



**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

# ZERO DAY EXPLOIT

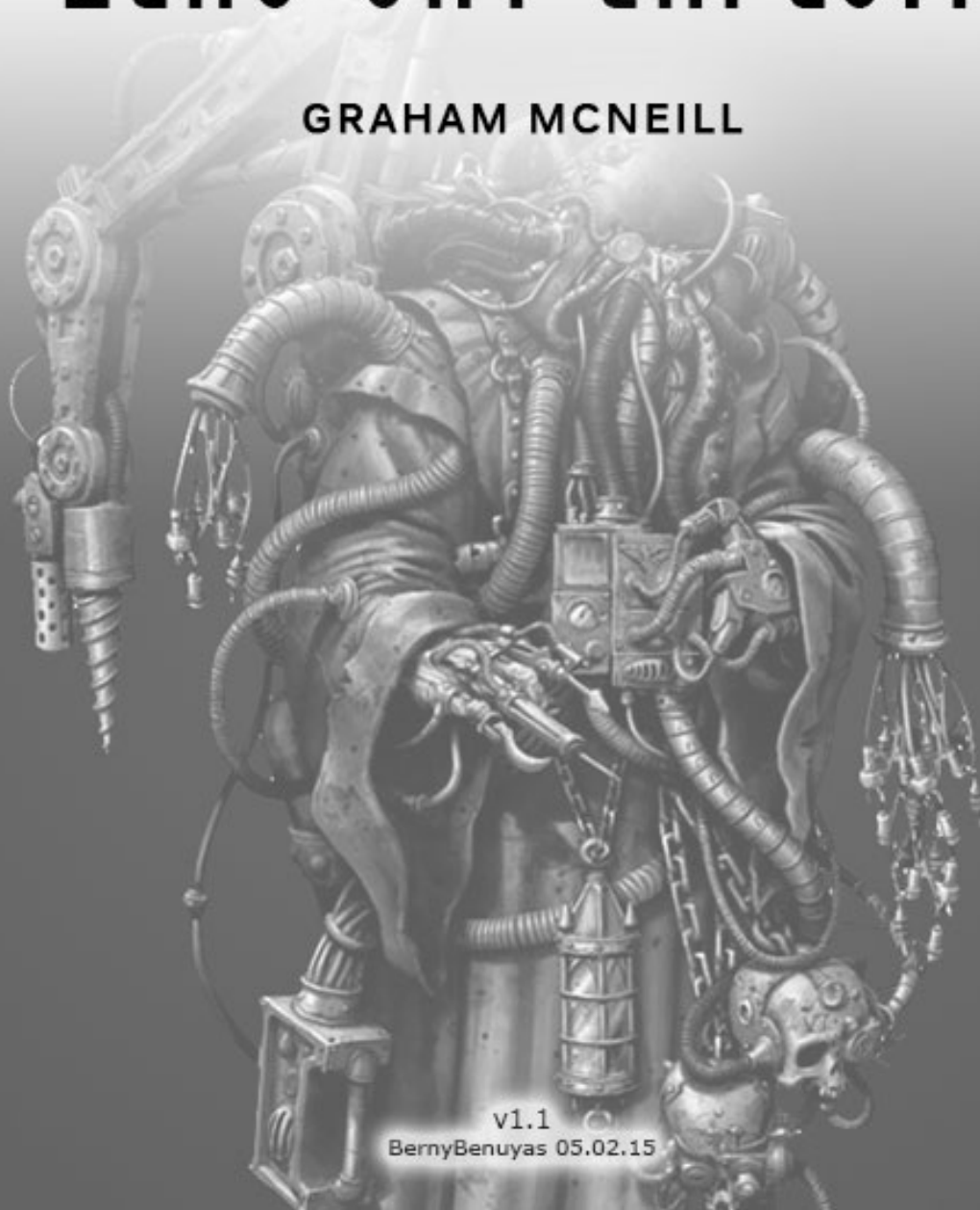
*An Adeptus Mechanicus story*

**GRAHAM McNEILL**



# ZERO DAY EXPLOIT

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## Zero Day Exploit



Graham McNeill

The sky over the Bouguer Crater reminded Hydraq of the day he'd come to the conclusion he hated Mars; awash with the thousand-year-old detritus of lethal ordnance, streaked with toxins and heavy with regret.

A hard wind was coming in, freighted with tonnes of polluted Martian ash billowing skyward as it hit the far edge of the crater. Within the hour those metallic flakes would descend into Bouguer in dry, choking blankets.

His team had cover, of course, but nothing was ever proof against the insidious nature of Martian dust. Despite the protection of tan-coloured Tallarn desert smocks and shemagh, he and Aurora would still be picking jagged granules from each other's skin weeks after this job was done.

Standing on a ridge of excavated soil, Hydraq lifted a hand to his glare goggles. He adjusted the spectra-focus at the side to try and penetrate the incoming storm. A futile exercise, he knew; Forge Basiri was a powerhouse of manufacture that never ceased its labours or the despoiling of its surroundings.

He couldn't see it, of course, just a hazy cherry-red thermal bloom on the inner face of his goggles. Three hundred kilometres of cratered hinterland separated Hydraq from Archmagos Alhazen's mighty forge, but after so long spent studying the pictis Enaric had supplied (and, more pertinently, the detailed schematics Simocatta had coaxed from the deepest layers of the noosphere) it was hard not to visualise its pearl and jade minarets, its golden towers and geodesic manufactorum domes.

Basiri was a hub of war-industry, where armoured vehicles of the Astra Militarum and engines of the Legios were wrought by the millions of tech-priests, servitors and indentured slaves who laboured there day and night.

Hydraq scrambled down the ridge and made his way to the rugged floor of the crater where they'd set up camp. The going was steep, and his breathing was laboured by the time he reached the bottom. Too many hours spent linked to his cogitator, too much stimm-glanding, not enough sleep and far too much tension.

He was out of shape and he knew it. With his skills, he could easily divert funds enough for anatomical enhancements to resculpt his body, enjoy the benefits of a dozen juvenat treatments or surgically end his stimm-dependence.

But he didn't. He liked these reminders of his humanity and the creeping encroachments that told him life was finite and to be enjoyed while it lasted.

