

WARHAMMER
40,000

GALL OF CHAOS

**THE STAFF OF
ASCLEPIUS**

by **GRAHAM McNEILL**

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Isstvan Cantaro runs, though he knows he cannot escape his pursuer. Dzyban has hundreds of cultists genetically enslaved to his will. They are mortals, but they are well armed and surgically altered not to fear the Adeptus Astartes.

Especially a wounded, unarmed one.

He can hear them rampaging through the ship, uttering foul names of things

Stubber round. Upward trajectory. Fired from ten metres.

Ricochet impact from ossified rib-plate causing it to fragment and tumble downwards through the pelvic cavity.

Femoral artery ruptured.

Without intervention, internal bleeding will almost certainly be fatal.

He could perform the life-saving operation himself, but he doubts his pursuers will allow him the time to administer the soporifics and clarity enhancers required for self-surgery.

Once, the thought of such an ignoble death would have horrified Isstvan, but more than just his life is at stake now. He bears the souls of his fallen brothers. The future of every Chapter depends on the work of its Apothecaries, as they harvest the genetic legacy of each of the Emperor's favoured sons.

Isstvan's squad brothers are dead, killed in the opening moments of the attack, when the traitors boarded the *Soju*. He alone lives, and he bears the gene-seed of seven of his brothers of Macragge. He failed to reach two others before the void claimed them, their legacy of heroism now gone forever.

The loss weighs heavily on him.

He twists a pressure seal on his narthecium gauntlet and a puff of cold air vents as a steel-jacketed vial emerges.

'Such a small thing,' he says. 'Upon which so much depends.'

He kneels and grimaces as pain stabs into his belly. Reaching down, he lifts aside a small panel of the bulkhead and hides the steel vial within. He closes the panel and quickly scratches a symbol upon it: a pair of serpents entwined around a winged staff.

'Let us see how far you have fallen, surgeon of demise...'

He pulls himself upright once more and presses on, leaving a gleaming trail of blood in his wake. His breathing is laboured and his vision greys at the edges. Oily sweat pours from his skin as the arcane biology within his body drives his healing mechanisms into overdrive.

He knows they will not succeed. The tumbling mass of shattered bullet fragments has wreaked havoc within his flesh. He needs to let his sus-an membrane shut down his extraneous bodily systems, but he bears too great a burden to allow himself the luxury of life.

Isstvan plunges deeper into the labyrinth of the ship's lower decks. He long ago memorised the layout of the *Soju*, but it has been modified since he last travelled to Mars with his portion of the Chapter's genetic tithe.

He is no longer certain of the path.

A vial, hastily scratched with snakes and a winged staff, bears another gene-vial. A smashed lumen strip becomes the final resting place for yet another, also scratched with the same sigil. It pains him to know he will not be the one to accord his brothers their proper rebirth in the body of a newly elevated warrior of the Chapter.

Once, the warriors of the Adeptus Astartes were thought of as immortal, heroes of legend who mocked death and bestrode the galaxy as demigods. The Great Betrayal put the lie to that belief, and their immortality became metaphor, a lineage of heroism passed down through the mystery of the gene-seed.

Those like him are the guardians of that immortality, the custodians of the Chapter's future. He has failed in his duty, and the weight of that failure is a greater pain than that inflicted on his fading physiology.

He finds hiding places for three more vials before his pursuers catch up to him.

His senses are already diminished. Normally he would have detected the traitors and killed them before they even knew he was close, but his wounds are all but overcoming him.

Isstvan turns a corner and walks into a hail of fire.

Six cultists, swathed in a riot of colours: electric blues, shocking pinks and nauseating purples. They wear hoods, but he can see the scarification and piercings, the tattoos and the toxic discolouration of their flesh.

'Dzyban!' they yell as they shoot low-tech stubbers and autopistols. A blizzard of shells caroms from the ceramite of Isstvan's war-plate. The armour's spirit, already angered by its previous failure, is proof against their fire, and sends a pulse of combat stimms through his body.

The fatigue and sensory fog enveloping him fades.

