleak woman's face sported chemical burns and her eyes were swollen. Unlike the superhuman warriors of the *Adeptus Astartes*, the *Sororitas* did not possess the altered physiognomies that could shrug off such assaults.

Lethe's lungs gave up metallic, coppery breaths as the bitter smoke scarred her inside. The silent mob moved to her, letting the Battle Sister waste her ammunition on them. When the magazine in her bolter clicked empty, they pounced and beat her to the ground, the sheer weight of them forcing her to her knees.

Time blurred in stinking lurches of pungent fumes, fogging her brain. The toxic smoke made thinking difficult. Through cracked and seared lips, Lethe mouthed the Litany of Divine Guidance, calling to the Emperor to kindle the faith in her heart.

She forced herself up from the decking. Her gun was missing from her grip and she tried to push the recollection of where it had

gone to the front of her mind but the smoke made everything harsh and rough, each breath like razorwool in her throat, each thought as heavy and slow as a glacier.

She focussed. Vorgo had loops of cable and odd metal implements in his hands, all of them still wet with greenish liquid where they had been immersed in the tank. He was struggling to breathe, but the midshipman's eyes were distant and watery. Behind the portly deckhand, a naked man was clothing himself in a dirty coverall, running a scarred hand through a fuzz of greying hair. He seemed to sense Lethe's scrutiny and turned about to face her.

'Vaun,' she choked. His reply was a cold smile and a nod at the broken capsule, thick neurochemical soup lapping out of the crack in its flank. Lethe's eyes were gritty and inflamed, making it hard to blink. 'Free...'

'Yes,' His voice was cool and metered. Under the right circumstances, it would have been playful, even seductive. He patted Vorgo on the shoulder and gestured towards the torn doorway. 'Well done.'

'Traitor,' Lethe managed.

Vaun gave a slow shake of the head. 'Be kind, Sister. He doesn't know what he's doing.' A brief smile danced on his lips. 'None of them do.'

'The others will be here soon. You will die.'

'I'll be long gone. These matters were prepared for, Sister.' The psyker crossed to Iona, where the injured woman lay gasping in shallow breaths. Lethe tried to get to her feet and stop him from whatever it was he was doing, but the deckhands punched and kicked her back to the floor, boots ringing off her armour.

Vaun whispered things in Iona's ear, brushing his hands over her blonde hair, and the Battle Sister began to weep brokenly. Vaun stood up and rubbed his hands together, amused with himself.

'You can't escape,' Lethe said thickly. 'It will take more than this to stop us. My Sisters are loyal. They will never let you get away from this vessel!'

He nodded. ‘Yes, they are loyal. I saw that.’ The criminal took a barbed knife from one of his erstwhile rescuers and came closer. Vorgo and the others held Lethe down in anticipation. ‘That kind of loyalty breeds passion. It makes one emotional, prone to recklessness.’ He turned the blade in his hand, letting light glint off it. ‘Something that I intend to use to my advantage.’

Lethe tried to say something else, but Vaun tipped back her head with one hand, and used the other to bury the knife in her throat.

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