He paused to scan the upper cliff edges of the crater, switching his visor to detect human neural patterns. Hydraq saw no one, but kept one hand on the rubberised grip of his wrath-pattern plasma pistol. This job didn't require a weapon, but there was always the possibility of meeting some unfriendly types in the wastelands between the forges, and the size of their camp was likely to draw some attention.

From a distance it was indistinguishable from the thousands of other archaeotech sites scattered all across Mars. Up close, it was a different matter entirely.

Prefabricated hab-trailers sat in a herringbone pattern beneath billowing cameleoline tarps shimmering with a bruised mixture of reds, ochres and umber. Not enough to keep out any determined orbital surveillance, but sufficient to maintain the illusion that they were nothing more than a clan of nomadic tech-scavs.

Three of the prefabs were just what they appeared to be: rough and ready dwellings for a close-knit family grouping, where the servitors were being kept. However, the fourth was a hermetically-sealed neurosurgical pod. Magos Enaric had provided it and its specialised surgeons expressly for this job, and they'd appropriately weathered it to blend in.

Buried generators powered swaying lines of storm-lumens strung between the shelters, and a pair of ancient earth-movers sat in makeshift shelters dug into the rock.

A third shelter concealed another vehicle, one faster and more advanced than anything tech-scavs grubbing in the dirt might possess, but it was shielded from view by far more sophisticated tech.

Hydraq navigated the trenches the servitors had dug this morning, their extent marked by a reticulated grid of taut wire. Marker flags fluttered in the

wind, indicating promising avenues of exploration. They were all placed at random, but this was necessary to maintain the fiction they were exactly what their outward appearance suggested.

He descended a chain-link ladder into the deepest trench and followed its downward slope to where a hanging square of canvas hid an entrance cut into the rock. A vac-sealed airlock kept out the worst of the Martian environment, and by the time Hydraq finally entered the buried bunker, his skin was raw from ultrasonic dust-blasting and rad-scrubbing.

Inside, the walls were bare metal, cold and sterile. A single corridor ran the length of the bunker, with four identical chambers on its left side. He unsnapped his pistol belt and unwrapped his shemagh, before removing his goggles and hanging them all at the main door.

Hydraq ran his hands over unshaven features and through his thinning hair. He held his hands out before him. Silicate-rich grains glittered on his palms.

‘Bloody sand,’ he said.

He wiped his hands on his thighs and made his way to the first of the bunker’s chambers. Its deck plates were rolled back to reveal a freshly dug pit and a rusted sheath of data-trunking buried deep beneath the Martian bedrock.

Three metres in diameter, the curved upper surfaces of the trunking had been carefully removed with a plasma-cutter. A pair of infocytes lay along the length of the enormous pipe with tentacle-like hands buried in the nest of wiring within.

‘Do you have full connection yet?’ asked Hydraq.

One of the infocytes looked up from the pit, his augmented eyes filled with rolling lines of static. Hydraq thought his name was Chivo, but couldn’t be sure.

‘Not yet. Soon.’

‘Get a move on, we’re on a timetable.’

‘Adept Hydraq, there are—’

‘I told you, don’t call me that,’ snapped Hydraq.

‘Update. As you wish. But there are tens of thousands of possible connections within this trunking and most of the serial identifiers are illegible. Thousands of years have passed since this trunking was first laid. The attrition of time makes this task incredibly difficult.’

‘With what I’m paying you, “incredibly difficult” isn’t a phrase I want to hear coming out of your mouths,’ said Hydraq.

They went back to their work, and he left them to it.

He bypassed the second chamber, where half a dozen data-miners were hardwired into the noospheric network on single-use readers with scrubbed ident-codes. They parsed the enormous volume of data routed through the Sinus Sabeus quadrangle, alert for any indication that what they were doing, and what they were about to do, had been detected.

The final two spaces were supposed to be identical, but could not have been more different. These were where the real work would be done.

The first of them, the space he'd set aside for himself, was clean to the point of spartan. An iron-framed cot-bed was pushed over to the far corner, and a grav-couch he'd stripped from an Aquila sat in the room's centre. Beside it was a blocky console of polished bronze, an inload cogitator equipped with myriad unsanctioned black upgrades. The sort of internal modifications that got a junior adept into all kinds of trouble.

The machine was waiting for him, but he wasn't ready for it.

Simocatta was already in place in the last chamber, his skeletal frame reclining on a latticed metal gurney. His body was surrounded by banks of humming machinery, controlling a complex network of gurgling intravenous tubes hooked into his neck, head and spine.

In contrast to Hydraq's workspace, Simocatta's was cluttered with Icon Mechanicus totems, hung with devotional palimpsests and littered with empty fluid packs. How the man could stand to work like this was a mystery, but his skill bought him a measure of leeway in matters of hygiene.

Like Hydraq, Simocatta was a spiker-for-hire, a masterless adept who specialised in the penetration of forge temple security, data-siphoning, factional defections and outright kidnapping.

This mission would be a mix of all four.

Hydraq had met Magos Enaric face to face for the first time five months ago under the pretext of a *Conclave Frateris* held on the slopes of the Tharsis Montes. Their dialogue had begun a year previously, via a series of laughably simple, blind communiques and encrypted vox-thieves that rerouted messages to appear as though they were coming from ever-multiplying sources.

Enaric believed he was being careful, but any halfway competent data-miner would have hunted him down within minutes.

Fortunately, Hydraq had hijacked Enaric's comms in the first instant of his opening missive, and thus all that passed between them remained unknown to all.

A clandestine rendezvous had finally been arranged to take place during a break in the Conclave, with Hydraq posing as the Executor Fetial of an obscure forge world Legio seeking partners on Mars. In service to this identity, Hydraq negotiated trade deals he had absolutely no authority to broker with numerous Mechanicus forges. He smiled every time he thought of some backwater planetary governor's surprise when a fleet of Martian bulk-haulers arrived laden with weapons and armoured vehicles.

Under such pretence, he and Aurora had come to Ascraeus Mons; him still in the role of Executor Fetial, she as his armed life ward. The meeting with Magos Enaric took place in a great gallery of crystal and bronze on the north-western flank of the great shield volcano.

Polarised walls filtered out the worst of the atmospheric pollution, offering views of unparalleled clarity across the Tharsis plains. The towering might of Olympus Mons lay a thousand kilometres to the west, while the infamous battleground of Mondus Occulum lay much closer to the north.

