

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



**PETER MCLEAN**  
**LIGHTNING**  
**RUN**

**AN AERONAUTICA IMPERIALIS STORY**

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



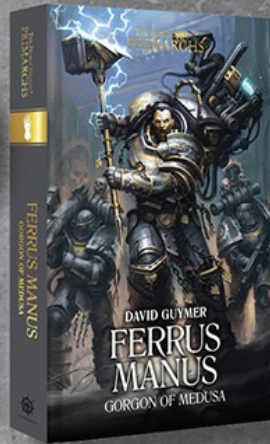
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# LIGHTNING RUN

Peter McLean

*Flight Officer Salvatoria Grant*  
*Munitorum base Sigma*  
*Elijan III*

The thunder of the engines gave Sal life.

Her gloved hands played over the Valkyrie's controls, caressing the age-pitted steel and brass levers as the plane throbbed with potential on the landing pad. The powerful twin engines were idling, but she knew from long experience that it would only take her to pull *that* lever back, push *those* throttles forward, stamp on *this* pedal, and the assault carrier would rip free of the ground and into the air with a bellow of fury like the very wrath of the Emperor.

This Valkyrie had been Sal's plane for three years now, Terran standard. It wasn't *hers*, as such, of course. It belonged to the Imperial Fleet, Segmentum Pacificus, Fourth Flotilla, First Battle Group, troopship *Damocles*. Through those holy lines of command, it belonged to the divine God Emperor Himself, and that was as it should be. The plane was her connection to the Emperor's divinity, her conduit to enacting His will on whatever world she had been sent to. The machine made her whole, gave her a purpose in the galaxy – to deliver death unending, in His name.

'Not long now,' she whispered to the Valkyrie. She felt as though she could feel its machine-spirit's need to be free of the ground, to fly the way it had been ordained to by the will of the Emperor. 'He'll be here soon, and when he comes he'll be in a hurry. They always are. Then we can fly and Emperor willing, we can kill His enemies.'

‘You talking to yourself again, Grant?’

Second flight officer Herrion leaned into the cockpit behind her, his helmet dangling from its straps in his hand. They had been flying together for six months now and she still hadn’t learned to like the man. He was unshaven, and an unlit lho-stick dangled from his mouth in open defiance of her rules. She let her right hand fall to her side and touched her father’s ancient autopistol. She wore it at her hip on every mission, for luck and for her father’s blessing.

‘Ditch that smoke,’ she ordered.

‘Oh, come on, Grant...’

‘Emperor, help me resist the temptation to shoot this fool,’ Sal said, turning in her seat to fix Herrion with a savage glare.

There was no smoking on Sal’s plane, no way. Not only because of the regulations, although she took those seriously, but also because you could actually smell the fumes of unburned promethium welling up from the Valkyrie’s idling engines. One flame could be the end of both of them, and half the Munitorum base as well.

Herrion sighed and put his smoke away, unlit.

‘Get in and buckle up,’ Sal snapped, taking her hand off the gun. ‘When he gets here we need to go *now*, not once you’ve got your kit together. And put your damn helmet on. Do you think you’re some sort of mudfoot?’

Mudfoots, that was what the Navy flyers called the Astra Militarum infantry they usually ended up transporting in their Valkyries. Men and women who would nonchalantly take their helmets off and sit on them for protection against the occasional bursts of groundfire that were bound to come up through the floor of the plane sometimes. People who had never been in a crash-landing situation, in other words.

Mudfoots didn’t belong in the air, but Salvatoria Grant did. Air was her element, the same as earth and mud was theirs. Her heavy Valkyrie felt like an extension of her own body. She wondered for a moment if the bridge crew of the *Damocles*, their desiccated bodies hardwired into the ancient spaceframe, felt the same way. She supposed they probably did, if they could still feel anything at all.

Herrion pulled a face but he buckled his helmet on as she had told him, and took his place in the co-pilot’s seat behind her. Her two gunners were already aboard too, one at each of the side doors in the aft crew bay, where their heavy bolters protruded through the fuselage. The canopies were still up, and damp air blew into the cockpit. It smelled like it might rain later.

Elijan III was a temperate world, mostly forested on the surface but rich in deep

underground promethium reserves. Sal had heard that when the wind blew from the right direction at night, the Munitorum base had reeked of promethium from the great refinery twenty miles up the river. That was before, though. Before the corruption.

Now the air only smelled of blood.

The corruption of Elijan III had come fast, and it had come hard. The vile taint of the Archenemy had spread like wildfire through the simple communities of pipemen and refinery workers, threatening to overtake all Imperial order on the world. That much Sal had learned at the Fleet briefing, at least. The rest of it, what the high command hadn't told them, she had learned in her time on the surface since the *Damocles* made orbit and disgorged four regiments of Guard and a hundred Valkyries to support them. Since her plane had first touched down on Elijan III, Sal had learned more about the hideous threat they faced than she had ever wanted to know.

The simple fact was, they weren't winning.

Oh, the Officio Prefectus would have it otherwise, of course, but Sal had eyes to see and she could think for herself. Not traits valued in the Guard, perhaps, but the Navy was different. In the Navy, you were expected to make command decisions based on the available information, to protect your plane and your passengers to the best of your ability. That meant not lying to yourself about the odds. The Munitorum base was crawling with troops, the walls manned with heavy autocannons and missile launchers, and still she thought it wouldn't be enough.

Elijan III had all but fallen to Chaos, and there was no lying to herself about that. Some terrible, blasphemous cult had overrun the planet, harvesting its rich natural resources for themselves in their endless pursuit of death and slaughter.

Now, though, there might be hope. She had been seconded to the Munitorum base, and although no hard intel had been revealed to her, it was clear enough to Sal that something of great importance to the war effort was coming to a head.

She took a deep breath and touched the controls in front of her again, taking strength from their holy construction and the connection she felt they gave her to the Emperor's divine will.

*This* control was for the nose-mounted multi-laser, *those* triggers would unleash her two Hellstrike missiles from their cradles under the wings. She could kill a main battle tank with those, if the Emperor willed it. She touched the triggers again, and slowly let out her breath. The plane calmed her. It was her spiritual anchor, her link to the ultimate divinity of mankind. Every shot fired was a

prayer to the Emperor, every kill an offering to His glory.

She bowed her head and whispered the Emperor's catechism of devotion.

'Now what are you muttering about, you mad mare?' Herrion snorted. 'Emperor's blood, you're—'

'Use His name in vain again and I really will shoot you,' Sal snapped at him, twisting in her seat to glare at Herrion over her shoulder. She touched the pistol again. 'Not on my plane. Shut up and— They're here. Launch prep, right now!'