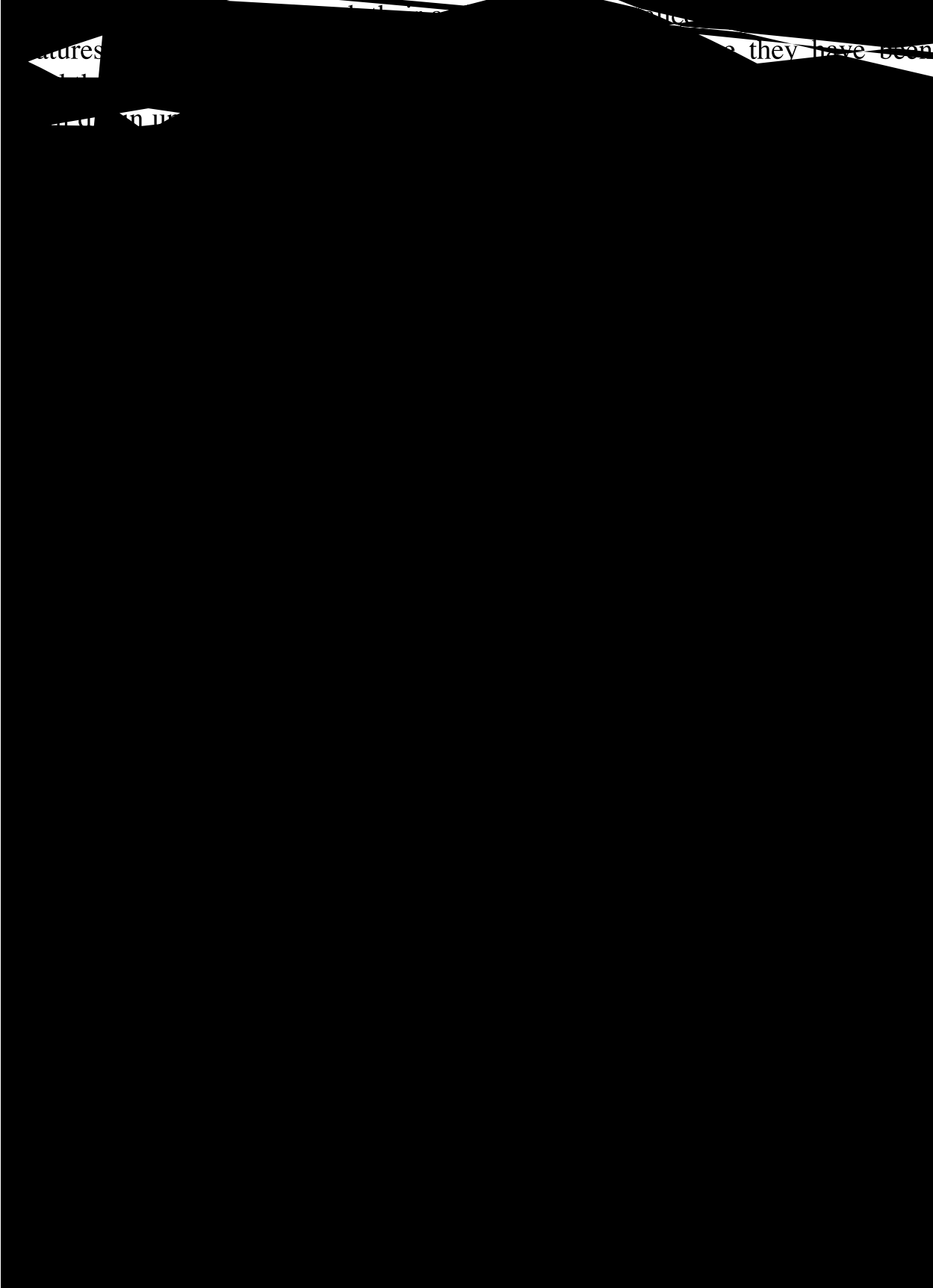
His senses sharpen and the pain lifts, but he knows it is temporary. When the effects of the balm fade, he will be worse than before. But maybe it will be enough.

Isstvan charges the men, but they do not flee.

Dzyban's gene-modification has removed any lingering traces of dread, and they howl as he attacks. They do not fear him, but they are only mortals, and mortals are absurdly easy to slay. Their limbs are barely attached to their bodies, and the trauma of even a light blow will kill them.