Far beneath the volcano were the battle engines of the Legio Tempestus, and many of the uniformed personnel enjoying the view were clearly Titan crew. Hydraq hoped none of them engaged him in conversation. Magi he could fool into thinking he was Legio, but he wasn't sure actual princeps or moderati would be so gullible.

'Enaric's early,' said Aurora.

Hydraq had already seen him pacing the metalled floor, practically wearing a sign that said he was here on a secret rendezvous. They introduced themselves, engineering the encounter to appear natural and almost accidental. Enaric was typical Mechanicus, chimeric and flesh-spare, but with enough humanity left that he couldn't hide his fear.

Not recognising them, the magos tried to brush them off. Part of Hydraq wished he'd let him. He pressed on, subtly weaving in numerous previously agreed code phrases before one finally registered.

The light of comprehension was almost comical, and Aurora had taken Enaric's arm and all but marched him towards the tinted glass looking out over Tharsis.

'Calm yourself, magos,' said Hydraq. 'You're drawing attention. That's bad. You have a task that requires a certain *expertise*, yes? If that's the case, we can talk. If not, my companion and I will walk out of here and you will never speak to us again. Signal your assent with a single nod.'

Enaric nodded.

‘Good,’ said Hydraq extending his hand and giving the magos his most winning smile. ‘Now smile and nod and talk as if we’re about to negotiate a particularly lucrative trade deal. While you’re doing that, tell us what you want.’

‘Here? Now?’ asked Enaric, his panic rising again. ‘There are listening devices woven into the very air.’

‘It’s nothing I can’t handle,’ said Aurora, tapping her right ear, where a vox-fractor nestled. ‘Trust me, no-one’s hearing anything of interest right now.’

‘Speak,’ said Hydraq. ‘And be succinct.’

To his credit, Enaric adapted quickly and told a scathing tale of Archmagos Alhazen of Sinus Sabeus, whose forge lay within the Schiaparelli Crater. Alhazen, a close ally of the Fabricator-General had seen unprecedented success in his uncovering of lost Martian techno-arcana over the last decade.

Caches of lost technology, standard template construct fragments and items that were said to date from the Wars of Unity and before. The technotheocrats claimed Alhazen was blessed by the Omnissiah himself and their approbation appeared to be borne out by yet more priceless secrets delved from beneath the red sands.

Throughout this bitter recitation, Hydraq was learning that Enaric liked the sound of his own voice and letting those around bask in the glow of his acumen.

Hydraq wasn’t so sure. He’d done his own research.

He knew Enaric’s skill wasn’t the equal of his ambition. He knew the magos had virtually exhausted his resources and the goodwill of his fellow magi in numerous risky ventures to advance his standing within the Martian Synod. None had borne fruit, which advanced him to the meat of the matter.

‘Are you familiar with FM-2030?’ asked Enaric.

Hydraq was, but said nothing, knowing Enaric would elaborate.

‘He was said to be one of the first transhumanists, from before the time of the Cult Mechanicus – a being who eventually transcended the limitations of flesh to become one of the first Binary Apostles. A founding father of our planet, he brought much of the First Tech from Terra to Mars. The *Cartographae 20-30* is said to be a map that lays out the precise locations of his first proto-forges, forgotten caches of the very technology that built Mars.’

‘Let me guess,’ said Hydraq. ‘You think Alhazen has it?’

‘I do,’ said Enaric, his optical implants glittering with avarice. ‘And I want you to get it for me.’

Hydraq heard a whisper of motion behind him.

But only because she let him.

'All clear up top?' asked Aurora.

'You almost certainly already know the answer to that.'

'Only *almost*?'

'Fine, definitely.'

'You're right. I do know,' she answered.

'Then why ask?'

'I like to hear you tell me things as if you're in charge.'

'I am in charge,' he said.

She smiled and he forgave her as he always did. He nodded towards the supine form of Simocatta, unable to keep a grimace from his face at the man's emaciated flesh.

'Duqu's not bitten yet?' he asked.

'Not yet,' said Aurora, her voice clipped and utterly devoid of accent. He'd heard her speak like a Terran hiver, a Jovian doxy and a Bakkan aristocrat. He didn't know for sure what her real voice sounded like, and she claimed not to remember. Had a life spent training with the tech-priest assassins of the Cydonian Sisterhood erased her true voice?

'He'd better bite soon,' said Hydraq. 'There's only so long the forge's long-range augurs will believe we're a scav-clan.'

'He will. I watched Duqu for three months in Basiri. He's the type to bite. That's why I chose him.'

Aurora moved past him and his impressions came, as they always did, in sharp jolts of awareness, as though each element was only revealed at a moment of her choosing. Midnight-blue drakescale bodyglove of non-reflective polymers, slim physique with a fractional augmetic lengthening of the skeletal structure. Narrow hips, narrow shoulders and long coppery hair worn in a tightly-wound plait. The overriding impression was of verticality, and her facial features were no different. Ever so slightly tapered; chin, sweeping blades of cheekbones and large auburn eyes that appeared natural, but almost certainly weren't.

'You're beautiful.'

'You always say that before we start.'

'It's true,' he said, taking a step towards her.

'Careful,' she said, with a quarter turn. 'I'm armed.'

A pair of short, rapier-like knives with dulled black handles emblazoned with a bull's head was sheathed at the small of her back. A matching pair of

matte-black pistols were slung at her hips, unique in the truest sense of the word.

‘So am–’ he started to say, before remembering that he’d hung his wrath-pattern by the main door. Aurora shook her head with a grin. He sighed.

‘Is your speeder ready?’ he asked, to change the subject.

‘As ready as it can be without actually moving.’

‘Good, I got a feeling when this is over, we’ll need to make a sharp exit.’

‘Trust me, when I get behind its controls, there’s nothing within a hundred light years that can see it, let alone catch it.’

Aurora made her way towards the door and Hydraq’s eyes followed her. Only a wheezing intake of breath from Simocatta made him drag his eyes away.

‘And we’re in,’ said Simocatta, his eyes blinking and milky with tears as they refocused on his surroundings. Tubes gurgled and the web of drips and intravenous chem-shunts began feeding him fresh nutrients and electrolyte-rich fluids.

‘Has he bit?’ asked Hydraq, moving closer only with great reluctance.