She wasn't looking at her co-pilot any more. Her attention was out of the side of the open cockpit, where a full general of the Astra Militarum was marching stiffly towards her boarding ramp at double time, with three aides and six heavily armed troopers hurrying after him. He was the hope of Elijan III, Sal knew, even if she wasn't privy to exactly why.

Herrion knew the art of aerial warfare well, which was the only reason she put up with him. His hands flew across the controls in front of him, running preflight checks with the practised skill that came from thousands of hours of flying time. He flicked switches, checked gauges, threw rockers, and the amber status runes on the main display turned to green in rapid succession as the twin canopies closed smoothly over their heads.

The Valkyrie shuddered with anticipation.

The crew bay intercom crackled in Sal's helmet vox.

*'The general is aboard, pilot. Immediate dust off ordered. Proceed to Patroclus base with all haste.'*

'Aye, sir,' Sal said.

She could only assume she was speaking to one of the general's aides, but it didn't really matter. She knew a command when she heard one. She flicked to the Navy channel.

'Crew, secure doors, brace for dust off. Bolters to automatic,' she said, and flicked back to the open channel. 'Lock down and buckle up, sir.'

Two runes on her readout went from red to green as her gunners closed the side doors and made fast. That was it, they were ready.

'All systems green,' Herrion reported, his voice all business now they were working.

'Systems green,' she repeated.

The base channel clicked open in her ear.

*'Transport, cleared for dust off.'*

'Dust off,' Sal replied. 'Five by five.'

She reached out and threw a lever forwards.

Her gloved hand closed over the twin throttles and pushed them forward, and the thunder of the engines built to a piercing scream as the plane threatened to shake itself to pieces on the pad. She raised a clenched fist over her shoulder. Herrion leaned forwards for a moment, tapped his own against it. Good to go.

Sal stamped on the release pedal.

The Valkyrie hurled itself vertically into the air, the acceleration crushing her down into her padded leather flight seat until she thought her spine must surely be compacting on itself. That was the feeling of the Emperor's will being done, by her own mortal hand. Her connection to the divine, through His holy war machine.

A tight smile crossed Sal's face as she vectored the engines, channelling their furious power from lift into forward acceleration. The plane roared and blasted through the air with a howl of righteous fury, leaving Munitorum Sigma behind as she struck out over the thick forest below. Her head-up display layered information over her field of vision, the preset course to Patroclus base showing her an endless hololithic tunnel of well-spaced green triangles that seemed to hang in the air in front of her.

Sal adjusted her flight yoke slightly, guiding the hurtling Valkyrie smoothly through the first triangle, which blinked out of existence as she passed it. She checked airspeed, altitude, wind shear, fuel and cargo weight, and keyed the passenger band again.

'ETA nine hours, sir,' she said.

A new voice came on the line. A man, older than the aide by the sound of him, with a voice that spoke with the gravitas of long-accustomed command. The general himself, she thought, and straightened with pride in her seat. She was honoured to be directly addressed by one of his illustrious rank.

*'Make it eight. Can you do that for me, pilot?'*

Sal looked at her readouts again, factored fuel tolerances, reheat burn durations, structural fatigue risk. Always a risk, when you pushed a plane this old to its limits. She cleared her throat.

'Maybe, sir,' she said. 'But...'

*'I know,'* he said. *'We might blow up in the air. I have the authority to tell you this, pilot, but consider yourself sworn to crimson-level secrecy – if I can get what I carry there in time, we've won this war. If I don't, then it doesn't matter if I get there at all. Every minute counts. Do it.'*

'Aye, sir,' Sal said.

It would mean a course alteration, Sal realised. However hard she pushed the

old plane, it couldn't be done otherwise. Not on their current heading. If she dropped them ten points east though...

That meant she would be flying them over a known enemy location. She didn't know exactly what was down there, but there was *something*. It was a gamble. Sal thought of the general's words, of the grim determination in his tone, and she made her decision.

She cancelled the preset course, vectored ten points east, and keyed in the afterburners. The plane kicked her in the base of her spine as it blasted through the air.

The Emperor's will be done. All their fates were in His hands, now and forever more.

The Valkyrie howled east over the forest on a flaming stream of afterburners, and a nine-hour estimate that became eight on their new heading, then became seven and a half. Sal hunched over the controls, milking every scrap of power from the overworked engines. She had felt the urgency in the general's words, the desperation he had been trying to hide. Whatever his mission was, whatever he carried, it was clear it *had* to reach Patroclus base as soon as humanly possible.

They were flying over the enemy lines now. Great swathes of the forest were burning, where overland promethium pipelines had been ruptured in the fighting. Senseless waste and destruction, Sal thought. The vile cultists destroyed for the simple joy of watching things burn. All the same, they built as well. Already they had streaked over settlements and military bases, crude but effective looking. More than once, she had spotted tanks on the ground. Former Imperial tanks, to be sure, noble Leman Russ machines captured and corrupted by the abominations of the Archenemy. Another time, she would have been raining righteous Hellstrike fury down on them from her plane, but not now. The mission was all that mattered.

Runes were starting to flicker amber on the display as the strained Valkyrie began to complain, but Sal caressed her controls and whispered encouragement to the plane's machine-spirit.

'You're no tech-priest, the machine won't hear you,' Herrion reminded her. 'You'll kill us all if you keep pushing it this hard!'

'Shut up,' Sal growled, and ran a reassuring hand across the yoke. 'She can do this. She *has* to.'

Whether Sal's plane could do it or not became irrelevant precisely seven

seconds later, when the surface-to-air missile blew her tail off. Warning klaxons wailed as though in physical pain, and the display lit up with flashing red runes across the board.

‘Critical, critical!’ Sal shouted into the open channel. ‘Brace, brace, brace!’

Her Valkyrie was suddenly in a spinning nosedive, trailing flames as it died screaming in the sky over Elijan III. Sal fought the controls with all her might, cutting the afterburners and vectoring what was left of her engines in a desperate attempt to turn their headlong plummet into something approaching a controlled descent. There was a clearing maybe two miles away, ferrocrete runway and armoured bunkers flashing in her vision as the Valkyrie spun wildly in its death throes.

*Airbase, Sal thought. Missile defences.*

It had always been a gamble; Sal had known that and she had accepted it. The enemy might be insane, but they weren’t stupid. Of course they had air defences – and she had flown straight into them. Such was the Emperor’s will for her that day, it seemed.

Wind screamed in her ears over the vox-channel from the crew bay, now torn open to the rush of air. A burst of flames ripped through the cockpit behind her from a ruptured fuel line. Herrion shrieked, and Sal snatched a glance over her shoulder just in time to see him incinerated in his webbing. She slapped the big red fire suppressant switch on the console in front of her, but it was too late for him. The retardant foam sprayed uselessly across his reeking blackened corpse.

