

WARHAMMER
40,000



DO EAGLES STILL CIRCLE THE MOUNTAIN?

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DO EAGLES STILL CIRCLE THE MOUNTAIN?

Graham McNeill

'To destroy the works of the Mechanicus is an affront to the Ommissiah,' said Adept Komeda, hurrying after Uriel. 'Adept Komeda does not approve.'

'Your approval is irrelevant,' said Uriel.

'Adept Komeda is certain that Fabricata Ubrique will not allow this.'

'The Fabricata is not in charge here,' said Uriel. 'I am.'

He turned from the irritating adept, pushed through the buckled shutters of the compound's operational command structure and emerged into its walled courtyard.

Weak sunlight glittered from rusted metal palisades and iron-framed drilling towers. The stench of alien dung and foul electrical vapours filled his senses. Less than an hour ago, this had been the site of a bloody kill-strike against an occupying force of greenskins.

Ancient Peleus stood atop the gate arch like heroic statuary, as if daring the orks to return, the banner of the Fourth Company snapping in the wind above him. Petronius Nero stood beside him, combat shield slung over his back and honour blade shimmering in the low sun.

Uriel touched the eagle at his breastplate, pride and humility alloyed in perfect balance at the sight of the jade-bordered image of a mailed fist gripping the Ultima.

Two Rhinos grumbled by the molten remains of the compound's gate, the cobalt-blue of their flanks all but obscured by clinging mud. Brutus Cyprian and Livius Hadrianus sat on the running boards, checking their weapons and arguing over the best way to aim a melta-gun.

These warriors were the Swords of Calth, his honour guard and chosen men. They had fought at his side since the Bloodborn invasion of Ultramar, heroes all,

and each with an exemplary legacy of courage and honour.

Uriel nodded to his warriors, making his way past three execution poles lying in the mud where a defence auxilia Chimera had toppled them. A team of corpsmen in tan and ochre uniforms attended upon two pallid youngsters who until only recently had been chained to those petrochemical-soaked poles.

Alexia and Casimir Nassaur. Highborn twins and joint heirs to the governorship of Sycorax. Both were clad in garb wholly unsuited to the muddy conditions prevalent on this world: kidskin britches, thin-soled boots of soft leather and brightly coloured fabrics that shone like dragonfly wings.

Along with Fabricata Ubrique, they had been taken prisoner by the orks and were only alive thanks to Uriel and the warriors of the Ultramarines Fourth Company.

The Fabricata herself stood beside a shattered drilling auger, surrounded by a gaggle of fussing tech-priests and grim-masked skitarii. Her servo-harness delved into the machine's guts in search of salvageable parts.

Uriel ignored them and climbed up to the dung-smear ramparts. Ultramarines warriors manned the walls, bolters aimed out over the endless expanse of mudflats and mist-shrouded fens.

To the south-east, the rust-brown summit of Mount Shokereth was veiled by slate-grey rain clouds. On Macragge, the mountains were soaring, geological wonders, white as marble. Here, they were miserable agglomerations of loose shale, rain-slick basalt and treacherous mud.

Abandoned mine-workings and nameless Imperial facilities circled Mount Shokereth's haunches, and from a rocky promontory near its summit, a lone vox-mast relayed positional information. When the mists closed in on Sycorax, pilots were as good as blind, and such beacons were the only way to navigate.

Uriel circled around to the northern corner of the compound's defensive walls, where a glyph-inscribed tower lay cantilevered out over the mud.

Perched atop the tower, Torias Telion kept watch on the horizon. The Scout sergeant looked down and gave a curt nod. His features were like weathered oak, and careworn fissures carved deep lines over his stern expression.

'Best tell Pasanus to hurry,' he said.

'They're on the move?' asked Uriel, gesturing to the tar-black pillars of smoke on the ash-smear horizon.

Telion nodded. 'At least three mud-steamers. Turning our way and picking up speed.'

'How long do we have?'

'No more than fifteen minutes,' said Telion. 'Any word from Captain Fabian and the Third?'