‘Of course he bit, my sceptical comrade-in-arms,’ said Simocatta, sighing as the stimms hit his system. ‘Didn’t I tell you he would? Our dear Duqu found the data-spike just where I instructed Mistress Aurora to leave it, and, reading its heraldic sigil of Archmagos Alhazen, carried it within Forge Basiri. From that moment it was a statistical certainty he would slot the spike in a commendable, albeit foolish, desire to determine its ownership.’

‘Omnissiah, bless the naïve,’ grinned Hydraq. ‘How long before the code exloads to his sensory augmetics?’

Simocatta reached up to an intravenous dispenser and adjusted his nutrient cycle with practiced ease.

‘I work with the craft of Hephaestus and the speed of Hermes,’ said Simocatta with an elaborate wave of hand, like a nobleman’s salute to his subjects.

‘What does that mean?’

‘It means the link is established and the polymorphic is wearing away Adept Duqu’s defences as we speak.’

‘It’s already exloading?’

‘My dear Hydraq, you didn’t pay me to craft slow code, now did you?’

‘Damn it, Simocatta,’ snapped Hydraq. ‘Start with that!’

Simocatta laughed as Hydraq ran to his own chamber. Aurora was waiting for him. She’d already known what Simocatta was going to say.

'Your heart rate's high,' she said, as if she could see it.

For all Hydraq knew, perhaps she could.

He nodded and took a moment to compose himself, controlling his breathing and forcing his heart-rate lower. He eased himself into the Aquila's grav-couch. It moulded to his body like a second skin, and he let himself sink into its embrace.

He felt his body relax. Now that the hunt was on, all the tension jangling along his nerves vanished. This was what he was born to do and his confidence calmed him.

'Better,' said Aurora, unsnapping two lengths of copper cabling from his cogitator terminal. 'You're sure about this?'

'No,' he said. 'But if we pull this off...'

Aurora shrugged. 'Can we trust Enaric?'

'Of course not,' he answered. 'That's why I have you.'

'So you do.'

Closing his eyes, he said, 'I am what I bring in,' and took the cables from Aurora's porcelain-smooth fingertips. He slotted the jacks home in the sockets drilled just behind both ears. 'Only that and nothing more.'

'You say that every time,' said Aurora.

'You say *that* every time,' he said, running his hand over the surface of his cogitator. 'It helps me deal with the Red Static. Listen, don't underestimate the importance of ritual.'

'I'm on Mars, how could I forget?' she said as his hand slid into the palm-shaped depression of the cogitator's upper surface. The activator rune was warm beneath his skin.

He let out a breath, feeling the thrumming power of the machine beneath his hand. The potential it represented.

'Good hunting,' said Aurora, bending to kiss his forehead.

'That helps too.'

'Then this will go smoothly?'

'Smooth as glass,' he promised, and pressed the activator rune.

Falling down a light-filled tunnel. Rushing motion, sickening vertigo. The sense of being drawn out to a chain a molecule thick. Connection was always difficult, but this...

This felt like it was stretching him past breaking point.

Then, like taut elastic, he snapped back.

Vertigo again. Motion blur, quickly followed by nausea.

He fought it, knowing it wasn't real.

Inner ear balance that wasn't his. A centre of gravity altered. Someone else's body.

New sensations. All unpleasant.

*Adjust, damn it. Get a grip.*

The nausea diminished, the sense of dislocation passed.

Light and three-dimensional space unfolded. Dimensions had meaning again. The vectors of X, Y and Z restored.

He sat before an angled panel of riveted steel, inset with a convex data-slate displaying lines of hexamathic cascades. And there, slotted through the inload port, was the data-spike Simocatta had contrived to have Duqu find. The crossed telescope device of Archmagos Alhazen was clear on the spike's base.

Decades had passed since Hydraq had processed advanced multi-dimensional geometry, and most of the data-slate's contents before him – no, not him, *Adept Duqu* – was beyond his understanding. In the corner of the slate was a blinking smirr of static, an entirely unremarkable visual glitch, common to all data-slates.

Except this was no glitch, this was Simocatta's covertly-running infiltration data, bypassing the forge's security protocols entirely and opening the door to Adept Duqu's augmetics.

Twenty-four fingers tapped a clicking dance over brass-rimmed keys of opal. With every key-strike, their cuckoo in the nest took in more of the polymorphic code. Duqu's single overhanging mechadendrite snapped a carriage return back each time the panel's scrivener-quill filled a page.

Adept Duqu's full attention was focused on his work. The man was completely unaware the sensory inputs of his augmetics had been hijacked. Oblivious to the fact, he was becoming less and less himself with every passing moment. Only when a fractional misalignment in Simocatta's canticles caused a visual glitch in the ocular interface did he pause in his labours long enough to look up.

Through Duqu's eyes, Hydraq saw he was seated on the overseer's pew of a Parity Scriptorium. Five thousand adepts sat in ordered ranks before him like supplicants. Faceless drones whose work Duqu – along with dozens of other stern-faced adepts – was monitoring for integer discrepancies. Chain-hung fluorescent lumens made what little skin was visible shimmer with a sickly, bleached-out sheen.

The vaulted chamber stretched into the distance, the roof coffered in palladium and hung with alloyed banners depicting the ongoing conquest of knowledge over ignorance. In the spaces between cogged pilasters and surveillant picters, devotional frescoes, hundreds of metres long, panelled each wall.

The hazed blur vanished from the corner of the data-slate. The polymorphic was done. Time to get moving.

Time to taste the Red Static.

Hydraq unleashed a surge of myriad hostile tech he'd encountered over the decades: scrapcode fragments, dissembler code he and Pavelka had worked on; line-breakers and hijackers all. Enough to overwhelm a moderately protected system, and Simocatta's shape-shifting canticles had rendered Adept Duqu defenceless.

The link between the adept and Hydraq roared with jagged lines of blood-red static. The adept's enhanced nervous system went into agonising spasms as Hydraq barraged him with false code, hexamathic dead ends and geometrically-increasing information requests.

Howling, snapping and stabbing spikes of aggressive code filled obscured Duqu's vision, but the link went both ways. Hydraq's body would feel this too, with only the grav-couch and Aurora to keep his spine from breaking in repercussive convulsions. He couldn't feel it yet, his sensory apparatus intimately linked with Duqu, but he would.

He'd experience it with interest when his senses returned to his own flesh. The thought of that sent a squirming knot of panic deep into his gut.