‘Anyone alive back there, brace and pray!’ Sal yelled into the vox. ‘We are landing *hard!*’

The first of the treetops hit them, and the Valkyrie rolled sickeningly as the great trees shattered in her wake. Sal screamed, and everything went black.

The pain hit Sal like a commissar’s bullet to the temple. She forced her eyes open, barely able to move. There was a section of twisted airframe embedded in her helmet, maybe one polymer layer away from having gone through her skull. She reached up with shaking hands, found the buckle at her throat and released herself. She was stuck fast in the wreckage, and had to squirm down in her seat to get her head out of her ruined helmet.

It had saved her life – just.

She checked her father’s autopistol was still at her belt, the three spare magazines in their leather pouches balancing its weight on her other hip, and hit the quick release that freed her from her webbing. She pitched sideways against

the canopy, and only then realised that what was left of the Valkyrie was lying on its side on the forest floor. She yanked the canopy release handle, but the mechanism had been so badly crushed by the impact that it refused to move. Sal swallowed, realising she was effectively trapped in the cockpit.

She twisted in her seat and looked over her shoulder at the shattered remains of Herrion's console, his blackened corpse still strapped tightly into the webbing behind it. His canopy release looked undamaged.

She swallowed again.

Taking a deep breath, she braced with her legs and forced herself up and over Herrion's console, straining for the second canopy release handle. She pushed herself upwards with a grunt of effort and half fell onto the charred and foam-encrusted ruin of Herrion's corpse. Her gloved hand tore into his stomach cavity as she put her weight on him, rupturing his half-cooked insides.

When she stopped vomiting, Sal grasped his emergency canopy release and pulled it, blowing the entire top of the cockpit clear with a sharp crack of explosive bolts. She crawled gratefully over the roasted filth of her co-pilot and out of the plane, and threw up again on the churned loam of the forest floor.

She stayed there for some time, hugging the ground and retching with a mixture of shock and horror and sheer relief. She was Emperor only knew how far behind enemy lines, but she was somehow, miraculously, alive. There was nothing she wanted to do more than run, retrace her flight path on foot and try to find her way back to the Munitorum base. Find another plane, and just fly away. She belonged in the air, not here, not in some wild forest. She touched her father's pistol, and his words came back to her.

He had been a pilot himself, once, and he had given her his beloved sidearm on the day she came home and announced she had taken her oath and joined up with the Navy.

*'The Emperor expects every woman to do her duty, however hard it may be,'* her father had said to her that day. *'Make Him proud of you, Salvatoria. I already am.'*

'The Emperor expects,' she whispered.

She forced herself to her feet, made herself ignore the pain of a hundred cuts and scrapes and bruises. At least nothing seemed to be broken. She looked at her beloved Valkyrie, and wanted to weep. The whole rear section of the plane had been blasted away, and the fuselage had burst open where it had hit the ground.

One of her gunners was red paste under the wreckage.

She knew she had to try to complete the mission. Whatever the general's

purpose had been, she knew it was vital to the war effort there on Elijan III. She had to have faith in the Emperor and *try*, however unlikely it may seem.

Both hatches were buckled and twisted but there was a gaping hole at the back of the plane where the tail had been, and Sal hauled herself painfully up and into the stinking interior of the crew bay. It was crimson with blood, reeking of ruptured guts and promethium. The upper fuselage had sheared off and come down onto the passengers like a guillotine, bisecting four of them and taking the others' legs off where they sat helpless in their flight webbing. They had all bled out from severed femoral arteries. The general looked up at her and smiled.

'Hell of a landing, pilot,' he said.

Sal almost died of fright.

*In the Emperor's name, how...?*

The general's legs were gone just below his groin, but... Sal blinked, and realised this wasn't the first time that had happened to him. The augmetics were ruined beyond repair and even now sparks were spitting dangerously from his dull metal stumps, daring the promethium in the air to explode and obliterate the entire wreck in a roaring fireball.

'Sir, we have to get you out of here,' she said, reaching for him.

He shook his head and tried to laugh, and blood ran out of his mouth and over his chin.

'My legs were augmetic, but my lungs aren't' he said. 'There's some of your damn plane so deep in the right one I can taste the metal. I'm not going anywhere.'

'The mission...'

Sal started.

The general nodded.

'That's yours now,' he said.

He reached into his uniform jacket with his left hand, and Sal realised the entire right side of his body wasn't working. He grimaced as he moved, and more blood ran out of his mouth and nose. He took something out of an inside pocket and held it out to her – an ornate ring, steel and brass with a gleaming gold bezel and a single clear crystal set into it.

'Take this,' he said. 'Wear it, if you have to, but keep it safe and get it to Patroclus base.'

'What?' Sal asked, taking the offered jewellery with open bewilderment.

'Encrypter,' the general said, and coughed up more blood. 'Code level vermillion. It's got... their battle plans on it. I'm a Navy intelligencer. Get this... to Colonel Shrake at Patroclus, whatever it takes. The words are *Ave Imperator*,

*in circulum arcanus trismegistus est.* Win... this war, pilot. The Emperor expects.'

Her father's words rang in her head.

*The Emperor expects every woman to do her duty.*

'Yes, sir,' Sal said, but he was already dead.

Sal peeled off her left glove, put the ring on and pulled the glove securely back over it to keep it in place. That done, she braved Herrion's corpse again to get back into the cockpit, and raided the emergency kit for bottled water and hard rations – and for the other thing she knew would be there, the thing every downed pilot hopes they never have to use.

She rigged the timed demolition mine to the Valkyrie and fled into the forest.

She was half a mile away when it blew. All the same she threw herself to the ground and covered her head with her hands, missing her helmet as burning debris rained down through the trees. After an explosion like that at the crash site, no one would come looking for any survivors, friend or foe. She was a ghost now, with no hope of rescue.

No pilot wanted to put themselves in that position, but it was the only way to be sure the cultists wouldn't come to investigate the downed plane and realise there was an Imperial pilot at large in the forest. The mission was everything, now.

Sal waited until the rain of twisted metal stopped, then sat up and touched her father's pistol. She was on foot and alone behind enemy lines, with two days' rations, one handgun, four magazines of ammunition, and over two thousand miles to cover in somewhere around six hours. There was nothing else for it.

She needed to steal a plane.

A fast one.

The enemy airbase was easy enough to find, even in the unfamiliar forest. She only had to follow the noise. The vile cultists delighted in wanton destruction, and the engines of war that enabled it.

Planes roared down the runway and into the air. They arced around to head back the way Sal had come, towards Munitorum Sigma. She recognised them from their silhouettes as they flashed west overhead. Lightnings. She knew then that the base was doomed.