'Nothing certain,' said Uriel. 'Between the ork scrap-tech and the atmospheric, long-range vox is lousy with distortion. All I know is that they are in the thick of it with the orks on Medea Ridge. We will link with them once Fabian starts rolling up their flank.'

Telion dropped from the canted rig, landing silently despite the metal decking plates.

'Then we need to be moving now,' he said. 'I'll take the Scouts ahead in the Speeder, see if we can't find a better route to Port Setebos.'

Uriel nodded and followed Telion back to the courtyard, issuing evacuation orders as he went. Even before they'd reached the churned earth of the courtyard, the Rhino exhausts were venting fumes as they built up power.

Telion boarded the Land Speeder Storm and it lifted from the mud with a wet whine before vanishing over the walls. The warriors of Pasanus's Firebrand squad boarded one Rhino, the Swords of Calth the other. Fabricata Ubrique and her coterie of tech-priests and skitarii clambered aboard a heavily modified Salamander Scout vehicle, while the Nassaur twins were bundled into an up-armoured Chimera with their family's heraldic lion and tower crest on its glacis. Ablative mesh and integral ion-shield generators studded its flanks like blisters.

'Pasanus?' said Uriel over the vox.

'Coming up now,' came the brusque answer.

A cog-stamped access hatch to the compound's maintenance sub-levels in the centre of the courtyard lifted from the mud and was pushed aside.

A broad-shouldered Ultramarines sergeant emerged, his shoulder guards scraping the sides of the hatchway as he climbed the last rungs of an inset ladder. His blue armour was a mix of Tactical Dreadnought plates affixed to a power-armoured chassis, every square centimetre caked in mud and oil or dripping with subterranean effluvia.

'Guilliman save us, you stink,' said Uriel.

'You try planting demo-charges below the water table and see how sweet you smell by the end of it,' countered Pasanus.

'Telion says we need to get out of here now,' said Uriel.

Pasanus wiped mud from the Ultima on his shoulder guard and nodded. 'In five minutes this place is going to be a smoking hole in the ground, so yes, I'd suggest we get a move on.'

Orks had long been a problem for the inhabitants of Sycorax.

A greenskin invasion nine centuries earlier had been defeated, but improperly eradicated, and the surviving orks had festered in the inaccessible mudflats. Occasional spasms of violent migrations forced a succession of governors to mount periodic expeditions into the wilds to quell such threats.

For the most part, this was enough, but the current rampage was the worst for five hundred years, destroying every force sent against it and spreading over the planet's surface like a virus. Mechanicus facilities were looted and burned to the ground, cities plundered and their populations taken as slaves or meat. The local defence auxilia was swept aside by the green tide, and so Governor Nassaur had sent a desperate petition for aid to the Lord of Macragge.

In the wake of the Bloodborn invasion, few such petitions could be heard, but Sycorax lay within Ultramar and Lord Calgar had despatched warriors from the Third and Fourth companies.

While the Fourth mounted hit-and-run raids against targets of opportunity throughout the continental landmass, Captain Fabian - eager for glory after the attack on Lysis Macar - had put the Third in the thick of the fighting.

The greenskins were pushing hard for Port Setebos, the seat of Governor Nassaur and heart of the vast manufacturing empire of the Adeptus Mechanicus, but there was no mass evacuation or flights across the ocean to safety.

Dozens of defence auxilia regiments and skitarii cohorts had been pulled back here to hold the city's main defensive line on the natural bastion of Medea Ridge. Captain Fabian and his Third would launch an unstoppable hammerblow on the enemy flank to roll up the greenskins and trap them with their backs to the ocean.

And this time, the eradication would be done correctly.

Uriel watched as the last of the compound sank into the mud. Most such structures were temporary anyway, built on a honeycombed network of subterranean drilling foundations, but the orks had buttressed this one with shuttered caissons long enough that it would likely have survived to be plundered by their disgusting kin.

'Captain Ventris is correct in this matter,' Fabricata Ubrique had said, when Adept Komeda had once again protested at the compound's destruction. 'The corruption is too pervasive to be removed entirely. Its destruction is preferable to it being looted by xenos.'