Duqu tried to call for help, but the Red Static had already shut him down to all external communications. To all intents and purposes, Duqu might as well have been alone on one of the black gaols orbiting Titan.

Then it was over.

The Red Static fell away and the frescoed chamber swam into focus. Duqu's hands sat unmoving on the metallated keyboard. The organic portions of his anatomy were spiking across the board, but Hydraq sent calming blurts of binary and balms into the adept's floodstream.

*+Adept Hydraq?+*

The voice in his skull was Simocatta's.

*+Don't call me that,+* said Hydraq. *+But, yes, it's me.+*

*+Excellent news. You have full control?+*

He lifted his hands. Not Duqu's, *his*. They moved by his volition, and he ran

through a series of basic motor/cognitive exercises to assess the level of his systemic integration.

+I do,+ he said.

Hydraq owned Duqu, body and soul. His consciousness occupied the throne in the adept's neurocortex, and there was nothing the screaming adept could do about it.

*+Sending you the prefix codes now,+* said Simocatta, all levity and pomposity gone now that they were on mission. Perhaps he had underestimated the man. Too bad they'd never work together again.

+Got them,+ said Hydraq as reams of information appeared in his memory, data he had no recollection of acquiring. It was simply knowledge he possessed and felt like he always had.

*+Enter the commands swiftly, Hydraq,+* said Simocatta. *+The authority signifiers will not linger in your short-term memory.+*

+I won't need them long,+ Hydraq assured him.

He flexed his fingers, quickly adjusting to the extra digits on each hand, and inserted a series of root commands into Forge Basiri's infrastructure. All were far above Duqu's rank, but each was prefixed by authority signifiers provided by Magos Enaric. With that finished, he requisitioned a flyer on a southern platform and filed a flight plan he never intended to follow.

+Done,+ said Hydraq as each command was accepted. He shut down the slate and inloaded acausal locks that would take days to break.

*+Based on distance and the mean striding velocity of Adept Duqu, it should take you no more than fifty minutes to reach the central data core,+* said Simocatta.

+I'd best get moving then,+ said Hydraq.

*+Is it my turn now?+* asked Simocatta, and Hydraq grinned as he heard the man's mischief over the sensory link.

+Yes, it's your turn,' said Hydraq. 'Run the Night Dragon.+

Simocatta cut his link to Hydraq. The plans he had sourced would be enough to guide the man through Basiri.

And he had mayhem of his own to unleash.

Decades spent strengthening dataspheres to resist attack from hostile scrapcode had given Simocatta preternatural insight into the best way to exploit a forge's vulnerability.

Not even the best networks could avoid mutational errors in their system architecture or cracks in their protection. Even the deep security of Olympus

Mons could be broken open by the right operators using the right code.

As Simocatta knew to his cost.

Dark Mechanicus adepts had cracked a Primus-level datacore under his aegis. They had stolen standard template construct schematics for armour-penetrating warheads that were now wreaking havoc in warzones surrounding the Eye of Terror.

From being courted by the highest adepts of Mars, Simocatta's star had fallen and fallen hard. Now his genius turned to breaking open the very places he had once protected, forced to whore his genius to scabby little men like Hydraq.

Still, at least it paid well.

And wealthy men could expunge anything from their history.

The infocytes had completed their sourceless connection to the planetary network, and Simocatta let his consciousness descend into the golden ocean of knowledge and data circling the Red Planet.

He let out a soft sigh, feeling the vastness of the Martian datasphere, an infinite vista of knowledge rendered as light. It humbled him and awed him. It filled him with wonder that his species had learned so much, then touched him with sadness to know how much had been lost.

The surface of Mars was like a newborn star raging with thermal currents, plasma storms and coronal ejections. Binaric brilliance shone in radiant hurricanes around the mountainous datastacks and greatest of these were the forge temples. Each was the fiefdom of a great magos of Mars, with molten streams of datalight pouring from them.

Simocatta was far more interested in what was going *into* the forges. Most had their own geothermal power cores, but that alone could not hope to supply the energy demands of a fully functioning forge-temple.

The bulk of their energy was drawn from the titanic atomic cores spread throughout the quadrangle, each burning with the light of sullen stars. Volatile cores imprisoned and enslaved by the works of man, each was held in a delicate balance between explosive detonation and dormancy.

Simocatta split his consciousness into proxy avatars and despatched them into the data flow surrounding each reactor. Sensing unauthorised presences, *Ouroboros* Protocols rose to intercept them, monstrous coils of idiot data whose only purpose was to burn out an attacker's neocortex.

He knew full well how exquisitely lethal these protocols were; he'd conceptualised their core systems. They circled his avatars like glossy black

snakes, unthinkingly hostile and ferociously hungry.

+Come then, my beauties,+ said Simocatta. +Feast. Devour.+

They flew at his avatars and tore them to shreds in a frenzy of hyper-violent deletions. Simocatta had designed the *Ouroboros* Protocols as a slash and burn form of defence. Unsubtle and indiscriminate, but thorough.

Except in this case, that very thoroughness was their undoing. Each of Simocatta's avatars was nothing more than a shell, a delivery system for something far worse.

The Night Dragon: weaponised data crafted by an ancient renegade known simply as Malevolus that had no purpose except to destroy. The binaric equivalent of the most diabolical venom imaginable. And the control mechanisms for a dozen atomic reactors all across Sinus Sabeus had just ingested it.

Sudden panic flared brightly within each reactor complex as the Night Dragon went to work. It burned out control systems and wreaked havoc within the regulatory mechanisms of rapidly overheating cores.

Simocatta had spent decades attempting to develop a defence against the Night Dragon, but had never succeeded.

He doubted anyone else had either.

Hydra's progress through Forge Basiri was swift.

He'd left the Parity Scriptorium without comment, though numerous eyes had followed his unscheduled departure. Embedded memories of the forge's layout guided him through its brightly-lit pathways.

His sole deviation was to enter a Machina Opus temple, where he retrieved a pair of moulded plastek melta-pistols that Aurora had hidden beneath a reinforced ironwork pew. The basalt structure was deserted but for a handful of dark-armoured Techmarines of the Sable Swords. The gigantic transhumans looked up as he entered, but instantly dismissed him as was typical of their breed.

Thus armed, Hydra continued onwards.

Archmagos Alhazen ran an efficient forge-temple. The mag-lev transits ran to a precise timetable and the ingress/egress patterns of adepts, servitors and the thousands of robed tech-priests were regulated to exacting standards.