*Following my trail, backtracking us,* she thought. *They've had it.*

The Munitorum base had missile defences, of course, but against a flight of Lightnings? No. No, they were too fast, too powerful. It would be a massacre.

Sal crept through the thinning screen of trees towards the cultist airbase,

shuddering as she passed rows of broken skulls mounted on sharp stakes. There was a single fighter left on the runway, refuelling hoses trailing from its fuselage like limp tentacles. The beautiful machine had been defiled, Sal could see now, vile runes of Chaos etched into once-sleek flanks that looked as if they had been freshly anointed with blood.

She tasted bile, to witness such desecration of the Emperor's holy war machine. She drew her father's pistol.

Cultists walked the perimeter, draped in blood-red robes daubed with evil black sigils. They had lasguns in their hands, no doubt stolen the same as the Lightnings were. As the base itself had been, probably. Looking at it, Sal reasoned this had to have originally been an Imperial facility before the corruption came and claimed it. No one but Imperial engineers had ever laid a runway so perfectly.

She narrowed her eyes as she thought about it. It was an Imperial facility, and an Imperial plane sitting there in front of her. She was no fighter pilot, no, but the Imperium ran on the principle of standard patterns. And she *was* a Navy flyer.

How different could it be?

The Lightning's cockpit canopy was open, and the boarding steps were still rolled up to its side. The fuel hoses were limp and flaccid, which either meant the plane was fuelled up and ready and just hadn't been uncoupled yet, or it had been hooked up only recently and refuelling hadn't started.

*Fifty fifty on that, Sal, she told herself.*

A fifty fifty chance, life or death on the flip of an Imperial Crown.

*Whatever it takes, the general had said.*

*The Emperor expects.*

She had faced worse odds.

Salvatoria Grant flicked off the safety of her father's pistol, said a prayer to the Emperor and sprinted for the grounded Lightning.

She got six yards before the first las-shot blew a chunk out of the rockcrete in front of her.

'Halt!' someone shouted, their voice guttural and somehow *wrong*.

Sal turned and fired on pure instinct. Her father's pistol kicked in her hand and twenty yards away a red-robed figure spun and dropped.

All hell broke loose.

Warning klaxons wailed across the airbase as someone triggered an intruder alarm, and then there was las-fire sizzling through the air all around her.

Sal fired again, missed, put her head down and ran like every enemy of mankind was on her heels.

The boarding steps were twenty yards away, then fifteen. Sal jinked and dodged, firing blindly over her shoulder as she ran as hard as she had ever run before in her life. The plane was waiting for her. The beautiful, crippled, *wounded* Imperial war machine, its hide so cruelly defiled with the foul sigils of the Archenemy.

*The machine won't hear you*, Herrion had said, and perhaps he was right about that, but Sal felt that she could hear the machine. In her mind, she could hear it weeping with shame and fury and the burning need for revenge.

She changed magazines at a full sprint and turned at the foot of the boarding steps, the pistol braced in both hands. She blazed into the charging cultists, dropping four, five, six, until they were just too close to miss her. At the last minute, she swarmed up into the plane like a simian, wincing as she felt the impact of las-rounds against the armoured fuselage.

Imperial standardisation was one thing, but the cockpit of a single-seater Lightning fighter was *nothing* like that of a Valkyrie. Panic gripped her as she saw the interior of the plane had been daubed with the same hideous glyphs that marred its outer fuselage – eye watering signs of abomination. A peeled human skull had been nailed to the top of the console, and the entire interior of the cockpit was drenched in blood. The seat under her was sodden with it, and she felt it soaking disgustingly into her flight suit.

Sal screamed and smashed the skull aside with a backhanded blow of her gloved left hand, feeling the general's ring dig into her finger with the impact. That ring was all that mattered, she reminded herself, fighting down hot vomit with every breath.

*The mission, think of the mission.*

She forced herself to ignore the blasphemous filth around her and *think*. A Lightning was an interceptor, designed to be scrambled at a moment's notice. There had to be an emergency action function, a way to override the need for preflights and just *go* when the Emperor called.

A big red button, in other words.

*Everything* in the cockpit was red, slathered with congealing blood, making it hard to distinguish one control from another. Not that one, that was the fire suppressant toggle. That was *always* in the middle of the console, on every plane Sal had ever been in. If not that, then... *there!*

The trigger grip was so obvious she almost missed it; it was just in the wrong

place compared to what she was used to. It was over her head, hanging from the bottom of the canopy so it could be grabbed as a pilot vaulted into the plane.

Las-fire whined over her head under the open canopy, forcing her head down.

*Stupid, stupid! How did I miss that?*

She blasted three return shots out of the cockpit with her father's pistol, until it clicked dry. She dropped it into the footwell, and risked losing her arm as she reached up and grabbed the big red grip.

*Sal pulled.*

Lots of things happened at once.

The canopy slammed down so hard it would have taken her hand off at the wrist if she had been a fraction of a second slower, and she heard the violent hiss of pressure seals engaging. Something coughed behind her, then roared like a native Elijanian vhorbeast as her engines lit up. Sal swiped a gloved hand over the console, clearing away enough blood for her to see the whole display illuminated in a blaze of coloured runes. The external monitor showed her a screaming trail of jet backwash incinerating the cultists who had been pursuing her. Her hands fell to the controls: throttle and stick, not the yoke she was used to her in big Valkyrie, but not so very different to the single-seater trainers she had used in the Navy flight scholam.

*The Emperor bless standardisation,* she thought.

The fuelling rune was flashing amber to tell her the hoses were still attached, but the brass gauge above it read reassuringly full. Again, there was a promising looking button under the flashing rune, so Sal reached out and stabbed it with one gloved finger. The fuelling hoses blew clear with a bang, and the flashing rune turned to steady green.

The Lightning was already pointed down the runway, so all Sal had to do was disengage the landing brake and push forward on the throttles. She whispered a prayer to the Emperor and shoved them forward hard.

That was a very bad idea.

The plane shrieked and almost flipped over backwards as *far* too much power was unleashed all at once. Only Sal's honed reactions enabled her to control the wildly bucking machine, and now more las-rounds were slapping against the fuselage. She engaged ground manoeuvre mode and whipped the skittish plane around on its landing gear, using the jet exhaust to sweep the surrounding area like the mother of all heavy flamers until the gunfire stopped again.

'Gently now,' Sal whispered, half to herself and half to the plane's furious, tortured machine-spirit. 'We can do this. Together, we can.'

She got the plane angled onto the runway again and this time made herself pour the power on gradually, letting the engine note build from a rumble to a growing howl as the rockcrete sped past outside the canopy. The end of the runway was coming up far too quickly for comfort.

Sal hunted the blood-slick console frantically, looking for some sign of what was wrong. *It's a short-runway launch interceptor, there must be a way to...* There!