Even Adept Komeda had understood that.

The last spar of a drilling auger sank beneath the boiling mud, and, beyond it, Uriel saw the smoking, clanking behemoths pursuing them.

The locals called them mud-steamers, which sounded almost pleasant until you saw one. Each was a hulking slab of bladed iron that bludgeoned its way through the surface layers of mud like an ocean-going ironclad of a bygone age. Smoke-belching engines and vast iron paddles on either side churned the mud and threw spuming geysers up in their wake.

Monstrous weapons that defied any easy understanding or identification crowded the decks, together with ramshackle aircraft that every adept of the Mechanicus swore should be unflyable. The greenskin ability to swiftly assemble weapon technology that ought to be beyond them had proved to be far in advance of what would normally be expected.

'They are quite magnificent, are they not?' asked Fabricata Ubrique, riding atop her converted Salamander, whose integral power fields kept the mud from touching her black and red robes. Ubrique's throat had been partially crushed by her ork captors, and her voice was scratchy and distorted. 'Ah, what I would not give to study one such leviathan up close.'

'I saw one up close not long after we made planetfall,' said Uriel. 'Trust me, it is not an experience you would relish.'

'Entirely understandable,' agreed Ubrique with a bark of mechanical laughter. 'But just think what we might learn.'

'I was under the impression that xenotech was outlawed by the Adeptus Mechanicus. Forbidden.'

Ubrique nodded and said, 'Indeed it is. Such a belief in the inherent ungodliness of alien technology is what separates us from the lesser races of the galaxy. Taint the golden light of the Omnissiah with the insidious corruption of alien mechanisms, and we risk dulling that light forever.'

'Then why study it?'

'Do you not study the methods of war practised by your enemies so that you might better fight them?'

'We do,' agreed Uriel.

'Then we understand one another, Captain Ventris,' said Ubrique as the air-pounding noise of enormous guns opening fire erupted from the closing mud-steamers. Their decks were obscured by yellowed clouds, and seconds later multiple smoke trails arced upwards on wobbling parabolas.

'Are we in range?' asked Uriel.

'As with all things greenskin, who can tell?' said Ubrique, retreating within the

armoured interior of her Salamander as it pulled away in a spray of mud.

Uriel returned his attention to the incoming munitions, trying to extrapolate where they would hit. As Ubrique had warned, their flight paths were unpredictable. Some had already fallen to the mud, others were boosting themselves into higher arcs.

As erratic as the incoming shells were, there were a *lot* of them, and what the orks lacked in quality, they made up for in quantity.

Uriel dropped into the Rhino and pulled the hatch shut behind him. He locked it and moved back into the crew compartment where the Swords of Calth sat ramrod straight against its interior surfaces.

'Was that incoming artillery, captain?' asked Peleus from the driver's compartment. The ancient's voice was strained from the effort of guiding the Rhino through the mud while trying to keep them from becoming bogged down.

Uriel nodded. 'Deck guns on the mud-steamers.'

'On target?' asked Brutus Cyprian.

'You'll know soon enough if it hits us,' said Livius Hadrianus.

'The range is too great,' said Petronius Nero. 'There's no way the orks could hit us from here.'

Cyprian hammered a fist on Nero's shoulder guard.

'Emperor save us from such foolish words,' he said. 'You've all but guaranteed we'll be hit, Peto.'

Uriel knew Nero would be scowling beneath his helm. Only Cyprian would dare call their champion bladesman by his old Agiselus nickname.

'We stay on course and Nero should be correct,' said Uriel as the first tremors of impact shook the Rhino. 'It's likely they'll turn back when we get close to Fabian and the Third.'

Yet more impacts hammered down, closer this time, and Uriel grabbed onto a stanchion as the Rhino shook with the violence of a nearby detonation as stones and buried rubble struck its armour.

'You were saying?' said Cyprian.

'You're worried?' asked Hadrianus.

'No,' answered Cyprian, and Uriel believed him. It took more than scores of incoming high-explosive shells to unnerve Brutus Cyprian.