Hydra was the only one not following its prescribed flow.

His unauthorised movement had been registered, as had his unsanctioned entrance to the datacore complex. Three squads of Mechanicus Protectors were

already mobilising to intercept.

All things being equal, Hydraq had four minutes until they reached him.

But all things were not equal.

Hydraq had just penetrated the deepest level of the datacore complex when Forge Basiri went dark.

Power failures on Mars were uncommon, but even so, each forge possessed numerous backup systems to immediately take over if the power was ever lost.

In theory, a complete loss of power was impossible.

Unless someone with senior enough prefix-codes had disabled those backup systems.

Hydraq could picture the chaos above, tens of thousands of adepts, info-sentinels and calculus-logi scrambling to save the precious data in their systems before internal capacitors drained completely.

Every soul in service to Archmagos Alhazen, including the Mechanicus Protectors, would be bound by emergency protocols. A single adept was the least of their worries.

How wrong they were.

Hydraq followed a curving corridor in total darkness towards the entrance to the most secure vault in Forge Basiri. Had the power been operational, a dozen security systems would already have halted his progress, shot him down or otherwise ended his infiltration.

The corridor made an abrupt turn, and Hydraq found himself in a high-roofed chamber of incredible dimensions. At its exact centre was an obsidian cube fifteen metres square and enclosed within a latticed steel framework.

Squatting before the caged cube were two Praetorian-grade servitors. Bloated with combat augmetics, lethal weaponry and advanced battle-wetware, they were monsters in all but name.

Praetorians were capable of semi-autonomous engagement, but the blackout had isolated them from the combat grid. To their eyes, Hydraq was a native of Forge Basiri. He didn't give them a chance to realise their mistake and vaporised both their skulls with twin shots from the melta pistols.

The weaponised servitors collapsed in hulking piles of liquified metal and bubbling flesh. Hydraq moved past their corpses to the cube over which they had stood guard.

'A data-tight Faraday Cage,' he said in admiration.

The way in was a simple door of plated steel secured with a heavy padlock. Protection so absurdly primitive that it seemed ridiculous, but it was all that

separated Hydraq from Archmagos Alhazen's most precious secret.

That very primitivity was what had required a physical intervention. Data connected to a network was inherently vulnerable to remote attack, but this datacore was completely isolated. And on a planet where every single system shared a link somewhere, only data kept completely off the Martian networks could be considered secure.

Hydraq's presence here refuted *that* belief.

He blasted the lock from the door and kicked it inwards.

Inside, the cube was empty save for a single, gloss-black cogitator that drew its power from battery racks secured in recessed alcoves.

Mono-tasked servitors tended to the batteries, and they ignored him as he circled the cogitator. Three metres tall, smooth-faced and featureless. A black monolith to knowledge, like something erected by a race of celestial engineers.

At its midpoint was a single inload/exload port and Hydraq unfurled Adept Duqu's mechadendrite, rotating its end cap to a data-spike. Duqu's slack features were reflected in the mirror surface of the cogitator and Hydraq shook his head.

'Sorry, my friend, this is the end for you. I need your memory space.'

He felt Duqu's panic, but didn't let that stop him erasing every aspect of the hijacked adept's persona from his own memory coils. In a single act of murderous reformatting, Hydraq reduced Adept Duqu's body to a mindless meat puppet.

No loose ends.

He slotted home the data-spike and allowed a small smile to surface as the exload began. Binary scrolled past his eyes in dense, interleaved streams.

'You keep a great many secrets, archmagos,' said Hydraq, checking the aircraft he'd authorised earlier was prepped on its launch platform. It was, and he grinned, browsing the data as it poured from the cogitator. Even freed from the necessity of storing Adept Duqu's personality matrices, the memory coils were quickly approaching capacity.

He kept a search trawl running in the background, hunting for signs of the *Cartographae 20-30*, but the more he searched the more his unease grew.

'It's not here,' he said, his unease turning to a sick, gut-loosening horror at what *was*. He wanted to disconnect, to wrench the spike from the inload slot. But this was too big, too damning, the implications too horrifying *not* to know.

At last the exload was complete.

He stepped back from the cogitator, wishing he'd never set foot in this

forge, never taken Enaric's commission and never touched knowledge he couldn't forget.

'Ave Deus Mechanicus,' whispered Hydraq.

'Not what you were expecting, was it?' said a black-robed adept stepping from the shadows.

Aurora watched the storm break over the crater's edge via a swarm of remote spy-flies on the surface. They'd built the camp securely enough not to worry about the dust fouling anything, but the sight of the approaching storm-front gave her a shiver of premonition.

She wished they hadn't taken his commission. Enaric's job had smelled bad from the start. But she was bound to Hydraq, and some debts could never be settled, the scales too weighted with blood to ever balance.

Where he went she went, and he went where trouble lay.

She blinked away the view from outside and brought the mission countdown to the front of her eye.

'Too long,' she muttered, looking down at Hydraq's prone body on the grav-couch. It would be days before he'd walk properly after this job, his limbs bruised and twisted by the convulsions of the Red Static. He'd heal, like he always did, gripped by narcotic dreams and fighting the hunger for more.

A perverse way to live when there were a dozen augments he could implant to purge his renal system.

Hydraq's face was lined and pale, his eyes darting behind their closed lids. His skin, never a heathy shade, was ashen, like a corpse. She knew what would happen if the body hosting his mind died, but pushed the image aside.

All too easy for one such as her to imagine the myriad ways a body could die. Wasting away with a consciousness lost forever in digital limbo, a flesh cut off from return. No way for a warrior to die.

She pushed herself to her feet and made her way to where the flesh-spare Simocatta reclined on his delicate framework, a dozen entoptic screens hanging in the air around him. Some were data trawls from the reactors he'd compromised with the Night Dragon, others were passive feeds from orbitals he'd redirected to look down on Forge Basiri.

'Have you heard from him?'

Simocatta looked up from his screens and a toothy grin split his sweating face.

'No, my dear Aurora,' he said, unctuous to a fault. 'Our mutual friend is still

at work.'

'The feed? It's still active?'

Simocatta indicated his cogitator, its surface blinking with green lights across the board.

'Adept Duqu still dances merrily to Hydraq's tune, though I suspect his dalliance must end soon.'

'Why?'