Her hand found the pull-toggle for the solid-fuel rocket assisted take-off and jerked it towards her. The resulting acceleration almost made her black out as the Lightning took off on a pillar of chemical flame, blasting into the air like a missile. The terrifying rush only lasted three or four seconds, by which time she was thousands of feet into the air with the spent rocket-fuel tank spinning silently away below her.

'Missile lock, missile lock,' the plane's servitor brain announced in a curiously emotionless voice. 'Incoming, two contacts.'

Two red contact runes were spiralling in on the head-up display now, closing with frightening speed. Sal cursed the cultist's missile air defences and slapped the chaff and flare icons simultaneously, pushing the throttle all the way forward and finding the afterburners with a grin of triumph.

The two incoming missiles blew themselves harmlessly apart in the cloud of chaff behind her as the Lightning went supersonic with a concussive boom fit to split the sky.

The Emperor's will be done.

Nothing could catch her now.

The base's other Lightnings had been heading in the opposite direction, towards the Munitorum base she had come from, and even if the cultists had recalled them, they were still no faster than she was, and probably a thousand miles behind her by now. She was home free.

The Lightning flashed over the endless forest far below, eating miles at a rate her Valkyrie could never have hoped to match. Sal used the time to work up a flight plan on the console's navigation cogitator, plotting a fresh course to Patroclus base. She was maybe two hours out, at her current speed and heading. That put her ETA well within the general's original target.

She keyed the vox to send word ahead of her coming.

Static howled in her ears, intercut with the blasphemous ranting of one of the cultist's heretical preachers. She tried to change the band, got nothing but more

of the same. It was unintelligible gibberish, to her ears, but still the harsh, guttural words made her feel ill. Just then she was suddenly, horribly aware of the vile sigils etched into the console and daubed over the surfaces inside the cockpit, of the skull she had knocked into the footwell, where it had sunk into the pooled blood that welled around her boots. She tried not to think about how wet her back and behind and legs were, her flight suit now saturated with blood from the sodden seat.

This plane had saved her life, but it was hideously corrupted. Sal could feel the machine's once noble spirit still fighting somewhere inside the fuselage, but it was dying under the weight of the Chaos horrors that had been inflicted on it. The vox refused to change to any other channel.

Sal shut it off, and thought about what that meant.

She was coming up fast on Patroclus base.

A Chaos-marked Lightning was coming up fast on Patroclus base, with its surrounding cordon of heavy air defences.

*They're going to shoot me out of the sky.*

She shed altitude as fast as she could, bringing the Lightning as low as she dared, until she could be sure she was flying under their long-range auspex. The forested ground was a hurtling, insane blur of green at well over a thousand miles an hour and barely eight hundred feet up.

Sal's nerve gave out in the end, and she throttled back to under the sound barrier before the shock wave of her own passage could tear the plane to pieces around her. Patroclus base was barely a hundred miles away now, and she was coming up fast on the outer ring of defences.

The plane blared a klaxon to tell her the first missile was coming at her. Sal launched more chaff and gave the throttle a blast to clear the area, dropping even lower until it seemed that the tops of the trees below were almost close enough to scrape the paint from the plane's desecrated fuselage.

Another alert, another burst of chaff, then the countermeasures icon was flashing to tell her that she was all out. She banked hard, throwing the plane into an arc that almost stood it on a wingtip, and keyed the main armament readout into her head-up display. The plane had two wing-mounted lascannons, but the primary weapon was a ventral-mounted long-barrelled autocannon that Sal knew had a truly awe-inspiring cyclic rate of fire.

The head-up display zeroed on the incoming missile as Sal righted the plane, closing at a speed that made sweat stand out on her forehead. Her finger slipped down the stick to the trigger, sticky with blood, and she forced herself to stay

calm until the four red triangles overlaid on her display locked on to the rushing blur of the missile and flashed with target lock.

She squeezed down hard.

A one-second burst threw one hundred and twenty-seven high-velocity armour-piercing rounds at the missile with a sound like a rip saw going through rockcrete. She flew the plane straight through the resulting explosion at close to eight hundred miles an hour, and banked hard once more.

The plane shuddered violently, and the flashing red runes on the console told a grim tale of structural damage.

‘I’m Navy!’ she shouted into the vox. ‘Hold fire, you stupid mudfoots!’

The troops on the ground either couldn’t hear her, or they simply didn’t believe her. She was past the missile defences now, but there were Hydra batteries down there somewhere in the green. Several of them.

They opened up all at once, their quad-barrelled autocannons spitting an eruption of Imperial fury into her path. Sal swallowed in a dry mouth. She could climb above their effective range, of course, but not if she hoped to make a landing at Patroclus.

She *had* to get down there, and get down safe with the general’s secrets intact.

A burst of rounds smacked into the belly of the plane, tearing more chunks out of the light armour and taking out half her electronics. The console display died.

*Whatever it takes.*

‘O Emperor, forgive me,’ Sal whispered.

*Win this war, pilot. The Emperor expects.*

She knew she had to. Whatever the general had given her, he believed the secrets contained on the encrypted crystal in that ring could carry the whole war on Elijan III. That would save tens of thousands, maybe *hundreds* of thousands of lives. What were a few mudfoot Hydra crews, compared to that?

They were human. They were, each and every one of them, the divine sparks of the Emperor’s will. They were her comrades, her brothers and sisters in arms. They were shooting at her, yes, but only because they believed her to be an avatar of the Archenemy. They didn’t know any better.

Sal *did* know better, she thought as she jinked the screaming plane around yet another burst of murderous anti-aircraft fire. The tortured airframe moaned in protest, and she knew the Lightning wouldn’t survive much more of this. Not at this speed and altitude, not with the damage it had already taken. There was just no way.

She had no choice.

*The Emperor expects every woman to do her duty, however hard it may be.*

Sal keyed the head-up display and brought the plane around until the four triangles converged on the shape of a Hydra flak tank. There were tears in her eyes.

‘Forgive me,’ she whispered, and squeezed the trigger. ‘Emperor forgive me, for I know exactly what I do.’

The ventral-mounted autocannon blew the machine apart with a two-second burst of supersonic munitions. There couldn’t possibly have been any survivors.

‘I’m Navy!’ Sal screamed into the vox. ‘For the Emperor’s love, let me reach Patroclus base!’

The vox returned a howl of static, but now she was this far away from the cultist’s base their signal jamming seemed to be out of range. Words fizzed in her ears, hardly intelligible.