'Captain Ventris,' said Peleus. 'Vox contact with Port Setebos.'

Uriel frowned. He hadn't heard anything on the Chapter vox-net. 'Who is it from?'

'Unknown. Defence auxilia signifiers. Command rank.'

Uriel made his way forwards and removed his helm, placing it in the stowage rack beside Peleus's shoulder. The vox-horn was only required when speaking to non-Chapter personnel, and a grim sense of premonition filled him as he held it to his ear.

'This is Captain Ventris. Speak.'

When it came, the voice was scratchy, fading in and out every few seconds, but the import of the words was all too clear. He carefully replaced the horn in its recess.

'What news, captain?' asked Hadrianus.

'Port Setebos is about to fall,' said Uriel, still reeling from what he had just heard.

'What?' said Nero. 'How...?'

Uriel shook his head. 'I do not know. Medea Ridge has been broken open and the orks are pouring through.'

'And what of the Third's flanking attack?' asked Cyprian.

'It... failed,' said Uriel, the word anathema to him. 'Fabian is in full retreat.'

Before the Swords of Calth could react to the unthinkable notion that an Ultramarines attack could *fail*, even more impacts slammed into the Rhino.

The vehicle's topside armour buckled inwards where half a dozen impacts punched convex deformations. Hadrianus slammed a fist into one, flattening it.

'Konor's Teeth!' he swore. 'That wasn't artillery fire.'

'No,' agreed Uriel, remembering the red-skinned aircraft on the decks of the mud-steamers. 'It was a strafing run.'

Uriel threw open the top hatch of the Rhino in time to see one of the six defence auxilia Chimera explode as a stream of laser-bright shells cut it in two. Bodies on fire tumbled from the wreckage as it ploughed a wash of muddy water ahead of it.

It wasn't the only one to die.

Another auxilia Chimera was ablaze sixty metres behind them, trapped in the mud by a thrown track and an easy target even for greenskins. A skitarii transport was missing half its side where its engine block had blown it wide open. Its crew were either dead or firing into the sky.

Four aircraft spun crazily overhead, as though piloted by drunken maniacs. Crude centreline prop-engines dragged them through the air, the iron patchwork of their fuselages painted a painfully vivid red. They were emblazoned with fangs and angular bovine skull emblems, and Uriel had seen wrecked Imperial

craft that looked to be in better shape.

They wobbled and dipped and rolled erratically, but every now and then they would level out and come at the convoy of vehicles once again. Wing-mounted guns barked with deafening thunder, throwing up great ochre spurts where the explosive rounds ripped into the ground.

The mud-steamers were close enough to make out individual greenskins on their gun decks. Howling, grunting, mad things, they took obscene pleasure in the act of killing and were almost *energised* by it. More shells arced overhead, falling in a booming, explosive deluge that filled the air with brackish mud and rain.

Peleus wasn't stopping the Rhino. To stop would mean never moving again as the mud pulled them down. Uriel gripped the handles of the storm bolter and swung the cupola around as the screaming howl of thudding turbines bellied out over the mudflats.

'Top cover!' shouted Uriel, and a moment later, he saw Pasanius take control of the storm bolter mounted on the Firebrand's Rhino.

'Where in Guilliman's name is Telion?' shouted Pasanius. 'We could really use a speeder about now!'

Uriel had no time to answer. Chopping, percussive thunder to his right. He swung the cupola round. A greenskin fighter rolled in on an attack run, and he gave thanks the pilot wasn't aware enough to attack along the line of the column.

Shells sawed into the ground. He mashed the triggers and a stream of mass-reactives punched upwards. Recoil battered his palms as he tried to walk his fire into the path of the warplane.

'Hold still, damn you,' cursed Uriel as the ork pilot swung his aircraft from side to side. He slewed the cupola round as the warplane roared overhead, the propwash battering Uriel with its force.

The aircraft began climbing, slowing. Uriel drew a bead on it before it passed out of his weapon's arc of fire.

'Now,' he said and sent four shells into the rear quarters of the warplane. The explosion blew off its tail section and it immediately corkscrewed around in a looping spiral before slamming straight down.