'I estimate Forge Basiri will have its power restored within forty seconds. If Adept Hydraq is not on his way out by then, he won't be coming out at all.'

'Don't call him that,' said Aurora.

'He keeps saying that too,' mused Simocatta, wagging a slender finger at her. 'Why is that? What grudge does he hold against the Cult Mechanicus or they against him? I confess I cannot find any record of him in the Martian datascape, which is both disquieting and reassuring in equal measure.'

'Did you really think you *would* find him?'

Simocatta laughed. 'I suppose not.'

Aurora saw the panel before Simocatta flicker with a mixture of red and amber lights.

'Is that him?'

Simocatta nodded, and flicked a series of ivory-capped switches on the panel next to him. Half the screens vanished.

'It is indeed,' said Simocatta, twisting a black dial and bringing up an auspex feed from an orbital plate. 'I am detecting a fast-moving flyer leaving a southern platform to us as we speak.'

'Time for us both to get to work,' said Aurora, galvanised and relieved at Hydraq's exit from Forge Basiri. 'You know what to do?'

'Of course. Call back the Night Dragon from all but the reactor in the Pollack Crater.'

Aurora nodded. 'As soon as Alhazen realises what's happened, he'll send everything he's got after us. We'll need some cover.'

Simocatta rubbed his hands together. 'Trust me, Mistress Aurora, when that reactor goes critical, no-one will be tracking anything within tens of thousands of kilometres for a rather long time.'

Aurora made her way up top, into the wind-scoured camp where visibility was down to less than ten metres. Red dust filled the crater and the trench was ankle-deep in the stuff. Her bodyglove felt clogged with it.

The prefabbed shelters rocked with the force of the wind ramming through the crater. The neurosurgical-pod wasn't moving, secured by stabilising struts bolted to the rock and protected by hurricane dampers. As far as the surgeons could feel, the environment beyond their hermetically-sealed walls was utterly calm. Aurora transmitted a ready code to the surgical leader, receiving a terse acknowledgement in reply.

She dropped and rolled beneath the pod, detaching two blocks of explosives from her belt. Neither was larger than the magazine of a pistol, but they would obliterate the pod and the team within once Hydraq and Aurora had what they needed.

With the neurosurgical pod rigged, Aurora moved past the sunken shelters where the earth-movers were being slowly buried by the sand.

The third shelter was covered by a billowing cameleoline tarpaulin that strained in the growing winds. Where the sand was swallowing the earth-movers, this shelter was kept proof against the Martian storms by virtue of an integral electrostatic shield generator.

She moved around its edge, ripping out the clips holding the tarp in place. The wind seized it and tore it away, revealing a tapered, gull-winged craft with a sleek deadly profile. It was a thing of beauty, a needle-tail Merganser, its gloss-black hull formed from a single-cast of polycarbonate resin that was virtually invisible to augurs.

Aurora dropped into the shelter, feeling the electrostatic shield scrape the dust from her as she passed through it. She landed by the cockpit, and twin bull head emblems shimmered on the wings, visible only because the flyer now recognised her.

'Time to fly, my pretty,' she said, and the drive plant purred to life. Near silent, but more powerful than any other two-man flyer in the Martian registries.

Aurora placed her hands next to the frontal cockpit and soft light haloed her splayed fingers. With deft movements of her fingertips, she prepped the flyer for evac, warming the avionics and setting up false flags for their flight path.

The Merganser was as ready as it ever would be. All it needed now were passengers.

*'Mistress Aurora?'* said a voice in her vox-bead.

*'What is it, Simocatta?'*

*'I should close my eyes about now.'*

Knowing what was coming, Aurora crouched low and cut the feed to her

optics as the shelter was lit from above by a blinding flash of searing light.

The atomic explosion of the Pollack Reactor lit the sky for hundreds of kilometres in all directions. It filled the atmosphere with radioactive fallout and made Sinus Sabeus lousy with e-mag storms.

Aurora vaulted from the shelter seeing the hazed, fiery outline of a towering mushroom cloud on the northern horizon. A storm was coming for sure, one that was only going to get worse.

She made her way back to the underground bunker and passed through the ultrasonic scrubbers, grabbing Hydraq's wrath-pattern pistol. The gunbelt snapped easily around her waist as she entered the infocytes chamber. They were just as she'd left them, flat on their bellies and still connected to the enormous data trunking.

A burst of paralysing code kept them from looking up as she drew her short-bladed stabbing swords. Aurora somersaulted into the pit they'd dug and drove a blade through the back of each skull.

Aurora wiped her blades clean and slotted them home in their scabbards. She left the chamber, moving swiftly to where the data-miners sifted the noosphere and physical networks.

Six of them looked up, their eyes glazed with partial connection, and killed them where they sat. Six needle rounds right through the eyes. With each death, a connection faded to black.

Aurora holstered her pistols and moved past Hydraq's chamber to where Simocatta was struggling from his reinforced framework of a seat. His face was a ruddy mask of fear. He'd felt the infocytes and data-miners die.

He knew he was next.

'Mistress Aurora!' he cried. 'Please! What are you doing?'

'No loose ends,' she said, and shot Simocatta through the heart with a blue-white beam of plasma. Hydraq's wrath-pattern was a duellist's weapon. Single shot only, but a Cydonian Sister only needed one.

Simocatta collapsed, dragging down his framework chair and smashing the cogitator in his fall. The entoptic screens tilted crazily, blizzardy with static. He reached for her, his fingers clawing the air, but his face was already turning blue from massive organ destruction and imminent brain-death.

Aurora turned from the room and overlaid one eye with what her spy-flies were seeing. A workhorse Ares-pattern lander burst through the clouds, rocking and swaying in the atomic winds and roaring from the detonation of the Pollack Reactor's core.

‘Erratic,’ she said of its flight profile. ‘He’s hurt.’

The Ares set down on the area they’d designated as the landing zone. Its engines coughed and died, clogged with radioactive dust. She zoomed in on the pilot’s canopy, but the storm made it impossible to make out more than a blurred impression of a man’s outline.

Aurora heard a strangled cry from Hydraq’s chamber.

She holstered the wrath-pattern and found him struggling against his restraints. His eyes were wide with terror, sweat pouring from him in rivers. She unsnapped him from the grav-couch and he all but launched himself to his feet.

He would have fallen but for her arms, his body and brain not yet aligned with one another.