*‘...ing traitor! By...’*

‘No!’ Sal shouted, working the vox frequency shifter with her left hand even as she fought the stick with the other, narrowly avoiding another burst of anti-aircraft fire. ‘Listen, *please! Navy Intelligence! Colonel Shrake! Get me—*’

One of the Hydras traversed its four swivel-mounted weapons and raked the side of her plane, punching rounds clean through the fuselage. Sal screamed as red-hot adamantium shot through the cockpit, taking a bloody chunk out of the meat of her left shoulder as it went. Her blood splattered against the inside of the canopy, running down the pane to mingle with the tainted, corrupt fluids that already profaned the Lightning. Sal tried hard not to think about what that meant. Wind howled around her as the cockpit violently depressurised.

She overshot the Hydra but there was small-arms fire snapping at her now, and she could see a four-man heavy weapons team hurriedly setting up a missile launcher.

She was out of chaff.

*No choice, Salvatoria, she told herself. There’s no choice.*

The autocannon turned them into red mist against the green.

She brought the crippled plane around and zeroed in on the second Hydra battery. Her head-up display finally died.

Aiming by eye alone, Sal angled the nose of the Lightning down into a steep attack run and let rip with her ventral weapon. The Hydra erupted in a volcano of merciless fire as its magazine went up, and took its nearby Chimera munitions tender with it. Three of the Chimera crew bailed out, blazing like human torches as they died. Sal could hear their screams of agony, if only in her mind.

She hauled back on the stick and the Lightning creaked and groaned in protest as it came out of its dive, shedding chunks of metal into the air as she hauled it around and back onto course.

The vox fizzed in her ear, a new voice.

*'...intelligencer. Col... Shrake... words?'*

The shooting had stopped for the moment and now Patroclus base was coming into view, the long runway waiting for her. It was lined with Hydras, and they were all pointed at her.

Sal wracked her brains for the general's words.

'Ave Imperator,' she said at last, 'in circulum arcanus trismegistus est!'

*'Hold fire. All... hold fire.'*

The vox signal was getting cleaner as she began her landing approach. There was no other option now – the Lightning was finished. It was a wonder it was still in the air at all, and Sal knew that her only choices were to attempt the landing and risk getting blown to pieces by the Hydras, or simply fall apart in the sky.

She took a shaky breath and keyed the landing gear.

Nothing happened.

Was this the Emperor's judgement, for the awful choice she had made? Was He about to smash her into the runway like a bug, in righteous retribution? No, she told herself. No, she did His work here.

His will be done.

She ripped open the emergency hatch to the left of her seat and found the crank handle. It was stiff, obviously too long since it had last been properly maintained, but it turned. Wincing with pain and effort, Sal cranked the landing gear down by hand. The wound in her shoulder howled at her as it ripped further open, the broken bones grinding together under the torn flesh, and blood streamed down her arm and into the emergency cavity until the handle was slick with it.

She gave thanks to the Emperor that she still had enough hydraulic power to lower the flaps, at least, but all the same the crippled plane hit hard and bounced. The tearing agony in her shoulder made Sal scream as her crash webbing bit savagely into it, but she found the air brake lever through greying vision and threw it forward even as she slammed the throttles into reverse thrust.

The Lightning hit the ground again and slewed sideways for a moment, threatening to roll. Sal prayed and screamed and hauled it around at the last moment, righting it in a great, stinking cloud of promethium exhaust and

vaporised tyre smoke.

She throttled back to idle, sagged in her webbing and passed out.

The after-action report was difficult, to say the least.

Colonel Shrake was a woman in her early one-twenties, with short, iron-grey hair and a badly scarred face that the patch over her left eye did little to hide.

She fixed her one remaining eye on Sal and said nothing.

Sal was sitting across a table from her in a small debriefing room, her shoulder field-dressed and her left arm bound to her chest in a tight sling. It hurt like murder, but it was nothing compared to the pain in her heart.

Two large men in the heavy carapace armour of the *Militarum Tempestus* stood behind the colonel's chair, matt-black hellguns in their hands.

The colonel looked down at her data-slate for a moment.

'So, one more time,' she said, her voice like a Fenrisian winter. 'You are not, in fact, an intelligencer. You are a Navy rating, rank of pilot flight officer, no more than that, and yet you are possessed of a crimson-level security passphrase and the single most important intelligence artefact in this entire theatre of war.'

Sal cleared her throat. She was very thirsty, but no one had offered her anything to drink.

'Yes, ma'am,' she said.

'You came into possession of these things after crashing the transport that carried my good friend and colleague General Gobrecht, leaving no survivors but yourself. After this you stole a Chaos-corrupted Lightning from an enemy airbase and flew here, murdering twenty-nine Imperial soldiers and destroying three valuable war machines in the process. Is that correct, Pilot Grant?'

'That's not—' she started, but the colonel's head snapped up and she glared at her until Sal's resolve crumbled. 'Yes, ma'am,' she whispered, and lowered her eyes in shame.

*Here it comes, Sal thought. I'm for the firing squad for sure.*

'Nonsense,' Colonel Shrake said.

Sal looked up in sudden shock as a slow, reptilian smile crossed the colonel's face.

'Ma'am?'

'Acceptable losses, pilot. They lived to serve the Emperor, and they died in service. Don't you understand? Dying is what soldiers are *for*. You are a heroine of the Imperium. You'd better get used to it.'

Sal wouldn't be leaving Elijan III on the *Damocles*.

She was done with Navy life, or so her handler told her. When the time came, she would depart on a sleek, fast ship belonging to the Navy's intelligencers. What happened after that, she didn't know. Nobody would tell her.

Elijan III was over with, anyway. The Imperial victory had been decisive, crushing and brutally fast. Single-handedly, she had made that happen. Her, Salvatoria Grant, Heroine Pilot of the Imperium.

A heroine who cried herself drunkenly to sleep in her private room in the medicae block of the barracks every night.

Her handler knocked on the door of the room where she was still supposedly convalescing from her surgery. What she was really doing, most of the time, was drinking herself into oblivion. Nobody seemed to care, so long as she got her lines right. Her handler marched into the room, and gave her a stiff salute. He was a *Militarum Tempestus* sergeant, and he wore full dress uniform.

'Ma'am,' he said smoothly, pretending not to notice the raw redness of her eyes. 'They're ready for you now.'

Sal nodded and stood up, swaying slightly on her boot heels. Her knuckles were white around the glass of *sacra* in her hand. Her sixth that morning, she thought, or maybe her seventh, but she couldn't be sure. She never could, any more.

She was in full Navy dress herself, the starched jacket uncomfortably tight over her still-healing shoulder. They'd had to fit an augmetic joint to save her arm, in the end. It hurt all the time, every minute of the day and night. Especially the nights. Sal clung to that pain, embraced it.

Deserved it.

She gulped her *sacra* and put the glass unsteadily down on the low table in front of her.

It was time to face the massed ranks of the *Astra Militarum* again.

Time to be the heroine, again. The newest face of the Imperial propaganda machine.