Isstvan destroys two with a single punch, reducing their skulls to bowls of pulped brain. A third dies as Isstvan tears out his throat, while the fourth is killed by a backhanded elbow jab that shatters his ribs to fragments.

The other two throw themselves at him, clawing with hooked daggers. Were



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Dzyban’s eyes sweep over the Apothecary’s armour, reading the ident-tags.

‘Isstvan?’ he says. ‘A name the warriors of the False Emperor regard with infamy.’

‘It reminds me of my duty,’ he snarls in reply.

‘But you know nothing of that world,’ says Dzyban. ‘I was there. I remember the world of the black sands like it was yesterday. It was glorious.’

‘You are a monster,’ growls Isstvan. ‘A base peddler in flesh and blood. I know what you seek, and you will never find it.’

Dzyban grins, exposing serrated shark teeth.

‘Not so,’ says Dzyban. ‘We are the same, you and I, devotees of the body who peel away its secrets to the truth beneath. I once bore the sacred narthecium and reductor, until the Clonelord, blessed be his name, opened my eyes.’

Dzyban’s words are no mere metaphor.

The traitor’s eyes are distended orbs in eye sockets chiselled wide by a madman’s hook, the skin of a stolen face pulled drum-taut by sinew wires drilled into the back of his skull.

The fleshsmith of the Emperor’s Children reaches behind him and produces a handful of steel-jacketed vials. They glint in the dim light of the companionway, each one acid-etched with the Ultima of Macragge.

‘Did you really think you could hide these from me?’

Isstvan sags at the sight of them.

‘I hoped so,’ he says. ‘Even if they never returned to my Chapter, I hoped to keep them from you.’

‘And yet you marked them so clearly,’ replies Dzyban. ‘I may have ascended to another level of mastery in flesh, but I do not forget the old symbols. I saw the caduceus you carved to mark them. The sigil of the healer since time

it to his lips and ingests the culture suspension of preservative fluids and flesh matter within.

Isstvan tries to keep his expression neutral as Dzyban opens each of the vials and takes the gene-matter into his body.

‘It has been too long since I have had such fresh material to work with,’ he says. ‘I altered the receptors of my omophagea and neuroglottis to allow the preomnor to sift and filter genetic codes, to extract useful sequences and valuable zygotes from everything that passes my lips.’

Isstvan nods and coughs, leaving a wad of blood on Dzyban’s breastplate. His killer swipes a finger through the frothed expectoration and licks it clean.

He frowns at the taste.

‘What have you done?’ says Dzyban.

‘Killed you...’ says Isstvan, surging forward with the last of his strength to hammer his narthecium into Dzyban’s chest. The injector spike punches through the traitor’s layered power armour and ossified rib-plate to pierce his heart.

The Emperor’s Children warrior grunts, and his hand slams down. The spike snaps, leaving it jammed in his breastplate.

Droplets fall from the broken metal.

‘What...?’ says Dzyban.

‘The component parts of a tyrano-toxin,’ says Isstvan. ‘Harmless in themselves, but lethal – even to us – when combined and activated with the ultra-rapid catalysing agent I just introduced to your bloodstream.’

‘No...’ says Dzyban, retching as his hand goes to his throat. ‘The caduceus... I saw your trail...’

The traitor’s false face is incapable of expression, but Isstvan sees fear in his eyes as his body begins to cannibalise itself.

‘You followed the wrong symbol,’ says Isstvan. ‘The caduceus was never the symbol of healers. It was the Staff of Asclepius that was borne by an ancient healer god of Old Earth, not the caduceus – that was the symbol of commerce, traders, liars and thieves...’

Isstvan leans back against the bulkhead and smiles through the returning pain of his wounds. He feels a vibration run through the metal, the sound of re-engaging engines, of boarding torpedoes and Thunderhawks punching through bombardment-buckled hull plates.

‘The gene-seed... where?’ says Dzyban, pawing at the steel-jacketed gene-vials. The musculature visible beneath his dead skin mask is turning necrotic with hideous rapidity. The toxin is designed to kill tyrannic organisms, but it is doing

a brutally thorough job on old Legion flesh.

Dzyban shakes his head. His throat is now too swollen to speak.

‘The blood-legacy of my brothers runs in *my* veins,’ says Isstvan. ‘I will die before my brothers find me, but all that we were and can be will live on. You

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.

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