‘We have to get out of here,’ he said. ‘Now!’

She dragged him through the bunker, his abused body still trying to overcome connection burn and the bruising he’d sustained in hijacking Duqu. His skin was ashen, yet fever-hot, his breathing shallow.

‘You need to calm yourself,’ she said.

He shook his head and took a gulp of air.

‘Got to go. Got to get away.’

He looked up in desperation. ‘Your speeder?’

‘Prepped and waiting,’ she said. ‘Do we need to make that sharp exit now?’

He nodded, too drained to speak.

They scrambled out into the trench, the storm winds filling the air with choking particulates. Hydraq pressed his shemagh against his face as Aurora’s spy-flies saw the canopy of the Ares lift and a compact figure of a man emerge. He climbed down with precise movements, almost as though the storm winds didn’t trouble him at all.

Anyone who could move like that worried her.

‘Who’s on that flyer?’ asked Aurora.

Hydraq opened his mouth to speak, his brow knitting together in confusion. Grit made his eyes tear up.

‘I don’t remember,’ he said.

‘How can you not remember?’ asked Aurora as she hauled him out of the trench. He shook his head again, clearly just as much in the dark as she was.

The winds were gathering strength. Every single tarp had blown away and the walls of the trenches were collapsing inwards. Only the neurosurgical pod

resisted the atomic storm, but Aurora knew they had no need for it now. The mission was over. Whoever had gotten out of the Ares almost certainly wasn't Duqu.

With a pulse of thought she detonated the explosives and the surgical pod went up in a hard bang of white hot flames, gutted from the inside out by the twin plasmic/melta charges. If nothing else it might give them some cover or distract the new arrival long enough for them to escape.

'Thank the Ommissiah...' said Hydraq as the Merganser rose smoothly from its shelter, turning on its axis to face them.

'That's not me,' said Aurora, more angry than surprised as the force of the storm was cut off by the electrostatic shield extending from the speeder's hull.

'No, that would be me,' said a voice in her ear, so clear it was as if the speaker was right behind her.

Which he was.

Aurora dropped Hydraq and spun on her heel, both pistols leaping to her hands via their e-mag link. They flew past her outstretched grip and into the hands of a black-robed adept with his hood drawn back and piled across his shoulders.

'I think I'll take those,' he said.

She didn't answer, her hands flashing for her blades as she sent a blur of hostile code at this adept. He didn't so much as flinch, and her horror was complete when her own body locked in place, the attack turned back on her.

'How are you doing this?' she demanded through gritted teeth.

'*This?*' he said, gesturing to her with one of the stolen pistols. 'These are the least of my order's cantrips. But don't worry, Mistress Aurora. If my employer wished you dead, it would already be so. Now, to business.'

'Who are you?' asked Hydraq, managing to pull himself onto his knees. Aurora watched the unfolding drama through her own senses and the compound eyes of her spy-fly swarm.

She saw the bland-faced adept before her, but her swarm saw nothing, only her pistols apparently floating in midair.

'That's not the question,' she said. '*What* are you?'

'My name is Adept Nemonix, and I am a dataproctor currently in service to Archmagos Alhazen,' said the adept, and Aurora fought to keep what he was saying in her head. His words squirmed around her skull, as though their meaning was so ephemeral that they could not be pinned in place for long.

'You work for Alhazen?' said Hydraq.

‘As do you now if you wish to live,’ said Nemonix.

‘Why?’

‘Come now, Adept Hydraq, you know why. You saw what was on that cogitator.’

Hydraq shook his head. ‘No, it’s impossible. The legends about Archmagos Telok are just that, legends. He’s long dead.’

Nemonix spread his hands and shrugged, as though the truth or otherwise of Hydraq’s words were utterly inconsequential.

‘My employer believes otherwise,’ said Nemonix.

The dataproctor’s head cocked to one side, as though listening to something only he could hear. He looked up and smiled.

‘Do you see that?’ he said, pointing to a pinprick of bright light crossing the sky, barely visible through the storm overhead. ‘That is cyclonic torpedo launched from an unregistered Deimos-pattern frigate in geostationary orbit with this exact spot. At its current velocity it will impact in ninety-seven seconds. You have that long to accept my employer’s offer of life.’

‘Why?’

‘Why what? Why should you choose life? A question better addressed to the technotheologians or, as I know how bitterly you despise them, *Adept* Hydraq, perhaps an Imperial preacher? Either way, time is running short for such deep questions of existence.’

‘Why do we get the *choice* to live?’ asked Hydraq.

‘Your existence or otherwise is of no interest to me, but you have been deemed useful and you have skills, which makes you desirable.’

Aurora felt the binaric shackles holding her fast unbind her body’s augmetics. Nemonix reversed her pistols and held them out to her, handles first.

Her optical threat readers said Nemonix was harmless, that she could kill him before he took his next breath.

Her gut told her she would be dead before she could move so much as a muscle.

‘We accept,’ she said, taking and holstering her guns.

‘What?’ said Hydraq. ‘No!’

‘We accept,’ she repeated. ‘I am life-bound to you, Hydraq. You cannot die, and if the only way to keep you alive is to treat with Alhazen, then we’re doing it.’

‘A most excellent decision,’ said the dataproctor, looking up at the

descending warhead. 'Now I would board that very fine speeder of yours and get as far from here as possible.'

'You're letting us go?' asked Hydraq.

'For now, but a time of change is upon Mars,' said Nemonix, retreating into the storm's fury. 'And when it comes you will be called. It will go badly for you to refuse that call.'

And then he was gone.

Aurora lifted Hydraq and all but threw him into the rear cockpit of the Merganser. She vaulted into the pilot's seat, sealed the canopy and shut down the electrostatic field. Howling winds slammed the speeder as its gull-wings unfolded and it sped away.

Barely had the inertia-couch gripped her when she rammed the engines out hard and the speeder surged from the crater.

Aurora flew hard and low, keeping as many ridges, rocks and mountains between them and the incoming ordnance as was humanly possible.

A second flash of detonation lit up the Martian desert.

A radiant dome of white-hot vapour fire turned the interior of the Bouguer Crater and everything in it to molten glass.

'What did we just agree to?' asked Hydraq, his voice all but smothered by the force of acceleration.

'I don't know,' she said. 'What did you mean about Telok?'

'They think he's coming back,' said Hydraq.

## 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.