It exploded in a wet bloom of fire and mud.

Streams of laser fire from Ubrique's Salamander struck another aircraft, too weak to hurt it but serving as a warning that this convoy had teeth. An additional aircraft fell from the sky as Pasanius found his mark, a bolter shell managing to get past the enormous prop and blow the pilot's head off.

Uriel swung around as a further set of explosions sent a wash of heat over him. The up-armoured Chimera containing the Nassaur twins had taken a hit to the engine block. The vehicle came to a swift halt as the cloying mud sucked hard at the tracks.

'Peleus, turn around,' he shouted. 'Circle back to the Nassaur Chimera.'

'That will make us a target,' warned Peleus.

'I'm not leaving them behind,' said Uriel. 'For all we know one of them might be the Imperial commander now.'

Peleus threw the Rhino into a tight skid, throwing up a wall of mud as he wrenched the controls. Uriel heard the side doors open and two Space Marines stepped out onto the running board.

Brutus Cyprian and Livius Hadrianus.

'Just drive in close and we'll get them,' Cyprian shouted through to Peleus.

The two aircraft, sensing the value of the smoking Chimera arced around in a wobbling circle. A pair of shark-nosed missiles detached from beneath one warplane's wings and slashed towards the wallowing vehicle. One buried itself in the mud after only fifty metres, but the other...

'Invictus's Oath, it's actually on target,' said Uriel. He pulled the triggers and fired a stream of bolter shells into what he hoped would be its flight path. Another pattern of fire joined it and the missile detonated as it flew into the interlocking zone of mass-reactives. The shredded wreckage ploughed into the ground and blew a mushroom cloud of mud into the air.

'*That's* how you bring down a missile,' called Pasanus from his own Rhino. 'Did you forget everything Chronus taught you about working in pairs?'

The Firebrand's vehicle followed a parallel course to Uriel's, and behind it came Fabricata Ubrique's Salamander. Riding in the turret, much to Uriel's surprise, was Adept Komeda, who was linked by a flexing brass cable to a boxy missile tube mounted on the side of the turret.

The adept's optics flashed from cherry red to emerald green, and a fiery contrail raced upwards. The war-spirit in the seeker head of the hunter-killer saw its victim and twisted through the air to slay it.

The missile flew straight into the warplane's intakes and it vanished in an expanding fireball of spinning debris. Its remains fell into the mud as the final aircraft dropped vertiginously to strafe the Nassaur Chimera.

'Faster, Peleus!' shouted Uriel.

Escorted by their lifewards, the Nassaur twins struggled through mud that reached mid-thigh, ruining their fine clothes. Until now, they had affected an

entitled disregard for their safety, but the fear on their faces was immediately very real.

Cyprian and Hadrianus leaned out, their arms extended.

'Get a move on!' bellowed Cyprian in a tone that Uriel was willing to bet they'd never heard directed their way before. Their lifewards hauled them out of the mud and held them as high as they could. Peleus brought the Rhino in as close and as slow as he dared.

Cyprian leaned out, his hand closing on Alexia Nassaur's wrist. Hadrianus grabbed hold of Casimir.

'Go!' shouted Cyprian, and mud fountained from the rear of the Rhino as Peleus rammed out the throttle. Alexia screamed in pain as she was wrenched from her lifeward's grip and Cyprian all but threw her inside the Rhino. Hadrianus was scarcely less brutal and Casimir cried out as he too was bundled unceremoniously inside.

The Rhino lurched through the muddy tracks left by the Nassaur vehicle, leaving the lifewards and the Chimera's crew wallowing in its wake. It sat ill with Uriel to leave such brave men and women behind, but to try and save them would doom them all. They knew that too and urged the Ultramarines to greater speed as they turned to fire pistols at the incoming ork warplane.

A blizzard of shells tore from the howling craft's wings, and a hurricane engulfed the ground behind the Rhino, fogging the air with a mist of shredded meat, iron and mud. Peleus slewed the vehicle around as Cyprian and Hadrianus fired at the warplane as it too circled. Bolt-rounds spanked from its scavenged, ironwork hide. Thin lines of smoke trailed the juddering craft.