Her handler reached into his uniform jacket and produced a pair of mirrored pilot's glasses, and handed them to her without a word.

She dutifully put them on to hide her red eyes, and followed the sergeant out of the medicae block. He led her down a corridor and out onto the square where the second Guard regiment awaited her, drawn up in parade formation.

Sal missed the Navy. She missed the freedom of flight, the furious glory of aerial assault. The space to breathe that was now denied to her.

Before her latest surgery, she had attended twenty-nine military funerals, closely watched at all times by two of Shrake's hulking *Militarum Tempestus*

Scions.

She had sobbed like a child at every single one.

Once she had given her pre-prepared, pre-approved, heavily rehearsed speech to the assembled mudfoots and they had duly applauded and saluted and praised her in the Emperor's name, her handler escorted her back to her room in the medicae block.

'You should rest,' he said.

That wasn't a suggestion, Sal knew.

The sergeant turned on his heel and left the room, and she heard the key turn in the lock behind him. Sal poured herself a sacra and walked to the window, gazing out in despair.

It was getting dark outside now, and the barrack block's floodlights were coming on. Not that they were needed, not any more.

Outside, on the raked gravel in front of the building where the Chimeras were parked in long lines, a huge, flickering ten-storey hologram lit up the night. It showed a young Imperial Navy pilot, taller and leaner and better-looking than Sal had ever been in her life, her hands braced on her hips as she stared into the distance with her chin raised in defiance. A caption hung in the air above it, the words fully twenty feet tall above the towering figure.

It read *Salvatoria Grant, Heroine of the Imperium!*

The key, turning in the door to lock her in – the newest tool of the Imperial propaganda effort.

The Militarum Tempestus troopers, never letting her out of their sight.

Twenty-nine funerals.

Salvatoria Grant sat down on her hospital bed, put her head in her hands, and she wept.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Peter McLean** was born near London in 1972, the son of a bank manager and an English teacher. He went to school in the shadow of Norwich Cathedral where he spent most of his time making up stories. By the time he left school this was probably the thing he was best at, alongside the Taoist kung fu he had been studying since the age of 13. He grew up in the Norwich alternative scene, alternating dingy nightclubs with martial arts and practical magic. He has since grown up a bit, if not a lot, and spent 25 years working in corporate IT. He is married to Diane and is still making up stories. *Baphomet by Night* is his first story for Black Library.

An extract from *Glory Imperialis Omnibus*.



Carson scrambled over the rocks at the head of his men. He hadn't given any orders; he hadn't needed to. His men knew what was happening, and they knew what to do. Every single one of them was a veteran. Every single one had been fighting since the first campaign of the Ellinor Crusade to here. They'd been soldiers for more years than everything else they'd ever been. He had left his position on the line; Red had gone with him, and the men silently laid down their packs and followed after. Words were simply no longer needed.

He had led them hard south, taking them around onto the reverse of the ridge that led back down the valley. They ran in amongst the stacks and rock chimneys which made the craggy terrain look almost as though it were a field of giant wheat made of stone. They went fast, swarming up the slope and over the broken, treacherous ground. Their step was sure, their movement confident and quiet. Anything they had been originally issued which rattled or clinked or flapped had been secured or disposed of long before.

The men grouped automatically in their sections, each man knowing his place in formation behind his corporal. The corporals focused ahead, each one forging his own path so as to avoid congestion or bottlenecks that would slow their advance or draw the enemy's eye. The sections rushed through concealed gullies, the men tightening into a column to thread their way through narrow gaps between chimneys and then dispersing back into formation once on the other side. They kept low over rises to reduce their profile and, no matter how steep their path became, they always kept their lasrifles in their grasps.

They went fast. Faster than they should. Faster than doctrine allowed. Carson knew it was a risk, but neither he nor any of his men could abide any further delay. Their attack was a strike to the throat that would take grip and then throttle the life from their foe.

It was a risk that paid off. Whilst the Charasians had some fine shots amongst their kind, Carson knew they were not soldiers. The tribe-males had allowed

their attention to focus entirely on their victims in the Boy Company; they all wanted to score a kill against their liberators. They thought they had hidden themselves well, but the faint discharges from the Kartha weapons their former overlords had left them were all Carson needed. Their very firing stances, low and crouched over, helped conceal the Brimlock platoon as it closed in on them from their left and behind. There were only a dozen or so metres left between Carson and the rearmost of the Charasian positions and still no warning had been shouted. Just like their targets a few minutes earlier, the Charasians did not stand a chance.

Carson did not need to order the attack. He merely had to think it. His men acted as he knew they would. They sprinted the last few metres and launched themselves at the enemy. The heavy butts of lasrifles smashed against the backs of unprotected Charasian heads, smashing their skulls or knocking them cold so there would be no shouts of pain when the lasrifles were reversed and bayonets impaled their flesh. One realised the danger a moment too soon and Carson heard a xenos shriek that carried over the sound of the continual gunfire.

Grenades, Carson thought, and he saw them fly down into the midst of the Charasian hiding places. Their firing stopped and for a split second there was no sound but a single voice gabbling xenos words. Then there was the *crump-crump-crump* of the detonations and blood-mist sprayed into the air. The screaming began for real: screams of pain from those struck and of panic from those who had been so confident a moment before, but were now realising the peril they were in. They were turning, desperate to target the threat that had appeared right behind them.

Volley, Carson thought, and las-shots from Brimlock rifles flashed around him. Through the spurs and jagged outcrops, few struck true, but the crack of the shots as they splintered off rock and the hiss of the air as the beams passed nearby convinced the remaining Charasians that they had been outflanked by far greater numbers than a mere platoon. There was no return fire. The Charasians were surprised, a few of them were dead, but the rest were safe in their dug-in positions. If the Brimlock Guardsmen hesitated, gave them even a minute to recover and collect themselves, the Charasians could have stayed put and unleashed a withering fire on the Guardsmen now so visible coming over the ridge above them.

His men had to charge, Carson thought, and that was exactly what they did. As his men leapt down upon their targets, Carson launched himself into a knot of the tribe-males. They were still standing, turning, fumbling to bring their

weapons around against the new threat. Carson's pistols were already in his hands. He clenched the triggers, once, twice and a third time, and the bodies of three of the xenos fighters smacked down onto stone, their faces and chests incinerated by the heat of the las-beams.

There was a sharp, shocked inhalation of breath behind him. He whirled about. Another Charasian had been hidden in the shadow of an outcrop. It was younger, this one, and for a split second Carson paused. His gaze locked with the wide, black-eyed xenos. Its youth was not relevant; it was carrying a gun, it would not get any older. Carson fired. He did not look to see that it hit, he knew it had.