'It's coming in again!' shouted Livius Hadrianus as the warplane dropped lower, rolling and pitching as though coming in to crash land. Perhaps it was, thought Uriel. Perhaps that was its last ditch attack.

He brought the storm bolters around and lined the iron sights with the erratic flightpath of the ork assault craft. It roared towards them in a looping, veering course, miraculously evading the streams of las and bolt-rounds punching the air around it.

Enormous shells tore a weaving path towards the Rhino. Metre-deep trenches were gouged in the mud. Uriel couldn't tell if they would hit. His own shells ripped a blazing path through the air, maddeningly refusing to marry up with the warplane's lunatic trajectory.

Time slowed as the warplane dropped lower. It rolled, the wings vertical as the canopy slid past Uriel. The hammerblow force of its propwash threatened to rip

him from the cupola.

He heard the clang of metal behind him.

The topside hatch opened.

Uriel's eyes locked with those of the greenskin pilot. Encased in furred leathers, smeared-glass goggles and a spiked pot-helmet, the bestial creature's eyes were coal-red and pitiless. Its porcine jaws opened wide with savage glee, monstrously tusked and spattering the canopy with caustic saliva.

The warplane thundered past Uriel. Standing behind him on the upper deck of the Rhino was Petronius Nero. He leapt, combat shield held in one hand, his honour blade sweeping out in a blindingly swift arc.

It clove through the cracked glass canopy and sheared the ork pilot's head cleanly down the middle. Stinking greenskin blood exploded over the inside of the cockpit.

And then the tail struck Nero, slamming him fifty metres out over the mud. Uriel watched him twist in the air, bringing his legs around to land in a skidding slide.

The ork warplane remained airborne for a hundred metres or more before its nose dipped and the leading edge of its wing ploughed mud. It cartwheeled and came apart, exploding into a million fragments of flaming debris.

Peleus angled the Rhino to intercept Petronius Nero, who climbed aboard as if leaping from a moving vehicle to attack a warplane was the most basic move taught by the swordmasters of Macragge.

Brutus Cyprian slapped the champion on the back, congratulating him on the kill, while Livius Hadrianus just shook his head at the recklessness of the young.

'Good work,' said Uriel, dropping into the Rhino as Nero closed the top hatch and took his seat. The champion nodded, but said nothing, cleaning the blood and oil from his slender blade.

Even through the steelwork hull, Uriel felt the booming thunder of fresh artillery fire from the mud-steamers.

The vox chirruped in Uriel's ear.

'I must congratulate your warrior on a most entertaining kill, Captain Ventris,' said Fabricata Ubrique.

'Once we're safe,' answered Uriel.

'Ah, yes, to that,' said Ubrique. *'There is no delicate way to say this, but since Captain Fabian's defeat, it seems we are caught between the hammer and anvil. We cannot continue south to Port Setebos, and the mud-steamers behind us*

render north an unattractive prospect.'

'Then it's east or west,' said Uriel, calling up the local topography onto a command slate inset on the wall of the Rhino. Impacts shook it as high explosive rounds slammed down nearby.

'I would suggest east,' said Ubrique. *'West is open mudflats for thousands of kilometres, east takes us to Mount Shokereth. Rocky ground where the mud-steamers cannot follow.'*

'They can still bombard us.'

'Not if we take refuge within the mountain,' said Ubrique. *'The reinforced tunnels beneath Variava Station plunge deep into the rock and ought to be proof against any greenskin munitions.'*

'Ought to be?'

'So I would surmise from the strength of the detonations surrounding us and the known density of the mountain,' said Ubrique, her voice rich with an amusement that Uriel certainly didn't share.

He scanned the map, quickly scrolling in all the cardinal directions and quickly coming to the conclusion that Ubrique was correct. It was the mountain or death.

Coordinates appeared on the slate, fresh from the Fabricata's Salamander.

He spun the vox dial to a broad-frequency channel.

'All vehicles, full speed to the east,' said Uriel, passing on the coordinates. 'We make for Mount Shokereth.'

The interior of Variava Station reeked of abandonment, though Ubrique insisted it was a fully-functioning outpost. Its corridors were sepulchral, bare stone and steel, modular and virtually identical to every other Mechanicus facility Uriel had seen.

A handful of servitors tended to the quietly humming machines of its central command chamber, and the air was freighted with a bitter, electrical tang. Adept Komeda was plugged into the vox-station, and his augmitters burbled with background chatter, ghost voices and hissing static.

Defence auxilia personnel fussed around the highborn twins, though it was Pasanius that had set the bones in Alexia Nassaur's wrist. In the absence of Apothecary Selenus, Pasanius had taken on that role with a gentleness surprising in such a big warrior.

'Is our world lost?' Alexia Nassaur asked.

'The situation is bleak,' said Uriel. 'But this world can still be saved.'

She nodded, her features slick with pain-sweat, her trust in the invincibility of

Space Marines total. Uriel hoped he and his warriors could live up to that trust.

Dust drifted from the ceiling as the mud-steamers continued their bombardment. Almost every mine and Imperial facility ringing the lower slopes of the mountain had been pounded flat by the greenskin artillery, but Variava Station yet endured.

'As promised, the roots of this place reach deep into the mountain,' said Ubrique, glancing upwards.

'More than I would have thought a maintenance station would require,' said Uriel.

Ubrique shrugged, a curiously human gesture. 'When you need to build everything on shifting mud, you build strongly.'

'Then let's hope it's strong enough to last until the lord admiral's Thunderhawks arrive.'

Adept Komeda had finally broken through the vox-distortion to make contact with Lord Admiral Lazlo Tiberius in orbit aboard the *Vae Victus*, the Fourth Company's attendant strike cruiser. A pair of Fourth Company Thunderhawks were even now dropping through the atmosphere to extract them.

Ubrique's eyes flickered with internal calculations. 'I make that fifteen minutes from now.'

'Tight,' said Livius Hadrianus, halting in his pacing of the circular room and glancing at external pict-slates. 'We'll likely still need to fight our way out.'

The mud-steamers were unable to approach the mountain, but the hordes of greenskin warbands disembarking from the three leviathans had no such problem.

Adept Komeda lifted a hand, and Uriel heard the crackle of an incoming vox. Space Marine prefix codes.

'*Captain Ventris,*' said the voice of the Thunderhawk's pilot via Komeda's augmitters. '*Be advised that we will approach from the east and circle in for evacuation from platform Rho-Epsilon-Seven. Estimated arrival time, thirteen minutes.*'

'Understood,' said Uriel. 'On our way.'

The transmission snapped off, but Adept Komeda jerked as though current were passing through him. His augmitters barked and spat a hiss of angry static, like a swarm of killer stingwings.

The sense of something immense and ancient filled the chamber, a fragment of something inhuman in scale and perception, yet hideously curious about the tiny lifeforms before it.

'Komeda?' asked Ubrique. 'Disengage the vox. Now.'

'*Do Eagles still circle the mountain?*' asked Komeda in a voice not his own. Uriel felt a chill as a sensation he'd not felt for a long time crept over him.

The space between his shoulder blades burned cold, as though an old wound were suddenly aflame. He remembered another mountain, another world. A dark place far from the light, where something older than time had almost ended him.

'*Do Eagles still circle the mountain?*' repeated Komeda, his head turning towards Uriel like the turret of a tank on rusted bearings.

Uriel didn't understand the question, but knew his answer was crucial.

'Yes,' he said. 'Eagles still circle the mountain.'

'*Then begone,*' said Komeda, sagging against the vox-station as though drained utterly of strength. Ubrique rushed to his side, wrenching the link-cables from his inload ports.

'What in Guilliman's name was that?' asked Pasanus.

Petronius Nero had his sword drawn and aimed at Komeda. Even the skitarii looked unsettled by the malign voice and its mysterious question.

'Something to deal with later,' said Uriel. 'Everyone up, that Thunderhawk isn't going to wait for us.'