He flattened himself against a rock, taking cover in exactly the same position that his enemy had been in a few seconds before. He listened and the only sounds he could hear were the shots of Brimlock lasrifles and the crunching of stone underfoot as men charged in behind him.

He looked up. All across the slope the Charasians were on their feet and running east, staying on the side of the valley, fleeing from Carson's men above them and the Boy Company below. It was only now that he could see how many of the enemy there had been. Over a hundred of them were running from the thirty Guardsmen who had attacked them. The Brimlock Guardsmen, winded and unable to keep up, kept firing at the backs of those in flight. Every Charasian tribe-male they killed at this moment was one who would never return to strike at them in the future. Carson saw Forjaz, his bayonet and rifle barrel drenched in the blood of the xenos who had been shooting at his child.

'Sergeant!' Carson called over to him, his first word since he had worked away from Blunder. 'Take a section, check on the boys.'

Forjaz stared for a moment, still wrapped in his paternal blood-rage, then blinked and nodded gratefully. Better that he knew as soon as he could whether his son was living or dead.

The sound of Brimlock las-fire lessened as the surviving Charasians went to ground, disappearing amongst the same kind of rock chimneys and gullies that had hidden Carson's own attack. They would not go far, they did not need to. They knew the country far too well to be rooted out by off-worlders. A few of them at least would turn back so as to stall any pursuit of the main party and perhaps even to creep back and take their attackers off-guard.

It was a merciless war, on both sides, and Carson suspected he would soon see how little mercy his own side had, for Blunder had finally ordered the other two companies to move and they were coming back for him.

Captain Blundell regarded the awkward reunion of Sergeant Forjaz with his bruised, bloodied, but still living son: man and boy, both shaken, yet both firmly restraining the emotions going through them. Blundell looked away from the embarrassing scene and instead shot a scorching gaze up towards the rocks where Carson, Red and the rest of their platoon were still holding. Blundell would be damned if he was going up there to haul the second lieutenant down again. Carson had to come down to him, and he would wait until he did so and then throw the book at him.

Blundell was furious. The captain did not care who Carson had saved; he was finished in this company. With the help of a senior officer or two – Major Roussell was another who detested Carson – the second lieutenant would be finished in this existence as well. He would be handed over to the commissars and they would put him up against a wall and be done with him.

This waiting game he was playing was not going to save him. Lord General Ellinor himself could appear and could not save him from the facts. Carson had defied Blundell's orders and that was it. His life was forfeit, and a thorn in Blundell's side would finally be removed.

'Captain,' someone alerted him. Blundell looked about. A trooper was walking towards him from second platoon. It was that piece of Cawnpore detritus, Corporal Gardner.

'Captain Blundell,' Gardner said, raising his hand and saluting him.

Blundell automatically snapped off a quick salute in reply. 'Yes, what?'

And the carefully aimed shot from a Kartha rifle burned through the back of Blundell's head and blew his face out from behind.

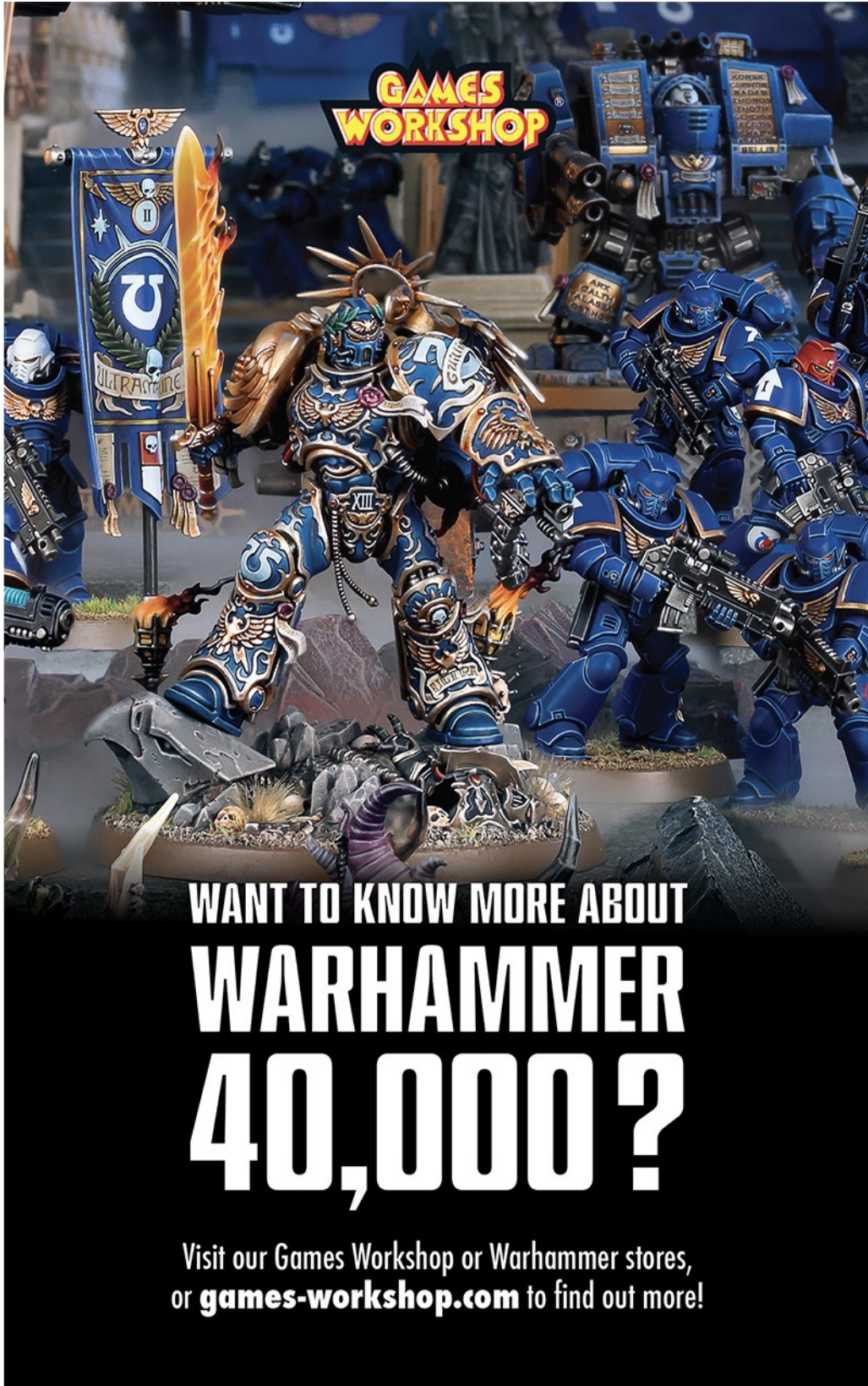
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