Spiralling rockets and heavy-calibre gunfire chased the Thunderhawk as it surged from Rho-Epsilon-Seven. Its blazing jetwash scorched braying greenskins to ash as the Swords of Calth fired from the open assault ramp.

The second Thunderhawk hovered overhead, its prow-bolters flensing the approach to the platform with mass-reactives.

Uriel hammered his fist on the closing mechanism as the gunship gained height. Explosions slammed against its underside and rattling impacts of gunfire beat its flanks like hard rain.

'Everyone accounted for?' he asked as the ramp finally shut.

'All of us who got to the mountain are aboard,' said Pasanus. 'Still no sign of Telion, though.'

'I wouldn't worry about him,' said Uriel. 'If anyone is going to survive out there alone, it's him.'

'I'm not worried,' said Pasanus. 'I want to know where the hell he was when we needed him.'

Uriel wanted to know that too, but said nothing as he made his way forwards through the crew compartment. The Swords of Calth and Firebrand squad did not sit idle, but reloaded and resupplied. Preparing for the next engagement.

Alexia Nassaur all but clung to Brutus Cyprian, and her twin brother looked on with relief plastered over his features.

The sound of solid round impacts began to lessen as the gunship gained height, and Uriel let out a breath. The gunship's estimated arrival time had been conservative, and they'd reached the platform a good minute ahead of the orks.

More than enough time to get everyone aboard.

Uriel made his way to where the *Fabricata* sat with Komeda, conversing in crackling streams of binary that sounded urgent even to his ears. 'Back in Variava Station,' said Uriel. 'What was that?'

Ubrique looked up, her half-masked porcelain face unreadable in the dim red light of the gunship's interior.

'I do not know,' she said, and Uriel didn't know whether to believe her. 'A data ghost, a rogue exload. Who knows? I am searching all Mechanicus databases for matching phraseology.'

'And?'

'Nothing yet,' said Ubrique. 'But my link to the *Sycorax Analyticae* is imperfect and local conditions are far from ideal.'

'I want to know what that was,' said Uriel. 'So find out fast. Is that understood?'

'It is indeed, Captain Ventris,' answered Ubrique. 'Trust me, I desire to know what it was as much as you.'

Uriel didn't doubt that, but suspected the *Fabricata* knew more than she was telling. Now wasn't the time to take her to task on any omissions. That could come once they reached the comparative safety of the *Vae Victus*.

He continued on towards the flight deck and took a seat across from the pilot, a junior warrior of the Forge named Taysen. The gunship's navigator and gunner nodded in respect.

'Pull up the local topography,' ordered Uriel.

The navigator nodded and the slate before Uriel swam into focus, displaying Mount Shokereth and its immediate environs. The mountain was a mass of dense contours, tightly gathered on the east and south and more spaced to the north and west.

The mineworkings and surrounding facilities were picked out in a mix of Imperial aquilas and toothed Icon Mechanicus. Those on the lower slopes shone a deep red, indicating they had been destroyed, and Uriel watched several more turn from blue to red as the bombarding mud-steamers pounded them out of existence.

Until then, only the eagle icon of Variava Station remained.

'Do Eagles still circle the mountain?' he whispered.
Not for much longer...

To be continued in The Swords of Calth

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Graham McNeill has written more Horus Heresy novels than any other Black Library author! His canon of work includes *Vengeful Spirit* and his New York Times bestsellers *A Thousand Sons* and the novella *The Reflection Crack'd*, which featured in *The Primarchs* anthology. Graham's Ultramarines series, featuring Captain Uriel Ventris, is now six novels long, and has close links to his Iron Warriors stories, the novel *Storm of Iron* being a perennial favourite with Black Library fans. He has also written a Mars trilogy, featuring the Adeptus Mechanicus. For Warhammer, he has written the Time of Legends trilogy *The Legend of Sigmar*, the second volume of which won the 2010 David Gemmell Legend Award, and the anthology *Elves*. Originally hailing from Scotland, Graham now lives and works in Nottingham.



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